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MR. PEGG TO YOU

A Novella

Five of us went into that summer. Four came out alive. The Big Fire of July 2002 spread faster than the experts had projected, burning thousands of acres of forest west of the town of Buck Hill before it could be controlled. The Resort at Buck Hill Falls, in the area colloquially and collectively known as The Poconos, was spared. I was one of the members of the Creek Crew who volunteered to help fight the fire, along with Cooper, Finn, Greg, and the ex-con Norman Pegg. We performed menial tasks given to us by real firefighters called in from surrounding towns, and eventually from as far away as New York City. Truthfully, I didn't so much volunteer to battle the blaze, as get shamed into it by Greg after Cooper and Pegg had volunteered enthusiastically. I had to lie about my age to join them, as I had just turned seventeen. Perhaps there was some courage in that.

There is a tale that both the creek and the town were named after the promontory a half-mile north of where the creek enters the southern edge of the golf course. Settlers and friendly Indians 200 years earlier—so the story goes—were able to survive a harsh and lengthy winter off the hides and meat of the deer found there, and despite what evolved into an annual

slaughter, herds of deer continued to feast on the succulent sour berries and fragrant pinecones of the heavily forested hills, and the name stuck.

Hiking upstream along the creek bed—from Buck Hill Falls, the area’s premier scenic attraction, after which the resort itself was named, to where it exits the forest near Mt. Pocono twenty miles southwest—it is possible to feel nature’s primal allure, to be seduced into thinking you are a hundred miles into a land untouched by humans, when in fact you are never more than six or seven miles from a paved or a dirt road. The effect is the result of the particular geology of the region; the eroded banks of Buck Hill Creek reveal striations of dark sandstone, while the undulating terrain above contains a mix of moss-covered boulders—left by retreating glaciers—and jungle-thick clots of pine and spruce. Peat bogs pierced by dead and rotting timber dot some of the deeper swales, and the creek tumbles over two waterfalls and a dozen ancient, crumbling dams. It is difficult terrain to hike. Opposition to land development, led by the surrounding resorts, was fierce, and the result is that no marked trails were ever cut, helping to minimize the intrusion of visitors.

We had set out that morning—like we did every weekday—to create and reinforce a series of moss-covered dams and silt ditches. The resort’s developers, seduced by the clarity and purity of the water flowing over the impressive Buck Hill Falls and into the small lake beneath it, observed that the river’s natural dams upstream resembled brick walls, with moss substituting for cement, so that the water was naturally filtered, water that would otherwise have been browned by the peeling of the sandstone along the creek’s many sharp bends. The tradition of actually building these moss-filtered stone dams, and the accompanying silt ditches designed to capture run-off from the forests after heavy rains, began when the resort’s developers noticed a steep drop-off in vacationers the summer after a particularly rainy spring had tinted the creek

water. The Creek Crew's efforts from late May to September, along a three-mile stretch upstream of the resort, ensured that Buck Hill's reputation for having the "cleanest water in the Poconos" was maintained. Working the Creek Crew was one of the few jobs at the resort where you didn't get tips; but you were outdoors, working hard, building callouses and muscle, doing what all the other employees respected as *mens'* work, which was what attracted me, Finn and Greg—all teenagers—to it.

It was my second summer on the Creek Crew. The previous summer, Greg Turk had recruited me out of the caddy corps after only two weeks. The Crew needed a fifth man, and he was desperate it be someone like himself, meaning "an outsider—somebody with half a brain." I was able to keep my pre-dawn shift as a lawn bowling greens-keeper, and still have time for a big breakfast at the dorms before the Creek Crew's 8am start. With late afternoons and weekends free, I followed Greg around the resort on his quest for local girls looking for guys "from the outside," girls he could charm into sex in the back of his Chevy Camaro, equipped with four small pillows, a glove compartment filled with condoms, and a supply of tiny liquor bottles he had filched from his father's liquor cabinet back home. He even offered me the keys to his car when I managed to get a date with Lacy Dunlap. "Hey, Donny, don't you wanna get laid?" he snorted, when I declined.

Lacy was the latest of generations of Dunlaps who had worked at Buck Hill as waitresses, greens-keepers, maintenance workers, and bellboys; she guided me through the thorny underbrush of social life among the workers, and the archaic rules that still held sway 100 years after they were adopted. While esteemed as rugged individualists, the founders' social leanings were to the formal; members of the resort—and most guests—still wear all white on the tennis courts, the golf course, the bowling greens, and at afternoon socials. To this day, staff

is forbidden to wear all white on the grounds, so as to be easily distinguishable from the guests. Occasionally, a colorfully clad younger guest, unfamiliar with the tradition, will be approached by an old-timer and asked to help with a golf bag or some other trifle, and that same day the little clothing store in the Inn will make a sale.

For a sixteen-year-old, Lacy was surprisingly voluptuous, with olive skin and full, dark lips, long black hair that poured down her back to her waist and seemed to softly disappear into the small of her back. I knew I would be returning for a second summer when—just a few days before getting my last paycheck—we took in a movie at the local theater and she allowed my left hand to roam downward from the back of her left shoulder, along her chest, gently teasing the fabric of her blouse, my fingers feeling the skin just inside the cotton. The glow from the screen seemed to cascade across her face like cool water, and the scent of her—the tiny bit of sweat on the back of her neck, the perfume she was wearing, her breath just before we kissed—was intoxicating. When I was packing to leave, Greg Turk did not hide his disappointment that I'd let the entire summer pass and hadn't "done it." He assured me that to Lacy Dunlap, I was more like the taste of forbidden fruit than a ticket out of town, so what was I afraid of? He announced that he was going to use his earnings to travel through Europe until the money ran out, and that he was going to find a girl in every country to sleep with, so he would know which was the best.

When I returned the following June it was as much for the possibility of consummating my relationship with Lacy Dunlap as for the work. I added lifeguarding on weekends to put more money in my pocket, which attracted lots of girls in skimpy two-pieces, which in turn increased my ache for Lacy. At the poolside employee welcoming social, she emerged from behind a group of girls in her one-piece—the two-pieces skinnier girls favored

could not contain her—and I immediately regretted wearing my loose swim shorts. She hugged me tightly, my erection conveniently hidden between us, and dragged me into the safety of the pool. But before I could say anything, I was shoved underwater. When I resurfaced, I turned around to find Greg Turk in my face, announcing he was back on the Creek Crew, and had added a dinner wait-staff job. He pulled me away from Lacy and explained that he'd had his “fair share of women” all across Europe, and that if Lacy came even close to fulfilling the promise of her looks, “she would rank near the top.” He whispered in my ear that if I didn't fuck her, and soon, that he would.

A week later—just days before the fire—Lacy and I took a sleeping bag and a couple of pillows into the forest and made love in a hidden alcove covered in cushiony green and purple moss. Again, it was the scent of her that overwhelmed me. Afterwards, I became sensitized to all the smells of the resort: to the sticky sweetness of pine and lilacs, the odor of talc and skin balm emanating from locker rooms, to the scent of cheap perfume on the prepubescent girls hanging around the pool, and to the oppressive colognes favored by the older men and women whose fortunes and spending habits kept the anachronistic Buck Hill Resort afloat. I could not pass a kitchen or a fir tree, a popcorn stand or a coffee shop, even the hotel lobby with its strong scent of jasmine—without getting a hard-on. Mowing the bowling greens every morning unleashed the scent of grass, also reminding me of Lacy. Getting away from the resort proper with the Creek Crew was liberating, thank God; the combination of hard physical labor, dirt, and sweat—my own—helped mute the powerful scents in and around the resort.

Besides Greg and myself, Norman Pegg, Finn Crawley and Silvy Sunderland were regulars on the Creek Crew. Pegg, the daily supervisor, was a forty-three year-old ex-convict who had served time for manslaughter, his history scrawled on a face ravaged by acne, sporting

scars on both cheeks under the eyes, and a hook nose—broken in three places—that zigzagged down from a set of thorny eyebrows to his mouth. His skin was splotchy and bruised, and despite working all those summers bare-chested, he could not rid himself of the farmer’s tan that accentuated his forlorn appearance. A scar that looked like a second bellybutton just below his real one, and a slightly larger scar on his back a few inches above his waist and to the left of his spine, he attributed to the trajectory of a single bullet. He refused to elaborate, however, as to its origin. Although he was the shortest of us, just above 5 foot, he had excess stored energy; he hummed out loud, like a faulty battery, when he worked. A full third of his life had been spent in a prison less than twenty miles away, where he had first learned creek management skills, on chain gangs that worked the Game Lands west of Tannersville.

Finn Crawley, a nineteen-year-old high school dropout, was only on the crew that summer because his family’s auto body business in Stanton had slowed, and his father didn’t need him mornings. At six-foot-three, he towered above Pegg but in the beginning cowered if the ex-con so much as looked at him. Finn’s extended family was involved with the local Methodist church as deacons, and Finn did not hide his religiosity. He bowed his head before every meal, thanking the Lord for his blessings and the bounty of his ham and cheese sandwich and warm coke. When introduced in early June, he had held his hand out to receive Pegg’s, and looked bewildered when Pegg ignored the gesture. Finn said, “Where I was brought up, it’s polite to shake hands, Norman.” Without bothering to look up, Pegg responded, “Where I was brought up, polite doesn’t have any fuckin’ thing to do with it.” You could see Finn shiver. He looked at me, mouthed the word “Whoa,” and stretched his lips across his teeth. When he turned back around, Finn was crowding him, smiling. “Don’t worry, Finn. Do the work and you’re OK with me.” It took Finn a while to shake that first impression. After one of Pegg’s

outbursts—he'd struck a rock with his shovel, twisted his wrist, and cursed for a solid minute—I could see Finn mumbling to himself and knew he was praying on behalf of Pegg.

At 8am, Silvy still hadn't arrived, and we wondered if we'd head out short a man. Silvy was an alcoholic, and had a habit of surprising us upriver a half-hour into our day, just as we were setting our shovels in. He was a sixty year-old townie who had worked the crew for forty consecutive summers, and was the unofficial "resort historian" and storyteller. He was bald and had lost half his teeth, but was as wiry and muscular as Pegg, and laughed easily. During a lunch break in early June, we watched him down a ham sandwich with foul-smelling Southern Moon Corn Whisky he sipped noisily from a silver pocket flask, and proclaim: "For the rest of your lives"—meaning Greg, Finn and myself—"you're gonna be able to say you worked alongside a murderer, a man who killed someone and did real time for it! Take a bow, Norman." Pegg spit out a watermelon seed, aiming for Silvy's face, and laughed. "And yours truly, the only man to stand naked in the lobby of the SkyTop Resort Hotel and croon an entire Sinatra tune before gettin' hauled off to the loony bin. You're in the company of Pocono royalty, boys." Silvy had no idea who I was, and didn't remember me from the previous summer, but I suppose after forty years he'd seen pretty much everything and every type of person, and didn't care to distinguish one of us from the other. He offered Greg, Finn and I his flask, and we each took a sip. For the next three weeks, every time I felt the slightest bit ill, I would attribute whatever microbe had attacked me to that single contact with Silvy's silver flask.

But at 8:05, Cooper Lund, lands manager for the entire resort, showed up and announced that Silvy had *done it again*, meaning some sort of public display that had landed him either in jail or in the hospital for observation. You could see the resentment building in

Pegg's face. "You don't mind, do you, fellas?" Cooper asked, shortly after catching up to us between the creek and the first tee of the Red Course, just past the famed Buck Hill Falls. The spray cooled our foreheads; the temperature had already hit 85. "If I just tag along for the morning? What do you say, Norman?" It was a cursory show of respect; he knew Pegg was our regular supervisor. He also knew Pegg was an ex-convict. Most people reluctantly gave some deference to Pegg because of his history, but not Cooper.

Understanding the frail formality of Cooper's request, Pegg answered coarsely, without taking his eyes off the uneven ground, "Fuck if I care, Mr. Lund." Pegg always referred to Cooper as *Mr. Lund*, as did I back then; whereas Cooper addressed Pegg as *Norman*. Each utterance of Cooper's name was accompanied by a slight nod of Pegg's head, a posturing on Pegg's part, which we assumed was a passive-aggressive habit he had picked up in prison. The two men were about the same age—Cooper was forty-five—but he was what, on the street, you'd call a regular guy; whereas, if you saw Norman Pegg on the street, you'd think about crossing to the other side.

Cooper Lund's family owned a successful local bakery called Lund's, but Cooper didn't want any part of it; instead, as a teenager, he began a series of low-level jobs at the course as caddy, starter, ranger, and equipment mechanic. He moved up steadily to various managerial jobs as caddy boss, maintenance supervisor—and finally overall lands manager for the entire Resort. He was outdoorsy handsome, the type other men admired; not fine, smooth, balanced facial features, but angular, like a Modigliani portrait; forehead and cheek and jaw and nose all promontories in a rocky landscape. At six foot, he was muscular and tan, with a thick mass of black hair. He loathed what he called "the inevitable but also random interactions with snooty Buck Hill Falls Resort clientele" that resulted from being on-site, which was of course



part of his job. This simmering resentment was a trait Cooper Lund and Norman Pegg shared, but it was not enough to form a friendship.

The morning of July 8<sup>th</sup> we hiked west, then north, for nearly an hour, unaware of the approaching fire, until arriving at a bend in the creek where we were to start digging our first silt ditch and construct a filtering dam from scratch. In a month we'd already dug a dozen ditches and made a half-dozen dams, all downstream from where we started that day. Finn and I crossed to the northeast side of the creek and started in, while Greg and Pegg took the southwest. Cooper stayed with them, adding his shovel to theirs. The creek bed was a good ten feet below the southwest rim, keeping us in shadow the next half-hour of digging; it was when the sun's rays began to touch the creek water I smelled the smoke and alerted Cooper.

“Mr. Lund, is that smoke?”

Finn looked skyward, straight up through the opening in the tangle of branches thirty feet above us. “Doggone if it ain't!” he yelled; Pegg dropped his shovel immediately and slopped across the water to get Finn's view.

Pegg said, “Mr. Lund, young Finn is right. There's a strong breeze up the treetops and it's bringin' smoke this way. ”

“Well, well, well,” said Cooper calmly. “Listen to the expert.” Cooper impaled his shovel in the sandy creek rim. “Shall we take a break?” he added. We assumed he meant from the heat. But then he antagonized Pegg by saying, “I tell you what, Norman. Because you are an ex-con, and I know you wouldn't fuck with me on purpose, I'll check it out myself.” He began climbing up the embankment.

“Holy cow!” said Finn, and just as Cooper's hands reached the top edge of the steep slope, a pair of black boots appeared at the lip. Attached to them was a man in firefighter gear,

minus the helmet. In seconds there were a dozen other firefighters standing alongside him, and a set of hands hauled Cooper the rest of the way up.

“Glad we found you boys,” said the first man, surveying the area below him where we were all spread out. “There’s a fire comin’.”

We walked in silence back to the parking lot, accompanied by two of the firemen; the others continued north towards Tannersville to set up what they called *the containment line*, and we lost sight of them quickly. It was already nearly noon. Finn and I discussed what we thought might happen. I assumed I would get the rest of the day off and maybe search out Lacy. Finn said he might eat lunch—which, oddly, he had not brought with him—since he now had the time, and was famished. Greg chatted up Cooper, talking movie plots and actresses like two frat boys. Pegg walked in silence behind us. When we crossed the bridge and saw the parking lot, everyone’s demeanor changed and we all realized how serious the situation was. In the four hours since we had set out to work the creek, a tent had been raised in the middle of the lot, surrounded by fire and emergency vehicles of all sizes. A policeman stepped out of the tent to greet us and check our resort IDs; Cooper identified himself as a manager and vouched for all of us. Pegg’s ID was passed around among several policemen, who smiled and whispered to each other, before the card was returned to him.

The policeman escorted all of us to the edge of the tent, glancing at Finn, Greg and myself, and handed our employee IDs back. One of the firemen walking past us into the tent wondered aloud how much volunteer help they might get; anyone over eighteen would be welcomed. Another stated that a dozen small crews, strategically placed, could save a lot of forest, and added, “We won’t need the big boys here. The locals should take some credit for a change.”

Pegg and Cooper volunteered right away. Cooper turned to face us. “You boys go on back to the dorm, or wherever. Work’s over.” I turned to leave, but Greg followed Pegg and Cooper into the tent.

“You wimps can go back to the dorm, but I ain’t missin’ this!” he said after a few tense seconds. And because Greg volunteered, so did Finn. They fist bumped, knocking each other off balance they were so excited.

“So what’s it gonna be, Donny boy?” said Greg to me, coming back outside and pinning my shoulders back to the hard metal of one of the fire trucks. He tilted his face, inches from mine, one way, then the other, as if he were examining a car part for defects. He whispered, “Just say you’re eighteen. What’re they gonna do, throw you in jail?” When I didn’t answer, he stepped back and snapped, “Man up, Donny!”

I spent a few seconds imagining the stories he would come back to the dorm with, how he would lord this experience over me, and so I agreed to join him. He gave me a high five, and that was it. Greg, Finn and I went in together, I lied about my age, and Mr. Lund just smiled. I imagined how impressive the three of us would look when we returned that evening to the employees’ dining room. I pictured us covered in soot and grime and sweat, t-shirts clinging to torsos that had miraculously become more muscular than at the day’s start, to the admiring eyes of the waitress pool, who were, of course, looking for just that kind of man, a man who they could give in to; the sort of man who they would open their legs for, expose their necks for, open their lips for, come again and again for. I went through the cursory training in a daze, my mind twitching with visions of Lacy. While half-listening to how to use the water-tank backpacks and small shovels, I daydreamed of the hero’s welcome Lacy would give me, her breasts with my lips poised above them, her hips grinding into mine, her breathing, and the

sounds we made, like the sound I made when I thrust the shovel into hard earth. And of course the smell, the sweetness of her sweat, the scent that rose between us afterwards, when we separated. What I never dreamed was that I would spend that night not among admirers in the dining room, not between the strong legs of Lacy Dunlap, but out in the forest; sleepless, anxious, my skin blistering, unbearably hot, and afraid.

Our names were added to a list, and we were led out the side of the tent to where ten other local volunteers had assembled. A half hour later, after being briefed on more safety techniques—now shouldering a portable water tank with hose, fireproof gloves, a shovel, a large bandana, an old-fashioned lunch box clipped to our belts, and a head strap with a tiny lamp affixed—we split up into three groups, each accompanied by a pro, and were led into the forest. Our leader assured us we would be kept well behind the actual fire lines, busy digging ditches and clearing shrubbery miles from any danger, using our water tanks to moisten the ground cover around the ditches to help stall the fire if—if—it ever advanced that far, which it likely wouldn't. Disappointment bloomed in Greg's face.

All three volunteer groups entered the forest and moved west and north, in short lines, like spokes of a wheel. Greg patted me on the shoulders, just above the water tank, and said, having recovered his heroic posturing, "Let the adventure begin, Mr. Perkins!"

We hiked over an hour directly west, eating lunch—I shared mine with Finn—and avoiding the most undulating terrain aspects, steep cliffs and boulder fields, before finding two control stakes set out earlier by the professionals. We did as we were told: with water tanks strapped to our backs, we dug a ditch, one-to-two feet deep, several yards wide, and I don't know how many hundreds of yards long. We took a short break at 4pm. We resumed digging. We followed the lead of the pro assigned to us, who dug alongside us, silently and effectively.

As the afternoon wore on, as the lengthening shadows brought relief from the heat, we began to wonder if our efforts were even necessary. Greg grumbled about being so far away from *the action*. Our pace had slowed considerably, until Cooper announced that we would get double our Creek Crew wages for the hours we put in. With that news, Pegg's shovel tore at the earth like a dog's forepaws. He was relentless. We tried to match his work rate, but couldn't. He hummed like a machine.

We began digging the afternoon of July 8<sup>th</sup>, one week after my seventeenth birthday, and four of the five of us made it back safely the morning of July 9<sup>th</sup>. Norman Pegg's body wasn't found until the next day—a mile north of the creek and less than a mile from the west edge of the Buck Hill Golf Course, at the base of the easternmost Boar Cliff—burnt to a crisp.

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The professional firefighter guided us while we dug. He shared his topographical map of the area with Cooper, showing him a red line indicating in which direction we were to proceed. At 6pm, he announced that since neither his radio or his cell phone was picking up a signal, he was going to hike northeast to confirm that we were on line to connect with the group that was working its way west from Tannersville. "Half-hour, tops," he said when he turned over his map to Cooper. Cooper in turn shared it with us, pointing out which tree or boulder to dig towards. Once we'd met up with the group working its way west, which was supposed to happen before 7pm—no later than 8—we'd have two hours of daylight to get back to the resort.

It never happened.

A little after 7pm, Pegg suggested to Cooper that the line, as originally designated on the map, wasn't going to be effective. Cooper ignored him. As we dug, moving south to north, we could see the occasional small swirl of smoke fingering its way between the high branches of trees, even though we couldn't smell it. By 7:30, when there was no sign of the other group and the fireman had not returned, Pegg scampered up a thirty-foot knoll for a better look. "Fuck!" he shouted as soon as he got there. "Fuck!" he repeated. "You gotta see this," he called down. Everyone but Cooper rushed up the hill and stood alongside Pegg. To the northwest, barely visible in the distance, tiny flickers of flame, no more than a foot or two high, were skipping along the surface, fueled by parched ground cover, a mixture of brush and crackling moss. Surely this couldn't be right; the pro had assured us we were over two miles from the fire's "head," as he called it. But there it was—*fire*. Not the raging wall of flames pictured on television news shows and movies, but easily two hundred yards in width, and, in all its frightening moodiness, inching towards us. Pegg judged it to be less than a half-mile away. We were more surprised than fearful at that point. Cooper insisted we follow the directions the professional had given to him, but it was clear to everyone that if we continued on the map's penciled-in trajectory, we would be digging a ditch directly into the approaching fire.

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Finn, looking anxious, suggested we turn tail and head back directly south towards Buck Hill. Pegg pointed out that directly south were the Boar Cliffs, a series of fjord-like drop-

offs caused by glacial scouring and rivers long dried up, that periodically filled with water during heavy rains when Buck Hill Creek turned into a torrent—coincidentally destroying many of the dams and silt trenches. We had purposely avoided this route, because the cliffs—though not high, only thirty to forty feet—were composed of unstable and slippery sandstone, and once we dropped in there would be the issue of climbing out the other side, of searching out a route that wasn't impossibly steep to climb. If we wanted to return to the Resort's trailhead where we had started, Pegg said, we ought to head east, to skirt the cliffs.

Cooper took out his cell phone, and scrambled up the mound holding the phone at arm's length. He said, "That would take hours. The cliffs go on for miles."

"East they're just a barrier. South you can get stuck in a chasm," responded Pegg.

"Well, soon as I get through to the Fire Department, they can connect us with the guy in charge and give us some new directions."

"Didn't the fireman guy leave cuz he said he couldn't get a signal?" asked Finn.

"You mean we're leaving?" said Greg irritably. "We're not gonna stay and fight the fire? Why the hell did we come out here?"

"Obviously, the wind shifted and the fire has come more east than they expected," answered Cooper from atop the mound." He was not speaking to anyone, so he did not wait for a response. "Probably the other group has high-tailed it back towards Tannersville."

"Where the heck did that guy go?" said Finn, meaning the pro who had ditched us. "I don't think that was too, y'know, professional of him to leave us out here."

Greg said, "I don't know about you guys, but I came out here to fight a fire. And isn't that a fire right over there? What the fuck are we wearin' these fuckin' water tanks on our backs for?"

Pegg snorted, then laughed.

“What’s so funny?” said Greg.

“You,” said Pegg. “You don’t know shit.”

“And you do?”

“I been in this situation before, yes,” said Pegg. Cooper took notice from his perch near the top of the knoll. “You don’t fuck with fire.”

“Fuck-a-duck! Goddammit!” screamed Cooper, hopping off a boulder. “Goddamn motherfuckin’ AT& fuckin’ T!” He was waving his cellphone in a series of loopy figure eights. When he realized we were all staring at him, he said, “No signal. Like when you really need it, right?” He stuffed the phone in his jean front pocket and scrambled down the rock. Regaining his composure, he approached Pegg. “Norman, I’m sure prison taught you a lot about survival, but we’re not in prison now. And we have to think clearly. And smart.” He eyeballed Greg. “Much as I’d like to finish our job, Mr. Turk, I think it might be wise to retreat—sensibly. I’ve hiked the Boar Cliffs, and they’re not so bad. That’s the way to go.” He looked at each of us in turn; he had the look of a man who did not expect dissent, the look of a man used to being in charge.

“You know it’s all uphill to there,” said Pegg. “And fire speeds up going uphill.”

“It does?” said Finn. “Really?”

“Norman, you’re not helping,” said Cooper derogatorily, to Pegg.

“I’m just sayin’—fire speeds up. The steeper the hill, the faster the speed-up. Like flames crawlin’ up drapes in a house fire.”

“I tell you what,” said Cooper. “How’s this for a proposition? If you want the double-time I promised you, we head for the Boar Cliffs.”



So, reluctantly, because Finn and I sensed that Pegg was right, we hiked south. The climb was gradual, but noticeable, and after walking in silence for several minutes, Finn asked Pegg, “So is it true fire moves faster uphill?”

“You only got to think about it,” said Pegg. “Heat rises. The hotter the faster.”

I could tell Finn was more unsure of his immediate future, than of the logic of Pegg’s statement. He kept close to Pegg and was constantly looking back over his shoulder. “Are those cliffs really high? I’m afraid of heights. You couldn’t pay me to work in one of those skyscrapers like they have in New York. All those people jumpin’ out of that building on 9/11.”

“You’ll be fine,” said Pegg, with some authority, just to shut Finn up.

“Yeah, stop whining,” said Greg. “You didn’t want to be out here anyways. You only volunteered because I did.”

“Shut up,” said Pegg.

As we hiked, Cooper periodically took out his cell phone and waved it around in figure eights before putting it back in his jeans. It was almost comical. “Fuck!” he’d say. “Fuck a duck!” The low brush was prickly, and our legs were getting scratched up. It was nearly 8pm, but the sky was still bright, and despite the darkening shadows on the forest floor, the heat and humidity were oppressive. Cooper led the way, and Pegg took the rear, with Finn keeping close to him. Gregg and I walked side-by-side mostly. The sweat dripping down my legs mixed with blood from the scratches and itched terribly, but I knew that if I started scratching I wouldn’t be able to stop. I could see the discomfort on Finn’s face each time he reached down to scratch his legs, and was determined not to share in it.

“Dumb hick,” said Greg. “He’s gonna fuckin’ lose it, I’ll bet.” Greg could not contain his irritability. He had wanted an adventure, and this wasn’t it.

Up ahead, Cooper stopped and motioned for us to join him. By the time we caught up to him he had doffed his pack and was already sitting down, staring at the topographical map. He told Pegg that he thought we should have reached the Boar Cliffs by now. Pegg asked him where the compass was, and Cooper said he hadn't been using it. "I've been in these woods a thousand times," he said.

"Well, me too, but this is different, dontcha think?" Pegg slipped off his water tank and let it drop to the ground with a thud. He sat down next to Cooper and asked for the compass, which Cooper pulled out of his jean pocket and handed to him. After a few minutes of twisting and turning both the compass, and the map beneath it, he announced, "We've been going southwest, Mr. Lund. Not south. The Boar Cliffs are still another mile south of us. What do you want to do?"

"Fuck if I know. Head south."

"Are we in trouble, Mr. Lund?" said Finn, visibly nervous, scratching at his legs.

To his credit, at that moment at least, Cooper Lund was calm; he put his hand on Finn's shoulder. "No big, whoop, fellas," he said as he stood up, holding the compass out from his body like a beggar holds a tin cup. "Another twenty minutes this way, tops, and we'll be safely in the Boar Cliffs."

At that moment, a strong gust of wind swept past us, causing a clattering of branches above, and sending small curly-cues of dust from the south like tiny little tornadoes. A few seconds later came the stench of smoke, stronger than before, and a few seconds after that, the black smoke itself—like a low, dark thundercloud—began blotting out the trees to the west of us. A few more seconds and the smoke—more grey than black as it moved past us—had blotted out all the trees and we were enveloped in it. I could smell the pine in it, and there was a

sweetness, as if someone were barbecuing blueberries or raspberries, but when I took a breath I began coughing immediately. We each had been rationed a large bandana, and we wet them with our hoses, and put them over our faces as we'd been instructed. No one said anything. I looked at Finn and he was bug-eyed. Greg was staring at Cooper. When the smoke cleared a bit, we saw that Pegg had unhooked his water tank's hose and was spraying water all over Finn, soaking him.

“What are you doing?” yelled Finn, trying to get away.

“Hold still, Finn. It's standard safety,” said Pegg. “Try to tell me it doesn't actually feel good and cool you off.”

“It does, kinda.”

Pegg turned to Greg. “You're next.”

“Really?” said Greg sarcastically. “Shouldn't we just be on our way? Isn't the smoke a fucking clue?” Still, he didn't resist the shower Pegg gave him.

I looked up when I heard the whoosh of wind again; there was loud crackling above us, branches clattered like wooden swords, and bits of bark began dropping. I didn't want to get hit in the face, so I tucked my chin just as a fairly large piece hit the top of my head.

“Donny!” yelled Finn. “Get it off!”

“Get what off?” I said; I was waiting calmly for Pegg to reach me and begin the promising shower that would cool me.

“You're on fire!” he yelled. “You're head's on fire!”

Pegg stopped watering Greg and lunged over towards me and slapped the top of my head. A burning piece of wood, looking more like a tiny, hot coal, shimmering orange and yellow and white, settled between a collection of twigs and set off a tiny blaze that Finn put out

with his foot. A few more pieces began dropping out of the forest canopy. Pegg doused my head before I could feel for where the burning ember had settled on my scalp.

“We need to get going,” said Pegg, with no apparent anxiousness; he had begun dousing himself with his own hose, as was Cooper when we settled into single file again. Pegg allowed Cooper to lead, setting a fast pace—as the smoke cleared temporarily—followed by Finn, me and Greg, with Pegg at the rear. We were still going uphill. Every few seconds, a gust of wind would blow by us, followed by streamers of smoke, and a rain of small embers. Pegg had established his authority without any objections from Cooper, or Cooper had ceded his; I couldn’t tell which. It didn’t matter. Cooper was in the front with his compass. But Pegg was who I felt I ought to listen to when the next decision had to be made.

\* \* \* \*

Within a few minutes we had escaped the smoke’s embrace, and pulled our bandanas down around our necks. We hiked in silence as the shadows grew longer and the forest darker. Pale blue skies gave way to dark blue, but there was still plenty of light to see where we were going, less so the ground beneath our feet. At Cooper’s pace, though, it took nearly all my concentration to avoid twisting an ankle as the terrain changed; there was less topsoil, and the small bushes and dry grass became sparser, revealing a rug of small rocks that rolled with each step, creating unstable footing. I was surprised—and pleased—that I hadn’t panicked in the smoke. Every time I looked back at Finn and Pegg, however, Finn’s face was flush with fear, and he seemed constantly on the verge of crying. I wondered if my face too had registered any

fear, without me being aware of it. I asked Greg. I knew I was giving him the opportunity to make fun of me, but he didn't seem in the mood.

"Nah, you look solid, Donny," he replied, almost sadly. He looked at the ground ahead of him, staying in front of me. His hands were in his pockets, his arms stiff, his shoulders hunched. Suddenly he straightened up. "Jesus! I don't know how I coulda missed it!" He turned around and continued walking, backwards, facing me. "It's so obvious now!"

"Missed what?" I said. "What's so obvious?" He continued walking backwards.

"You fucked her! Am I right?" Thankfully, he wasn't really asking a question; he seemed content to make the observation without provoking me. "I'm right. I can tell. You finally did it, Donny boy." He turned back around and continued, shoulders back and head up. "I gotta tell ya, I thought for a long time I was gonna have to do it *for* ya." He laughed, and I glanced over my shoulder to see Finn grimacing with piety, and Pegg grinning.

"We're here!" cried Cooper up ahead, where the slight upslope ended abruptly. Behind us were the top branches of sunlit trees, instead of trunks. "Two lousy miles to go, maybe less, and we'll be at the golf course, boys! Right through there!" He pointed to a spot in the distance where the trees rose up again like the face of a giant wave.

Greg and I caught up with Cooper and stared down at what seemed more swale than valley or chasm; I couldn't see any cliffs. Finn and Pegg caught up to us; Pegg's expression countered Cooper's cheery and toothy smile. Pegg pleaded with him to turn and head east, because the flames we'd seen were moving south, towards the Boar Cliffs.

"When the fire comes this way, it will shoot up to here like a blowtorch, Mr. Lund," he said.

"Pegg, what makes you so sure? We're only two miles from Buck Hill."

“South is where it narrows. Climbing out will be hard.”

“So? I know all the easy routes up the cliffs, Pegg.”

“In the dark?”

“The sun won’t set for another hour, maybe more.”

“Can we just get going and stop arguing?” said Finn, nervously.

“I’m not going south,” said Pegg defiantly.

“Then you don’t get paid.”

“Then I don’t get paid,” said Pegg, this time sounding more relieved than angry, as if his decision to separate himself from Cooper had set him free. “I’m going east now.” And with those words he hopped gingerly down into the swale at an angle 45 degrees off where Cooper had pointed. He was almost lost between the trees when I started after him. Greg caught up but remained a few steps behind me as we sidestepped gingerly down the slope, trying not to lose sight of Pegg in the thickening underbrush.

“Pegg!” I called out. “We’re coming!” He stopped and turned to look back uphill, but not at us, more towards the sky. We turned around to see what it was that had captured his attention. Above Cooper and Finn, between the branches of the forest canopy, barely visible against the darkening blue sky, hi-lit by a setting sun that had already abandoned the forest floor, was the front edge of a black cloud that might have been mistaken for a huge thunderhead auguring the arrival of a welcome storm. But Pegg knew—and we knew—that it wasn’t.

I arrived at Pegg’s side before Greg, and asked him if he was going to let Cooper and Finn know what was behind them; Pegg remained silent, waiting for Greg to catch up. “Fuckin’ know-it-all,” was all he said before leading us on. When I looked back uphill again, after only a dozen or so more steps, Cooper and Finn were no longer visible among the mass of tree-trunks.

We heard Cooper shout out, “You’re fucking fired, Norman! You’re all fired!” That made Greg laugh. We crunched downward across the decayed and dried-out tree bark of paper birches, past pine scrub and hawthorn, dewberry and dogwood—each about the size of a crouching human—trying not to lose sight of Pegg. The larger trees, most of them red pine with few or no branches until 12 to 20 feet above the ground, were spaced out now to about 20-30 feet between each trunk. This allowed us to see ahead as we neared the floor of the swale. I turned on my headlamp but it proved useless, and would likely remain so until it was pitch black. But my eyes had adjusted to the approaching darkness, and I could see to our right the upslope, which was interrupted by a wall of dark rock that set off the trees in front of it.

Suddenly Pegg stopped. He turned to face us. Greg jumped in front of me, like a grade school kid wanting to show off his enthusiasm to his teacher.

“What the fuck are you guys doin’?” said Pegg. Greg jerked backwards, accidentally elbowing me in the chest.

“Following you,” I said.

“Yeah, Cooper Lund is an idiot,” added Greg.

“Cooper Lund is not an idiot,” said Pegg. “He’s just wrong. He’s a rich guy, and rich guys are used to being right.”

For the next half-hour we traversed the cliffs along their base in silence. It became apparent that Pegg was not looking for a route up and out and back to Buck Hill; rather to get as far away from the fire as possible, even if it meant circumventing the resort entirely. Greg soon became annoyed and bored again. Every so often he squirted water at me, or pretended the hose was a water fountain.

“They are probably back at the resort by now,” whispered Greg, catching up with me. Finn is drinking a coke and Cooper is downing a beer at the Hotel bar.” He put his arm around me. “But on the plus side,” he continued, “we get to spend quality time alone with a convicted murderer.” Greg’s remark only served to remind me that after one and a half summers, we still did not know any details about the Pegg’s prison time.

It was dark enough that my headlamp shone brightly on the tree trunks closest to me, but not sufficiently bright to illuminate a path between the trees. But through the trees to the northwest, along the line of the downslope, I could see what I thought were the lights of Tannersville—nestled into the sidehill of Flattop Mountain. Below the town was another string of lights stretching north/south across the middle of the mountain, then making a loop that headed towards us; they looked like the lights of a road congested with traffic. I asked Greg what was the road south of the Tannersville and why couldn’t we head for that. It looked close, maybe less than a mile. Pegg must have heard me; he was at my side—before Greg could answer—tilting his head to get a view. He put his hand on my shoulder and asked me to show him what I’d seen through the trees. I pointed to the break in the veil of trunks that had afforded me my view: there—between us and Tannersville—was what I had assumed was a well-lit road engorged with traffic, possibly residents from the south fleeing the fire.

“There’s no road south of Tannersville,” answered Greg, finally.

“That’s no road,” echoed Pegg. For the first time I sensed some anxiety in his voice. “That there’s the reason we never met up with the folks from Tannersville. That’s part of the fire, Donny. It’s got half-way around us already.” Looking again, I could see he was right. The continuous line of flickering light I had mistaken for a road was the front edge of the forest fire, already as far east as we were, but fortunately at least a mile north.



Pegg leaned against a tree, the water tank scraping along the bark; he clasped his hands behind his neck and arched his back. Greg sipped water from his backpack tank, sucking the nozzle of the hose. “What do you think—?”

“Shut up!” said Pegg. “Listen.”

My breathing was too heavy, and my heartbeat too loud in my ears; I couldn’t be sure whether I heard something in the distance or not.

“What is it?” asked Greg after a few seconds.

Pegg raised his arm and clenched his fist as if he were ready to punch Greg, who flinched and raised his left arm in defense. “Shut the fuck up!”

Then I heard it. In the distance, back from the direction we had come, a voice—raspy, high-pitched—repeating something over and over, like “Hey! Hey! Hey!” Pegg straight-armed Greg’s face, and then mine, stopping just short of hitting us. The voice was getting closer, and the word—repeated over and over again—became clear. “Help! Help! Help!” We could hear the sound of underbrush being trampled.

“Over here!” screamed Pegg. “Mr. Crawly! Over here! Come to my voice!”

“Finn?” mumbled Greg softly, breaking Pegg’s ultimatum. After thirty seconds of calling back and forth, Finn stumbled out of the darkness, between two trees, and into Pegg, nearly toppling over, despite being a foot-and-a-half taller.

“It’s Cooper! Mr Lund, I mean. He’s hurt!” gasped Finn between gulps of air. Frightened and exhausted, he sank to his knees, as if by disgorging the message he had sapped the last bit of strength from his legs. Both upper arms were smeared with blood; in the encroaching darkness, he must have caromed off trees like a billiard ball while searching for us.

“Catch your breath, Mr. Crawly,” said Pegg. “Where is Mr. Lund?”

In short bursts of fragmented sentences—the end of the last word of one repeated as the first word of the next—Finn recounted how they had begun the climb up one of the Boar Cliff’s steep inclines. Cooper had lead the way, coaxing Finn upward, telling him where to find hand- and footholds. Finn explained to Cooper how he was afraid of heights, and Cooper initially showed a lot of patience, waiting for Finn to catch up every ten feet or so. But after Finn stalled out—“freaked out,” he admitted—Cooper lost it and threatened to leave Finn behind.

“That’s when he fell,” said Finn, in tears—whether from the sight of Cooper falling or from his own ordeal I could not tell. “Like God had ordained it, for him losing faith.”

“God didn’t do it this to Cooper, you moron,” said Greg. “He did it to himself.”

Finn went on to describe how Cooper had “bounced” past him and back down to the base of the cliff and just lay there, moaning, asking for Finn to climb down and help him.

“Bounced?” said Greg. “He bounced?”

“That must have been scary,” I said, trying to comfort Finn. He was still shaking, though he had caught his breath. I tried to imagine what a body looked like when it *bounced*.

With his arm around the nineteen year-old, Pegg coaxed more details out of Finn. Cooper was alive, but had some kind of leg injury, and perhaps a broken rib or two. He had left Cooper at the base of the cliff in the position he had landed in, said Finn, because Cooper thought his leg might be broken, that his knee was “all fucked up.” He refused to let Finn touch him there, or even wipe his face clean—covered in blood from scraping stone on the way down—with his moistened hankerchief.

“He told me to go get you,” said Finn. “He told me all I had to do was keep the cliffs to my right. It was an order, so here I am.”

Pegg withdrew his arm from around Finn and began rubbing his own face. I had not noticed until now the soot that had accumulated on his skin; it occurred to me that this was more what the headlamps were good for: close-up views and first aid. The area of his forehead Pegg rubbed clean shone from my light. I sat down again, across from Pegg and Finn; Greg joined me. “You scared, Mr. Crawley?” said Pegg, after he’d cleaned his entire face.

“Not so much now,” said Finn, managing a smile.

“Well, you oughta be scared,” said Pegg, surprising me. I was trusting Pegg—more than ever—to lead me out of the forest and back into the safety of the resort and the waiting arms of Lacy Dunlap. He fixed his eyes on Greg and I. The empty feeling in my stomach, possibly mistaken for hunger before, revealed itself as fear. “So should you assholes. Fuckin’ pickle we’re in now.” Pegg stood up abruptly and tightened the straps on his pack, pulling the loose-fitting water tank up higher on his shoulders; he moistened the hankerchief around his neck. “You three oughta just keep going east. Get to the North Point Road and find help.” But I could tell he didn’t care, really, what we did.

“Where the hell is the North Point Road?” asked Greg.

“You want us to go without you?” said Finn. “That doesn’t seem right.”

“Right’s got nothin’ to do with it!” said Pegg, raising his voice. “I can’t leave Mr. Lund lying on the ground. And you summertime pricks have no fuckin’ clue what’s back there. You especially,” he added, eyeballing Greg. “You think you’re in some kind of movie. You think this is some kind of adventure.” He loomed over Greg, who was no longer smiling. “You wanna fight this fuckin’ fire so bad? Fine! But I am not takin’ care of your ass.”

“Jesus, Pegg, why are you being such a jerk?” said Greg, nearly on his back, except for the water tank. “What’d I do to you?”

Pegg turned away. “Nothing,” he said, setting out in the direction we had come from. He didn’t hesitate. He did not look back. I lost sight of him within seconds, and stood up. I tightened the straps on my pack, and Greg did the same. Finn stood up, and it was then we realized that he didn’t have his pack with him, nor his headlamp. “Nothing. Forget it,” Pegg continued, as if talking to himself. “Ah, shit. Do what you want,” he called out from the darkness. He must have heard me moving in his direction, followed by Greg and Finn. “If you come with me, do exactly what I say. Exactly. No questions. No fuckin’ around. I will not be wet-nurse to three babies.”

I caught up to Pegg first. I followed Pegg because I was more afraid of getting lost, than of the forest fire. Greg came, I suppose, because he wanted to be closer to *the action*. Finn came because he didn’t want to be left behind. When I asked Finn what happened to his water tank and headlamp, he told me that Mr. Lund’s lamp had failed, and that he’d left the tank because he felt it would have slowed him down.

My motivation had changed: it was now not to disappoint Pegg; I wasn’t going to allow myself to be a “baby.” Pegg had been in prison, he had been shot, he had survived. I believed with all my heart that he knew how to live and that was what I needed to know, too. So I would stay with him, learn from him, do whatever he asked of me. He picked up the pace, and I struggled to keep my balance as we jogged, the water tank digging into my shoulders and hips. With the cliffs to our left now, we ran towards Cooper Lund—and the fire.

\* \* \* \*

Within a half hour we smelled smoke and had to pull our hankkerchiefs up around our noses. The moon, three-quarters full and thankfully high in the northeast, provided some light, periodically, and helped us navigate the uneven terrain better than the headlamps. The forest floor to our right steepened and soon we were in a deep swale, abruptly rising to our left as the Boar Cliffs, with a more gradual but still steep rise to our right. The cliffs took a ninety-degree turn to our left, moving the barrier from north/south, to west/east.

In the distance to my left, I thought I saw two lights next to one another, and pointed it out to Pegg, who stopped and came back to where I stood. “Well done, Mr. Perkins,” he said, slapping me on the shoulder. “I mighta missed that.”

Cooper was lying on his back, just as Finn had described. And then I realized what the real purpose of the headlamp was for—not to help you *see*, but to help you *be seen*. Cooper looked like a man taking a nap, with one arm up, elbow bent, hand behind his head—twisted to his left—supporting his neck; the other arm lay across his forehead, and that hand held his cell phone, shining its bright light adjacent to Finn’s dimmer headlamp. The phone was propped up vertically, like some strange cemetery headstone. Cooper’s left leg was slightly off at an angle. He wiggled the hand that held his phone, saying, “Fuckin’ good for somethin’ after all.”

Pegg loosened his pack straps and let the water tank fall to the ground behind him. He crouched over Cooper, snatched his phone, and directed its light on Cooper’s left leg. The knee was bent normally, but where the kneecap ought to have been there was a slight hollow; to the left of the knee it looked as if a large egg had been placed underneath the skin.

“That is one fucked up knee,” said Greg, softly. He turned away.

“Your kneecap is over here, is all” said Pegg as he gently touched the protrusion.

Cooper stiffened.

“Is his leg broke?” asked Finn.

“You’ve dislocated your kneecap,” responded Pegg softly. “Might be a break too. Probably not, though. Anything else hurt?”

“Jesus, Norman,” said Cooper, wagging a finger at Pegg. “Is there anything you’re not a fucking expert on?”

“You see all kinds of shit in the slammer, Mr. Lund.,” said Pegg. “And this here—” he tapped gently against the obvious protrusion on the left side of Cooper’s knee joint “—is a dislo-*cay*-tion. Maybe you’d like a second opinion?” Pegg gently massaged Cooper’s lower leg. “Anything else hurt?” he repeated.

“My ribs—here.” Cooper raised his left arm and ran the fingers of his right hand down from his left armpit to the belt of his shorts. “Right in the middle. Couple, maybe three.”

“How’s your breathing? Can you take a deep breath?”

“Not really. Don’t really want to try right now.” Pegg sat back and surveyed Cooper’s entire body. Cooper closed his eyes. “I’m really fucked, aren’t I?”

“No you ain’t,” said Pegg calmly. “Kneecaps’r’easy. Ribs don’t matter right now. Issue is, how we are going to get you up there.” He pointed towards the top of the cliff.

“Up there?” said Greg. “I thought you were against it.”

“Was then,” said Pegg matter of factly. “Not now.” He walked to the base of the cliff and stared up; he looked left and right, stepping away from the wall and back several times. Then he knelt down over Cooper again, and gently arranged Cooper’s knee so that it pointed upwards; he wrapped his left arm around Cooper’s leg just below the knee, and guided me to do the same with Cooper’s upper leg. Then Pegg placed two fingers of his right hand against the lower edge of the protrusion—which we now knew to be Cooper’s kneecap—and began

pushing it up towards its normal spot. A tiny staccato “ahh” came out of Cooper’s mouth, but then he gritted his teeth and for the next several seconds Cooper sounded like someone straining to move a heavy object. I watched the protrusion move from Pegg’s effort, slowly, until it settled into the hollow where it belonged. Once there, Pegg straightened out Cooper’s lower leg, and I let go, until the whole of the leg rested next to the other one. The air came out of Cooper’s mouth like a whistling teapot.

“Holy shit, that hurt!” he said—smiling. “Now what?”

“We walk a few hundred yards east and climb.”

“You want me to walk?” said Cooper.

“OK. Limp. Whatever.”

“Why over there?” asked Greg. Why not here? Why not now, if the fire’s so close.”

Pegg was in Greg’s face immediately. The veins in his neck, and the tendons, all showed. His eyes seemed as round as marbles, and just as hard. “Who the fuck are you?” he screamed. “What do you know? Nothin’! Not a goddam thing. You decided to come with me, right? Do you know these woods? Do you even know where we are? No you don’t. So shut the fuck up!”

Greg looked as if he might cry; he looked to me for some comfort or understanding, which I could not give him. I had entrusted my well-being to Pegg. I had given myself over to him completely. Nothing else mattered.

“Look for sticks about yea long!” said Pegg, holding up his hands about 2 feet apart; I was sure he meant all of us, but only Finn and I scrounged for sticks. From what we collected in the next few minutes he selected eight and lined them up next to one another on the ground. Then he tore his hankie into several strips, knotted them together, and signaled for us to do

the same. Finn and I complied while Greg stood off to one side. Pegg collected all the strips and began arranging the sticks under Cooper's leg, and four of the knotted-together strips under the sticks—two above, and two below Cooper's knee. He guided Finn and I as we encircled Cooper's knee with the sticks, while Pegg tied and tightened the strips, creating a splint that held Cooper's leg secure and straight.

“Thank you,” said Cooper, when we were finished. “That feels a lot better.”

For the first time since the early afternoon, since digging the fire ditch at a furious pace, Pegg smiled. “Had to be done, Mr. Lund,” he said. “Had to be done.”

\* \* \* \*

Pegg led the way, Greg behind him, and for the next half-hour, Finn and I took turns holding up Cooper's left side, until we arrived at a spot where Pegg and Greg had already doffed their water tanks. We still had fifty yards or so to catch up to them.

“Drink up, boys,” said Pegg. “And wet yourselves from head to toe. You'll need it.” Greg walked back to Finn and myself; he did not offer to help with Cooper the last hundred yards.

It was Finn's turn to hold Cooper, so Greg took me aside and whispered, “I know we thought he was the guy, Donny, but I'm tellin' ya, he's got some kind of hero complex. We gotta get out of here.”

“I'm not leaving him,” I said firmly.



“I mean, first he doesn’t even want to do the Boar Cliffs, and now he thinks we’re gonna lift Cooper’s heavy ass up—what—50-60 feet of rock? Why? He won’t tell me anything. Every time I ask him a question he looks as if he wants to kill me.”

“He’s got a lot on his mind.”

Greg clenched both fists and held them up to my face. He tried to whisper but his voice cracked, and I’m sure Finn heard what he said next. “That’s your problem, Donny. You are such a fuckin’ goodie two-shoes. You think everybody’s a nice guy.” He put a hand up against my chest and stopped me from continuing towards Pegg, while Finn walked on. Then he put his arm around me, and his face next to mine. He pointed off in the distance, parallel to the cliffs. “That’s the way to the North Point Road. Right? Isn’t that what Pegg said before Finn came back and screwed everything up? Well, that’s where I’m going. You should come with me. I understand why Finn is sticking around. He’s only got half a brain and the rest is committed to the Lord, but you—think about Lacy. Think about a nice shower. Think about a cold beer. You could be out here all night. Shit, half the night’s gone already.”

I could have reminded him how gung-ho he had been about firefighting a few hours ago. About how chest-thumping macho he had seemed when the real fireman was around. But at that moment I understood Greg, finally—as someone who had always acted according to his needs at the moment, not according to any principles. That even his obsession with getting laid wasn’t about physical pleasure; it was about the “getting.” He wasn’t interested in fighting a fire; he just wanted to be *seen* as a fire fighter. He waited for me to say something.

“God, Donny,” he said finally. “You are such a wimp.” He walked away from me. He passed Finn and Cooper, then Pegg, who was dousing himself with water. “This way, right?” he

said to Pegg as he passed him by, snatching his water tank up by one strap and swinging it across his back.

“Yup,” said Pegg without looking. “Straight north.”

In seconds Greg had disappeared from view.

We wet ourselves completely and left the water tanks. The route up was not precipitous. The rock felt firm, and the light from our headlamps—useless in the forest for seeing ahead any distance—was enough to see several yards up, to find handholds and shelves where we could stand, or sit to catch our breath. I led, with Finn following. Cooper, who complained of rib pain whenever he stretched his left arm above his head, nonetheless climbed on his own up the easy stretches, using his right arm to pull himself up, and his right leg to push off of. Occasionally Finn would reach out and help pull Cooper’s good arm. We were slow and methodical, at Pegg’s insistence. He called out the route for me from down below, telling me which way to go, which hand to use.

I could hear the fire. As we climbed, the noise increased as did the wind, and the wind brought hotter air with it. Our clothes dried out within minutes. Halfway up, Pegg called for me to stop at the next big ledge. As my head cleared it, I could see that there was a large indentation in the cliff, hollowed out like a big scoop, with room for all of us to rest. Finn arrived, and we looked down at Cooper, with Pegg only partially visible below him. When the upper half of Cooper’s body leaned onto the ledge, we could see Pegg’s hand pushing Cooper’s butt from below. Cooper swung his good leg up and rolled onto the ledge.

“That was fuckin’ awful,” he said, holding his side. “Ribs feel worse than my leg.”

When Pegg’s head appeared, I looked for some sign of concern or anxiety, but there was none. “You’re doing great, Mr. Lund,” he said. “Can’t quit now. Good job, all of you.”

We were above the tops of the trees—most of them anyways. And the fire was clearly visible in the distance. The wind was in our faces as we looked out, but more like it was coming from below and rising. The fire was closing in; it was closer to us now than to Tannersville. Finn asked how close; Pegg replied that it was close enough, but not to worry—we only had to make the top of the cliff, he assured us, and we would be safe. A calm, unquestioning acceptance of Pegg's reassurance was reflected in Finn's face, which mitigated my simmering doubts. Finn's eyes were closed and he was smiling broadly. Perhaps he was praying—to a God I had no connection with, but who would be extra insurance should Pegg fall short. Cooper broke the quiet by asking for a break; he was still wheezing, and announced that he could hardly breathe. Pegg got him to lay on his back, which helped. But after a few longer breaths, which seemed to me a good sign, he announced that he felt he needed more rest.

“Just give me ten minutes, maybe twenty,” said Cooper, who rolled over on his right side to relieve the pressure on his ribs. “We got that much time, don't we?”

I wasn't sure if the question had been directed at Pegg, or if Cooper was just thinking out loud. Pegg gazed out at the approaching flames. “I was raped my first night in prison,” he said abruptly. “In the laundry room. Two guys held me down, bent me like a paper clip over a laundry cart. Turns out the guy I shot had paid to have me shanked.” Pegg continued, “The butt-fuck was supposed to soften me up for the shank, when the work shift changed; but I only stopped struggling so I could concentrate on what I was going to do when it was over. I wasn't going to let it go. The guy I shot had raped my sister—one of those date rapes where nobody believes the girl.”

I looked over at Finn, who looked distraught, as if he wanted off the ledge, to be anywhere else but here listening to Pegg's confession. I thought of Greg, who had been so

curious as to the nature of Pegg's jailtime experience. I wondered *why now? Why tell the story now?* Pegg continued, "The shift bell rang and the guys who did me left me, and I waited for the new group to walk in. I didn't even bother to pull my pants up. I stayed leaning over the cart and rolled it over next to one of the ironing boards; the irons were attached to chains hooked to the ceiling, and I positioned myself so no one could see my left hand was wrapped around a chain. I knew what was gonna happen."

"How did you know?" asked Finn. I had to admit I was curious as well.

"Somebody does you like that, and doesn't say anything—doesn't announce you are his bitch or slave or delivery boy or punching bag or whatever shit role he wants you to play—that means you are a dead man. You are a useless piece of meat. You got to go. The deal had been made. I was sure of it."

"Why are you telling us this?" I asked him.

"Because when this is over, I don't want you making shit up about me."

"Why would we do that?" asked Finn.

"Cuz people say untrue shit about me all the time. People think they know me, and they don't."

This whole time, Pegg stared out across the forest canopy at the encroaching fire, and did not shift his gaze or move a muscle as far as I could see. His hands were at his side, pressed against the rock ledge, his legs dangled motionless over the edge. The sound of the fire had become a constant hum in my ears.

"What happened next?" asked Finn; less out of curiosity than from a desire for the story to end.

“The guy came in—I remembered him from the holding cell and the bus ride—with one other fella. That was also a clue. There should’ve been at least six guys coming in to work the laundry. He saw me there, bent at the waist, pants around my ankles, but did he say anything? No he didn’t. So I tightened my grip on the chain. He came over while his buddy blocked the entrance.” My anxiousness was increased by Pegg’s almost deadpan delivery. “He had his right wrist stuck in his waistband. He put his other hand on my shoulder and asked me if I would like some help. As soon as I saw his right hand come up outta his waistband, I swung my arm, the one attached to the chain holding the iron, and goddam if the fuckin’ iron didn’t hit the guy right in the temple—the pointy end—right next to his eye socket.”

“Oh my God!” exclaimed Finn. “Oh my God!”

“True story, in case you were wondering,” Cooper chimed in.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“Everybody from around here knows the story. It just doesn’t get told much anymore is all. Right Norman?”

Pegg waited until he was sure Cooper didn’t have anything additional to say, before continuing. “The point is that I went to jail for shootin’ somebody who hardly got hurt at all, and I—”

“Wait a minute,” said Finn. “I thought you went to jail for killing a man.”

“The man I killed,” said Pegg, turning around to face us for the first time since he had begun, “was already in jail. That’s what got me fifteen years.”

“But he was going to kill you. That doesn’t seem right,” said Finn, suddenly animated now that an issue of right and wrong had come up.

“They never found no shank.”

“Nope,” said Cooper, from his prostrate position. “Never did.”

“What’s funny is that the man I wanted to kill, I didn’t. And a man I didn’t aim to kill, I did. Ain’t that life in a nutshell? So in a strange way I felt I had got my revenge. That I had honored my sister.”

“What about the scars on your stomach and your back?” I asked, suddenly energized.

Pegg brought his legs around so that now he was sitting facing the rest of us, his back to the forest canopy. “That there was real revenge, boys. Man I had shot for rapin’ my sister, the guy had hardly skipped a beat whole time I was in. Had a job, got married, lived a normal life. He just waited ‘til I was out, and shot me in the back while I was sitting on my motorcycle at a stoplight. The bullet missed my spine and went clean through, so I only missed two weeks of work. I knew who it was, but couldn’t ever prove it. I seen him from time to time. He looks at me, and I look at him. I figure we’re even. I figure he does too. So I ain’t worried any more. That was years ago anyways.”

“Who was he?” asked Finn. “Is he from around here? Do we know him?”

“That’s enough, Pegg,” said Cooper. “Now they know.”

“Yeah,” said Pegg, sighing, as if an expected relief had not materialized. “Now you know. Now you know.” Just then a bright burst of flame shot up from behind him. I could feel the heat radiating from it, so I know Pegg must have felt it against his back.

“Sweet Jesus!” said Finn, backing up against the rock face. “Did you feel that?” He stood up, and the rest of us joined him, except for Cooper, who tried to but couldn’t. As we did, a shower of small embers fell on us, too tiny to cause any damage, but as a taste of what was to come, enough to tighten my chest and throat.

“Let’s go then,” said Pegg. “You first, Mr. Perkins, then Mr. Crawly, then Mr. Lund, then me.” He pointed the way and I began—unthinking, mechanically—focusing on the physical acts of reaching, holding, pressing, pushing; the tactile sensations that let me know I was secure with each upward surge, despite the shaking of my limbs and the certainty I had lost half my strength. Pegg and Cooper took a slightly less direct route to our left, not as precipitous. Pegg described exactly where he wanted Cooper’s hands and one good foot to go, and when to pull up; he assisted by putting his shoulder against Cooper’s butt each time. Within a few minutes, Finn and I were well above Pegg and Cooper; I couldn’t bear to look up, certain I would be dismayed at the amount still left to climb. Nor could I look down, in case Pegg was so far behind as to be useless to me should I encounter any problems. This was how my fear presented itself; a narrowing of vision, heat from within to compound the heat from without, a weakening of muscle strength, uncontrollable shaking. And yet I climbed—because Pegg had said to climb.

When I reached the top, I rolled over onto the flat surface until I felt secure, away from the edge; the rock felt cool, even moist. I let my cheek rest against a thin veneer of lichen. After several seconds, Finn had not appeared, and I crept back to the edge on my hands and knees, and looked down. It had not occurred to me that I had done something remarkable until that moment. The final part of the cliff face was nearly vertical. I had pulled myself up ten feet of sheer rock. Finn was struggling to find handholds and footholds; he looked up at me wide-eyed.

“Help!” he cried out, reaching with his free hand.

“Don’t look up,” I called out. “Just look at the rock in front of you. There’s places to grip. I found them. You can too.”

Finn rested his head against the cliff face; his outstretched arm felt for holds like a blind man using a stick. When he found one, his fingers tightened around it and he pulled himself up slightly. When his head had reached the level of his hand he paused. After a few seconds he began the process using his other arm. Only then did my vision widen, and I saw for the first time the enormity of what we were fleeing from.

Beneath Finn the forest floor was glowing, resembling a bed of coals. Less than a hundred yards away from the cliff base, tree trunks were burning as brightly as the logs in a fireplace fire. Every few seconds, the upper branches of a tree would accept the flames from below and explode like a matchhead, sending thousands of tiny embers up in wide arcs, and then down again like fireworks. With each burst, a surge of intense heat blew into me; the painful sensation lasted only a few seconds, thank God; but I thought that if this is what fire felt like from a hundred yards away, how horrible would the pain be if it were closer?

I urged Finn to hurry, but regretted saying it; I had said it for myself, not for him. I backed away and waited for his head to appear. I kept backing up; just a few feet seemed to make a difference, and make the heat tolerable. Finally he appeared, silhouetted against the burning forest canopy, a curtain of undulating orange and yellow, rippling currents that unleashed thin streams of flame upwards like snapping whips. The roar was loud, and as constant as a waterfall's. Finn stumbled into my arms, and we hugged. His arms and face felt uncomfortably hot, and we ended our embrace quickly. We turned our attention to the cliff face a few yards east, where we anticipated Pegg and Cooper would surface. Each time the upper parts of a redwood or birch exploded into flame, Finn and I both twitched nervously. As the roar of the fire increased in volume, it also revealed its strange cornucopia of sounds: groaning and squeaking mixed with scraping and popping like engine backfires. The rumbling—like a truck



dropping an endless load of rocks—was unceasing, and had a quadraphonic quality, pulsing and retreating as if an unseen hand were altering the settings on a series of speakers.

An arm appeared twenty yards away, followed by a second. The two arms remained there, motionless, while we approached. Returning to the edge was like opening an oven door. We heard Pegg's voice. We thought at first he might be calling out to us. He was screaming orders: "Move, Goddammit! Move!"

"Mr. Pegg?" Finn called out. We were near the edge. "What do we do now?"

"Who's that?" came a voice from below.

"Finn!"

"Grab his arms, Finn!" came the order. It was then that we realized the arms belonged to Cooper. Pegg was below him, just as he had been when they started out. "He's stuck on something, and he can't go down and he can't go up. I can't push him up off it."

We did as we were told; Finn took one arm, and I the other. In a few seconds, Pegg had joined us.

"It's his belt or pants near his waist, boys. I can't see what he's stuck on, so I'm gonna hafta lean on over while you hold him and see if I can get him unstuck from here."

"Mr. Pegg," said Finn. "What's going to happen? Are we going to die here? What if we can't get him free?"

Pegg calmly reassured us. "Boys, the fire is gonna blow like a hurricane up this cliff and over us and onto the forest beyond." He waved his hand over our heads, pointing away from the cliff. "All we gotta do is get Mr. Lund up where we are, and away from the cliff face. OK?"

It did not seem possible to me that the fire could blow over us. Maybe the whole prison story was untrue also; maybe Pegg was all bluster, an uneducated townie using his toughness to lord over softer high school and college kids like myself. How could he know what the fire would do? I felt that any substantial increase in the heat and my skin would begin to boil, or that I would not be able to breathe. I must have shown Pegg an expression that irritated him. “Mr. Perkins,” he said. “Don’t you trust me?”

“I trust you, Mr. Pegg,” said Finn firmly, saving me the trouble of trying to muster conviction that I did not have.

“Then hold on!” said Pegg as he shimmied on his stomach back to the edge and slowly dropped his head, then chest over the edge, next to Cooper’s body. I felt Cooper’s body move, and tightened my grip. A bit of Cooper’s head began to show.

“Atta way Mr. Lund,” said Finn. “You got it.” Cooper’s head and his right shoulder were now visible. His face looked drained; his eyes were open but empty. He groaned as his left shoulder rose and then dropped; that was the side with the bruised—or broken—ribs. His face showed no emotion; it was as if he were not complicit in his own rescue. He was just a body. He groaned again during a second effort by Pegg to dislodge him. The moment I felt an upward motion of Cooper’s arms, I pulled, as did Finn, and both Cooper’s shoulders appeared.

The top half of Pegg’s body was still hanging over the edge of the cliff, his legs visible to the left of Cooper’s arms, which we held onto tightly; Pegg’s arms tugged out of sight at Cooper’s waist belt. Finn and I each clutched one of Cooper’s hands and pulled with all our might. Pegg knew what had to be done and called up to us. Finn and I thought one of us should get hold of Pegg’s legs. But Pegg said no, and I silently cursed Greg’s early departure to run for

help, and Pegg's too-easy acquiescence. I shuddered each time a loop of flame poked the air above us, or when a noisy pop was accompanied by an explosion of embers.

"I see the problem, fellas," said Pegg, straining to get enough volume so we could hear him. I could tell he was struggling to breathe; he didn't want to suck in too much of the superheated air just a few feet below the cliff edge—even hotter than where we were—and had been upside down for several minutes. "I'm gonna have to try to pull him away from the wall, OK? You guys can't let go now."

Finn screamed against the crackle of the flames and the sound of the wind. "We won't let go, Mr. Pegg!" he yelled.

I kept hold of Cooper's left hand—Finn grasping his right—and crawled over Cooper and wiggled one of my arms under Cooper's upper chest; with my head close to the edge, I could make out part of the back of Pegg's head, down there scraping against the granite cliff wall. Pegg must have been proud of Finn at that moment, having overcome his fear of heights and fire to participate in the rescue of Mr. Lund. Might he have secretly known that it would be Finn—and not Greg—who would be up to the task?

"That's right, boys, it's Mr. Pegg today!" he called up. "Are you ready to pull?"

Finn and I said yes simultaneously. I changed my position to match Finn's and set my feet against a crack in the rock, just enough to provide purchase.

"On three!" Pegg shouted. "One! Two! And Thr—" And with that, he groaned, and I could feel Cooper's body lighten. Finn and I heaved and pulled at Cooper's belt when it appeared, keeping our other hands tight around his wrists, lifting the limp and weighty carcass away from the edge while we pulled; his body shot upward like he'd lost fifty pounds and Finn and I both fell on our backs as three-quarters of him settled onto the flat rock, and safety.

“He’s up, Pegg!” I yelled into the wind and smoke. “He’s safe!”

I looked to the left of Cooper; Pegg’s legs were no longer there. I looked at Finn, who was staring at the space where Pegg had been seconds ago. Scrambling across Cooper’s back on my hands and knees, I poked my head over the edge. The heat rising from the basin was unbearable and I pulled back. I tried again, just barely edging my eyes along the rock until I could see down below; the heath barren’s floor grasses, evergreen shrubs and azaleas just yards from the cliff base were fully ablaze, each dry bush exploding like a helium balloon, and raining teardrops of fire upwards. I struggled to catch a glimpse of Pegg.

“Do you see him?” I screamed at Finn, who had crawled beside me. We were shoulder to shoulder, lying on top of Cooper’s legs; cinders wafting lazily on searing waves of heat singed our skin, but neither of us moved. When I could stand it no longer, I pulled away. Finn stayed.

“I see him!” yelled Finn. “I see him!”

Reluctantly, I crawled back and looked over the edge. Finn pointed to a spot ten or more feet away from the cliff base. “There! On his back.”

“How are we going to get down to him?” I asked, even though I knew it was impossible. Either one of us might have posed the question, knowing we had neither the means, the skill, nor the additional courage required to save Pegg. A bush near him popped like a tight wad of firecrackers and sent a rush of flame skyward, inches from our faces.

The heat became unbearable and we pulled our heads back at the same time as the ball of yellow orange flew past us. It was then that I noticed Finn’s face; it was frighteningly red, and blistered at the tip of his nose and above his eyebrows. He backed further away from the edge. I grabbed him by the shoulders and told him he had been burned.

But Finn wasn't listening to me; he was listening for the sound that hadn't occurred yet. He was waiting, staring away from the cliff, then up into the sky, as if mesmerized by the undulating strands of smoke. Without warning, the loudest explosion yet—double the power of any previous one—made his whole body spasm. I thought it might have been from one of the water tanks we had left behind. Finn turned around and shivered as a fireball the size of a horse came into view and disappeared as quickly as it had formed, accompanied by screams—several in a row, each as loud as the previous one. They were unshaped, unformed cries of horrible pain and fear; they were wordless, unspecific, guttural and high-pitched, the entire range of human sounds in each one; they penetrated my skin along with the heat, my ears with the wind, and my heart with each repetition. After a half dozen, maybe, came two short ones, staccato bursts with less volume. Then there was only the sound of the fire.

Finn's head dropped, and his shoulders sagged; he started crying. "Donny, that was Mr. Pegg," he blubbered, between sobs. "That was Mr. Pegg!" he repeated. He looked at me, then down at Cooper Lund lying between us now, face against the granite, arms stretched out above his head as if he were diving into a pool. "You bastard!" he screamed at the unhearing Mr. Lund, and he smashed a series of fists into the helpless man's back, between the shoulder blades. "*Mr. Pegg to you! Mr. Pegg!*" After several strikes he looked helplessly around us. We were on large patch of barren rock—nearly the size of a football field—and I estimated the distance from the cliff edge to the nearest trees to the south at sixty yards. East or west, maybe forty yards either side of us, and the forest closed in right up to the cliff edge. Pegg had led us to the only treeless space within miles.

Finn fell onto his back, exhaustion finally overtaking him. He looked up at the sky and sighed. He took a deep breath, and I thought he might be preparing to speak, so I lay down

with my head next to his; partly because I wanted to hear what he had to say, and partly because I too was exhausted, and next to him, for a brief moment, I felt safe. “What?” I asked him. “Did you say something?”

“Look up at the sky,” he said. Streaks of flame were shooting across the sky above us horizontally. Tiny embers dropped down on us, but they were easily swatted away and died out. A few landed in tiny pools of water, collected in cracks in the granite, and sizzled comically. The fusillade continued for several minutes; we watched as the fire leapt over us and attached itself to the forest southeast, and watched in amazement as the process we had witnessed a few minutes ago started up again. And then, for the first time since sunset the previous day, I saw stars, glimmering between slivers of smoke then disappearing and reappearing as the smoke billowed and spread, moving south. The sun would be rising in a few hours.

The wind had picked up, which had helped us by moving the fire more quickly. We lay there, with no sense of time passing, until the sky brightened, until the only sounds were the sounds of wind, natural and clean—nothing to remind us of fire—until the sky turned milky blue and there were only a few wisps of smoke. When I stood, I felt the wind pouring up and over the cliff, but this time it brought relief, and felt cool against my skin. We knew we could move south now and stay behind the fire. We did not know at that point that the resort had been spared. I could not bring myself to look back down the cliff where Pegg’s body lay.

“We have to go,” I said, kneeling next to Finn.

“I know,” said Finn. “You think I don’t know?”

“You got burns on your face,” I told him when we were both standing. I pointed to the places on his nose and forehead.

“I think if I don’t touch ’em, I’ll be OK,” he said while looking over at Cooper, who had rolled over and managed to sit up.

“Where’s Norman?” asked Cooper.

“Down there,” said Finn angrily, pointing beyond the cliff.

Visible again were the tops of the tress, which two or so hours ago had been crackling with flame, popping to life like oil torches. Their black, vein-like limbs, smoldering and outlined against the smoke still wafting upwards from the hidden valley floor below, seemed like streaks of charcoal on grey paper, like symbols, like letters—an alphabet of death.

Cooper managed to stand up on his own, not asking for our help, and turned around to face us. “You think young Mr. Turk made it back?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” said Finn. He looked towards the forest southeast. “Maybe he just kept running and won’t ever come back.”

Finn and I stood next to Cooper, all three of us silent, while the sky brightened enough for us to see clearly in all directions. Every tree was leafless and black. To the southeast, the last flickers of flame were visible through the thick mass of blackened trunks. The occasional matchstick burst into orange, but died out quickly. There was smoke in the distance, but not thick, not black, not threatening. The fire had either been beaten, or had died out. Perhaps our ditch had aided in that process in some small way. Who knows? What I do know is that the fearful tsunami of orange and yellow and white had poured up the cliff and over us—just as Pegg had predicted. It passed above us, dropping only small pieces of what it had consumed, obsessed with finding new fuel, ignoring the large patch of barren rock beneath it, upon which we stood now.

The Boar Cliffs had been the instrument of our undoing—and our salvation.

\* \* \* \*

Later, as the sun rose, we took a closer look at Cooper's left knee. It was swollen as round as a ball and the skin was almost shiny, an ugly greenish-blue. The makeshift splint had loosened, so we raised and repositioned the sticks and retied the strands of hankerchief. Cooper didn't make a sound.

"Can you walk?" asked Finn, having accepted that Cooper was going to live, and that Pegg was dead, and also, I supposed, that God would punish Cooper, if there was any punishing to be done. "Cuz if you can walk at all, you need to try. It's only fair, Mr. Lund. Donny and me are tired, and we can help a little, but not a lot. And we're not gonna leave you here, because Mr. Pegg, he wouldn'ta left you. Right, Donny?"

Finn was on a roll, I could see that, and perhaps was channeling Pegg at that moment; in any case, I wasn't going to argue. So I nodded my assent, and that seemed to be enough for Cooper. We weren't going to count on Greg bringing back anyone, not the way he had left. He might have made it the long way around to Buck Hill, but if so, he would be busy making his story look good for himself. I didn't want him leading some rescue squad back to us. Having gone through what we did, I wanted to make it out on my own. I wanted to try at least. I wasn't going to leave Cooper; Finn spoke for the both of us in that regard. So if Cooper couldn't walk, we'd take turns carrying him—if we had to—all the way to Buck Hill.

The real rescuing had already been accomplished, in any case. We'd been rescued by Pegg; who died in the process of it. Greg had simply not trusted Pegg enough to stay—he had *turned tail*, as Pegg might have put it. He had opted for saving himself alone.



A week after the fire, Finn and I were honored together by the Buck Hill Chamber of Commerce, in a public ceremony. We were each presented with a “medal of service,” which felt appropriate. But we were also interviewed by local media and subjected to questions like *how did you find the courage?* And *how did it feel to be a hero?* Which made me uncomfortable. “I just felt that Norman Pegg knew what he was talking about,” I said. “Mr. Pegg was our supervisor, and I did what he told me to do. He’s the real hero,” said Finn. We also each got a certificate and a savings bond from the Rotary Club. Cooper was not in attendance; he was still at home recovering from his injuries. I learned that Greg had quit, and returned to Stroudsburg.

In a separate ceremony conducted at the Buck Hill Village Hall, Pegg was honored posthumously by the Buck County Fire Department and awarded the Honor Medal for true bravery, which was accepted by his sister Nora. Silvy Sunderland showed up—sober and clean-shaven—and stood next to Finn and myself. “That oughta’ve been me,” he said, a glint of ire in his eye. “Shoulda been me that died. He didn’t get a fair shake in anything.” Finn, to his credit, kept his mouth shut, but I could tell he wished he could get Silvy to invite The Lord Jesus Christ into his life, only now was not the time. “He never shoulda gone to jail in the first place,” Silvy added. “He just wanted to do right by his sister.” Once the ceremony was over, Silvy disappeared into the crowd, and Nora found us. She gave us both a hug. We learned that she had never married, and lived with a girlfriend in Tobyhanna. She taught second grade, and seemed content. She asked if Pegg had shared “his story” with us, and we nodded yes. She told us that she felt responsible for his downward turn in life, even though she had begged him not to retaliate against her rapist, and that for her this ceremony acknowledging him as a true hero wasn’t just about the night of the fire, it was about his whole life, really. He had finally got the respect he deserved. She cried and let us hug her, and asked us to remember Pegg only as we

had known him, and not for his earlier life. She thanked us for what we had said to the media about her brother, and left us to join a group of firefighters who had gathered near the makeshift stage. We never saw her again.

I understand there is a way memory can work for some people: over time, you shape the past to your advantage, in both the retelling, and the spaces between the retellings, until the most disturbing emotions are drained like water and silt through a sieve, are filtered as through a moss-and-stone dam, and you are left with only the purest water, always drinkable, always refreshing. But in my experience this option—like the water from Buck Hill Creek itself—is open only to the rich, or the fortunate few like Finn Crawley, with his unshakeable faith in God. Or perhaps Greg, who experienced everything differently than I for whatever reason, remaining strangely uninvolved in his own actions. Memory has never worked that way for me, and I do not think memory worked that way for Pegg.

Experts from the State and National Forest Services were called in to evaluate the damage to the golf course and the lands west of the Falls, and after ten days the resort reopened, we all had our jobs back, and the Creek Crew reformed. Silvy—still sober—returned, taking Pegg’s place, and a sixteen year-old with the nickname “Popper” replaced Greg. First day out Finn and I told him only about how Pegg had died, honoring Nora’s request. Silvy couldn’t help himself, though, and at lunch break spilled the beans about Pegg’s past, becoming especially animated when he got to the part about the prison murder. I began mowing the lawn bowling courts again, and lifeguarding on weekends, and Lacy resumed her maid duties.

For several weeks, I would wake up several times a night, before my dreams about the fire could develop fully. More significantly, I could no longer smell what I had become used to before the fire; passing the kitchen on my way to Lacy’s, no aromas surged through my

nostrils. I couldn't smell the pungent grass as I mowed the lawns in the pre-dawn chill. Not the scents of pine and lilacs, not the odor of talc and skin balm emanating from the locker rooms; neither the choking excess of cheap perfume on the prepubescent girls hanging around the pool nor the oppressive colognes worn by the older guests stirred my imagination. As for Lacy, I could not smell her either. Her scent—and all the other smells—had been replaced by the stale, smoky remains of the fire whenever I inhaled. Examined at the Pocono Medical Center in East Stroudsburg after our ordeal, I was diagnosed with anosmia—temporary loss of smell—due to excessive irritation of the nasal lining and throat from smoke inhalation. I had not realized how dependent I had become on Lacy's scent, and for weeks I struggled to get aroused when we were together; more from the anxiety of fearing the condition might be permanent, than from the condition itself. Fortunately, I could taste the saltiness of her skin when I kissed her, and was eager to please her as before; the eagerness passed for passion and she accepted that.

Then one evening, in Lacy's bed, my sense of smell came back with a suddenness that woke me from my dreamless sleep. I became increasingly panicked, curled up in a sweat, because along with the smell came sounds: the roaring cacophony of the fire, Cooper's groans as we lifted him up, Finn shouting "Oh my God!" when the wall of flames rose up behind us like a giant wave, and Norman Pegg's horrible screams. With my body arched in on itself, I felt like a fraud, that I had tricked Lacy into thinking I was more of a man than I was, braver than I was, more confident than I was. I was grateful she stayed asleep, that she didn't wake up and examine my face for the fear I felt I would consume me. She would be disappointed and throw me back like you throw back a fish that is too small to be either good eating, or good sport.

With the return of my sense of smell came the wall of doubts, and nightmares as thick as the deadly wall of flames that had threatened the five of us who had walked confidently into the

forest that morning. During the day, the memories were manageable; they blew over me like the fire did that night. When I fell asleep—when I was able to—every vision conspired to frighten me, contrived to have me fall like Pegg onto the valley floor, to explode like the forest canopy, or the bushes, or the water tanks; to blister like Finn’s face, to inhale corrosive super-heated air and burn from the inside out. I pictured myself as Pegg, delivering orders. I pictured the pointy edge of an iron cleaving the face of some nameless convict. I felt the bullet entering my back and exiting just below my waist. I saw Greg’s face, replaced by Lacy’s when I awoke. For the rest of that summer, and after I left for home and college, until the chill of the following winter, I struggled with sleep.

I moved on to college and a good job, made love to other women—women more sophisticated, more educated, wearing more exotic and expensive perfumes, who, each in turn, have loved me more for what they expect me to become, than for what I am, or what has shaped me. The story of the Big Fire of 2002 doesn’t mean much to them, other than that I survived.

Today the trigger was a phone call—from Greg Turk, long absent from my life, now a commodities trader, who unbeknownst to me has been living in Brooklyn for several years, less than a half-mile from my apartment. I do not remember pressing “end” on my cell, and do not know how long it has been since we finished our conversation. Minutes. Or an hour. My finger still hovers over the button. Greg promised to bring me news of Lacy if I agreed to meet him; probably to tell me he finally slept with her, having told me over the phone that he’d seen her when his trading group held its annual retreat in Buck Hill Falls three summers ago—which I knew already because of the sporadic emails I still get from Finn. In one of them he wrote that the firefighter who had left us that fateful day had brought his car into the family body shop for repairs. Finn asked if the guy remembered him. The firefighter responded with a surly “Should

I?” and Finn sucker-punched him right there in the garage. He added that he was still struggling with his anger and asked for Christ’s forgiveness every day. He ends every email he sends me by expressing hope that I have found God.

I drop the cell phone and watch as it bounces off a discarded pillow and onto the floor, rolling under the bed. I wonder if I will remember it is there when I wake up again. Shelly, my current girlfriend, shifts her position and billows the covers, unleashing smells from our nighttime lovemaking that have been trapped underneath. Their re-emergence arouses me. This is comforting.

I picture Greg as he was back then, marching off into the darkness. He will want to reminisce about that summer at Buck Hill; no doubt his memories differ from mine. He is one of those people who can shape the past to his advantage.

To help me get back to sleep, I conjure up the image of Silvy Sunderland instead; he is hobbling speedily, but gracelessly, towards Nora and the group of firefighters in the distance. It looks like she is introducing him to the other men. Silvy shakes their hands one by one, and then takes both of Nora’s hands in his. She is listening. I am sure he is sharing with her his belief that it should have been him that died, not Pegg. All I can hear, though, is the sound of trickling water flowing through moss and rock. She gives him a big hug, squeezing him tightly, and I can sleep.