

Ashes

Midland Sentry Tribune

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Inconclusive Evidence Thwarts Arson Case

The Coulee County Prosecutor's office has suspended its investigation into the fire that took the life of Alan Stewart last August. Dean Ledbetter, assistant deputy prosecutor, said that because the Midland City Fire Department's arson investigation was inconclusive, no charges would be brought in the case. When contacted by the Sentry Tribune, Fire Chief Ray Bolten said that "the fire burned so hot that it was impossible to determine the initial source and cause" of the fire. Police had responded to domestic disputes at the Stewart home numerous times. The house was fully insured and Stewart's widow intends to rebuild. Stewart was survived by his wife, Gwen, and daughter Grace, who was pulled from the burning home by her mother.

September 2010

I went out into the garden, which is to say that I went outside, for my entire yard has become my garden. There was a time when it was a tidy fenced in place with concrete and grass. We worked so hard to keep it that way, orderly and green, straight and controlled. It was as if we were determined to avoid the randomness that lurked beyond the boundaries we created, as if we were afraid of the mystery into which I am now slipping.

I went first to the tomatoes, for they are in bloom and it is exciting to see their delicate yellow flowers and think of the rich red fruit that they will bear. I had my artist's brush and gently stroked the blossoms, stimulating the blooms one by one. I cannot help but wonder if I am causing intense convulsions of pleasure. It is difficult to think of life beginning without such frenzy. The randomness of it all; my brush upon this blossom is no more accidental than the coupling with my child's father. And yet the feelings were so intense. I tried to give it some meaning; I wanted so much for there to be a meaning to it all. I ached for a story with a happy ending and a moral to it. It seems so long ago and I have no memory of the pleasure that created my child, nor do I remember the suffering, only that there was much of it. Now I see that there will be no bow tied upon it, no story even. Just an ending.

I lingered awhile among the zinnias. I am inspired by their resolve: they push out of the earth, their stems straight and tall, in a rush to deliver an effusion of color to the world. "Look at me!" they shout. I wonder if there was ever a time when I had that in me. I was more like the nasturtiums, hiding among the foliage, not wanting to be seen but hoping to be picked. If only I could have been

a zinnia: unafraid, proud, resolute. But I wasn't. I didn't define my life and so it just happened. I placed my passions upon the canvases that appeared. I wasn't the artist; I was the paint, splattered recklessly across the landscape, each speck of color a random bit of anguish or joy, undistinguished.

I admire the garlic, even if I don't understand it with its arched stem like a fencer's arm thrusting the rapier of bloom, self-sufficient and threatening. It has no need of anyone, nor Desire, and yet it is the one plant in my garden I would be most pressed to do without. It adds such a depth of flavor, a glow of warmth to my palate. In the garden, it seems so cold and selfish, as all of its cousins do, onions and leeks (although the leek's foliage and sense of community is comforting), shallots and scallions. What is the purpose of the bloom if not to entice and seduce? And what is the pleasure in such a life? This is not a question I should have to ask. Perhaps I have become an onion, or better yet, garlic. I think that people are often repulsed by me. It is the wrinkles and veins, the liver spots and bruises that are like the smell of garlic on my being. I have become death but not dead; they can not see that I am still here. Underneath the rot I am the child that always was.

When I tire, which is often, I sit in the chair I have placed under an apple tree. I close my eyes, enjoying the summer heat upon my skin, and I listen to the garden. I hear the steady hum of bees in the lavender, the darting thrum of a humming bird chasing a competitor from the zinnias. The cheery whistle of the grosbeak, high in the trees, always lifts me, as does the chirping of the goldfinch. But no bird stirs my soul like the unimposing Mourning Dove; it is the cello of my garden, vibrating notes deep within the core of me, as if it were plucking the strings running through my solar plexus to my heart.

I hear the ruffling of leaves, the buoyant sounds of children, a screen door

slamming and a mother's worried scolding, the muffled splattering of traffic in the distance. And I sink into myself. I have become more child than adult. I wonder what the suffering and joy was all about? Thinking of it embarrasses me. I am content to sit here and be.

I think of my mother. She comes to visit me. She is even more beautiful than I remember, and kind. She brings a basket with fruit and jam, bread and meat; all the favorites of my childhood. Her voice is soft and kind, her touch gentle. She walks with me in the garden, admiring the geraniums and gladiolas, the peppers and parsnips. She talks to them as lovingly as if they were children. Then we sit in the garden and listen. Sometimes she calls me Mother, which is confusing. Or perhaps that is just the way I remember them, the words she says. All dreams are confusing, but surely I am awake when she comes. I see her often. Oh well, it doesn't matter if I am dreaming or awake, it is so wonderful, my sweet mother taking care of me. I like to think of her while I rest in my garden, listening.

The veil between waking and sleep has grown thin, but in my dreams the world is more like an ocean than earth and air. In either state I am unable to control circumstance or outcome, but in my dreams I seem even more helpless. I often dream of my child; I watch her drift through the womb fluid, warm and happy, and I feel the ache of love. She is safely attached to me. But in all my dreams she becomes cut off from me and drifts away, the chord trailing useless behind her. I watch her, helpless, as she floats further and further away. I wake crying and try to think what has become of her, my child, and I can not remember.

When I was cutting some lavender by the fence, to make into a sachet for my pillow, the flashing light of a police car caught my attention. Looking out beyond the fence, which I rarely do (my garden is world enough for me), I saw two men

in uniform across the street. They were stringing yellow tape around Marybeth's house, wrapping it around the trees and fence posts, as if a crime had been committed. And then another police car drove up and two more officers walked into the home like one would walk into a warehouse, as if there hadn't been forty years of family there.

I remember her: a young woman with long auburn hair, in an apron, and a young boy standing on the front porch every afternoon waiting for the blue Buick sedan, and every afternoon the same tall man got out of the car and the boy would run and jump into his arms as the man carried him to the porch where, bending slightly, he would kiss the woman and she would put her arm around him as they walked into the house. Or did I just see them once, waiting on the porch, and always thought of them that way. Or were they there at all? Perhaps they exist only in my imagination, in a dream I had last night. Marybeth was her name, and Walter and their boy Tommie. I envied her so; she had the perfect life.

That was before the garden, when our yard was all walk and lawn and fence. We tried so hard to look like the others. We mowed and sprayed and lamented at every weed. Look at it now! Gone to hell I suppose some people say, and perhaps they're right: gone to hell. I guess the walk and the fence and the spray wasn't enough to tame us. Life had its plan for us, even if we didn't want it. Sometimes I see his face, or the shape of a face without features, a presence that I sense must be him. There is no feeling there, unless it is fear. It fills me with both dread and longing. And her with Walter's arm around her waist. And then it was gone, whatever it was, Walter dead of a heart attack in the backyard, steaks burning on the grill and her wailing, keeping us awake at night; Tommie in his khaki shirt and pants with a lunch bucket every morning.

I picked the beetles from the potatoes, squishing them between my finger and thumb. Each year they come, from where I do not know. It is one of the mysteries: if you plant potatoes the potato bugs will find them, just as the earwigs find the corn. But potato bugs can't fly, so how do they get here? It is the same with frogs and cattails, which somehow appear in ponds built in city parks, their egg and seed carried in the mud on ducks' feet I've been told. Nature has its way of shaping itself no matter how hard we fight it. And I try, with even more effort than when my yard was mowed and sprayed. I pick the bugs and pull the weeds, water and cultivate, shaping the world to my fancy.

Marybeth died, I think two winters ago. The ambulance came with flashing lights and siren. I looked out my window past the withered stalks of corn cold in the snow, the scarecrows arms drooped rigid and frozen, and saw them carrying her, or someone, on a stretcher, the blanket pulled over her face. I don't think it was because of the cold. They put the stretcher in the wagon, then closed the doors. I could hear them, one and then the other, voices sharp in the frozen air. I swear I saw the window pane, through which I was watching, shake with their slamming. It sent a shiver of cold up my spine so that I could not look any more. But I could not not look either, and so I saw Tommie standing there on the walk as they turned to face him for a moment, the words they spoke plumes of vapor in the frigid stillness. Then the two men each shook his hand. Once more the window pane shook with the two doors closing and the ambulance muffled into the distance as he stood there for too long a moment before walking, slump-shouldered, into the house.

The winters are long and gray, the soupy skies sitting like a gloom over the valley. The snow covered town turns black and grimy with the soot. The dark earth of my garden beds sleep under quilts of leaves and straw and manure. I

like to think of the tulip bulbs hidden there, the anticipated rapture of color, as I follow the path to the wood pile and back. It is their promise that sustains me. After rising each day, a chore that becomes more and more difficult, I put on my shawl and make that trip, to feed the fire. Then I sit in my chair as the tamarack spits and crackles, the water steaming in the kettle. When the fire is hot I feed it with red fir. Three good chunks will burn all day; the aromatic smoke, like mushrooms and moss, is dense and comforting.

All that winter Marybeth's walk was left unshoveled. Tommie's footprints to and from the Water Department trampled the snow. Traveling to the woodpile path in the morning and evening I would look over and think of him there alone with the grief that seemed to rush out of the house like a flood threatening to envelop me as if I belonged to it. I began to think the house and Marybeth and Walter and Tommie existed only as a story for my own grief.

We walked through a field of wildflowers to the river. I spread a blanket on the beach and set the picnic. The sun filtered through the cottonwood and twinkled on the water. I could smell the warmth on my skin, the fresh cut hay in the meadow. We laughed and splashed together there, in that moment. Then he came, laughing with us at first, digging his toes in the sand and skipping stones on the water. And then the flask came out of his pocket and I waited for it. A cloud covered the sun and a cool breeze blew the cotton from the trees. A dark shadow fell over his face. I cradled myself in my arms to shed the chill as we walked silently back to our house. The street lights reflected eerily in the puddled streets, the muted buildings lurked under a threatening sky. As we entered the house he turned toward me and I could see the rage. His beard and hair were a lion's mane, his piercing eyes those of a vulture, his nose an eagle's

beak. He opened his mouth and his words ignited the furniture, the walls and ceiling were consumed by his breath. He vanished into the flames, and the child followed. I grabbed her disappearing arm, pulling her out of the inferno. I felt the heat of her skin, smelled it burning. I held her tight in my arms, sobbing. "Stay with me," I pleaded.

After steeping the tea I would sit and remember everything I could about Marybeth, reliving every event. But all I could remember was the Buick pulling up, their walk into the house, the smell of burnt meat, and her wailing; Tommie walking with his lunch bucket, the ambulance driver's words frosting in the air. I'd go through it three or four times each morning, never remembering anything more. So the grief clung to me like clothing dampened by fog. No amount of moving about the house could shake it. I tied a line between the house and woodshed, hung sheets and blankets so that I could not see their door, the snow-filled walk. The more I tried not to look, the more it became all that I could see. I became uneasy, sitting by the fire. I began to plan the garden.

With pencil and paper I traced the beds. Tomatoes surrounded by marigolds and peppers; Lilies and lavender around the potatoes; beans and squash among the hills of corn. Thinking of the garden, sensing the life that would emerge, that never fails to come, I could almost feel the sun's warmth upon my skin, feel the budding of apple blossoms growing within my chest. I moved the tamarack and fir onto the back porch so that I would not have to look beyond the sheets and blankets.

Last night she visited me. She wore a long flowered skirt with a white blouse and sandals. Her hands are so delicate and graceful; I love to watch them as she folds clothes or cuts vegetables; she makes the simplest chores into music. I am

content to sit quietly and watch her. She wore a blue silk scarf over her hair, tied under her chin. It made her look exotic, like a movie star. Through the veil I could see a wrinkled scar on her forehead and cheek; red lines fanned like a molten river spreading to the sea. When she noticed me looking she dropped her eyes and pulled down the scarf so that my gaze turned once more to her graceful fingers. I was not repulsed, only curious: how had the scar so suddenly appeared? “You remember...” she said, knowing the source of my attention, and her eyes looked gently upon my face as she reached out to comfort me. I could smell the meat burning on the grill, hear the wailing.

This morning I felt uneasy. As I drank my tea I tried to think of the garden. The morning chill has come; there is so much to do this time of year. The potatoes need digging, there is garlic to dry and the tomatoes need canning. The dead cornstalks need pulling. It is time to find manure and leaves to replenish the earth. But in my kitchen Marybeth and Tommie (or was it mother, but what would she be doing with Tommie?) waited until the Buick drove up. I told them what had happened to their house, how the order had turned to chaos. I had not seen the blue Buick for years I said. The yard was left untended. The grass grew tall, and thistles and buttonweed, filled with plastic and paper.

Last summer the cars came, and it wasn't Walter walking up the steps, but strangers, coming and going endlessly. They came in all shapes and ages; it seemed as if the whole town came to visit their house. I tended my garden and paid them no mind, the restless souls that came and went. I had thought of stringing a line along the walk to hang the sheets after the ambulance took Marybeth away, so intent was I on not looking. Instead I planted two rows of raspberries. Their thorny bushes grew tall and thick. Each day I pick a pint or two of berries, and in the picking I would part the branches, sharp and prickly. I

could not not see, I said, embarrassed for my snooping. At night there was no end to the noise, cars coming and going, music blaring. When the moon was full they would pile out of the house amid a great commotion, yelling and shouting. I could see them through the raspberries, pushing and shoving, women and men circling the center, the mass of bodies rushing and receding in a rhythm, swirling like a cloud of sparrows.

I never saw Tommie again until this morning. Once in a waning moon, I saw a scraggly looking man half naked on the porch, his hair matted wild, arms and torso covered in tattoos. I saw him under the porch light, leaning against the post, drinking from a can, one hand tucked in his belt. It filled me with sorrow, thinking of Marybeth, having to bear this defilement of her home. For a month the house has sat empty, yellow tape stretched taut around it. Until this morning. This morning they came back with their red and blue lights flashing at each end of the block and took down the tape. The street is full of fire trucks and firemen in black jackets and yellow helmets. Some hurry in and out of the house while others spread hoses on the ground.

She has come to comfort me, and in her coming has been their parting, for now there is only her: Marybeth and Tommie are gone. I did not see them go, but no matter; she is still here. She is even more beautiful than I remember! I want to sit in her lap and feel her fingers through my hair, but she says I am too big for that. I fix her tea and she asks about my garden. I show her the plans I have drawn for next spring's planting. It will be even bigger than before. I show her the rows of corn and beans, the climbing roses, their branches too thorny for parting, that will cover the windows. The garden path will be a maze, I tell her, and at the center will be two chairs under the apple tree where we can sit and listen. As I tell her this I can see the flickering light on the window pane and feel

the heat on my skin. I hear the urgent voices in the street.

Then she tells me that Tommie is waiting for her, that she must go. She tells me not to be afraid, that everything will be all right. As her arm and leg disappear through the door I reach out and catch her by the hand, thinking to pull her back to me. But her hand is strong and I am drawn through the door. I see the flames bursting into the sky. I see the spray of water, the ladder climbing above the trees. There are no birds to hear, only the crackling roar of flames. I smell the heat on my skin as the ashes fall like snow on my garden.

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The thrum of the motor filling the darkened cab of the truck, the whole world hidden except the black asphalt, the borrow pit and fence with the long grass nudging the barbed wire illuminated in the light's edge. It used to be so comforting, riding at night. I remember as a child being mesmerized by the white stripes, short and lazy in the distance, then growing long and listless as they sidled up beside us until... zip!, they disappear suddenly, each one replaced by another, a hypnotic procession. Just like the procession of faces that have floated through my life, small and insignificant in the distance until one sidles up beside me, or on top of me, and it is all that there is in this world, all that I can see. Then zap!... it is gone. There have been too many of them. There is no comfort in the darkness now. Each stripe is an accusing face rushing up to jeer at me, remind me of my failures. They are plentiful, but none so irreversible as this.

Only Tommie's face can comfort me now. But there are no guarantees. We have decided to go to Driggs where there will be work for the winter at the ski

hill, but it could all blow up. He's only lived in that one house his whole life, only had one job. Now it is all gone forever and we are driving off in the night. Just keep driving, I told him. Don't look back, I said. God damn it, Tommie! Don't you go all squiggly on me. I need you Tommie, I said. I patted his leg as I said the last part, but I don't know if he even heard me. I could see the tightness of his jaw, his fearful fierce glare, the tight grip of the wheel.

The sky was so blue that it might have lifted me if it had been any other day. Mama in her summer dress, her hair falling in long gray curls. Walking through her garden she showed me flowers and vegetables as if *they* were her children, paused at each bed giving her full attention, stroked the stalks and petals. I have longed for her to stroke me with such love, have wanted the feel of her touch on my arm. I need her comfort, now more than ever. I can only remember what it was like, having her comfort me. It was so long ago, in my childhood, before she gave herself over to zinnias and zucchini. It is all that holds her now, the garden. What holds me? I have a hunger in me; I have smelled the richness of it, my longing, in the fertile soil of her freshly tilled garden. It frightens me that something as commonplace as the scent of earth can stir me so. I am feral. I need to be tilled and fertilized, cultivated.

She is laughing by the river, a can of beer in her hand. She is laughing because I have done something funny. He stands beside her looking down at me, his thick beard and curls dripping wet. He is laughing, too. We are all laughing together in the hot afternoon, digging our toes into the wet sand.

I should have told her I was leaving, sitting with her under the apple tree, her ankles grown thick with the weight of years, as we watched the fire. She wouldn't have understood what I was saying, but I should have told her.

I can't make out his features. They have grown gnarled and shapeless in my

memory. There is only his beard, wet from the river, and the sound of our laughter. That is all I remember.

I can't stop reliving the moments that have led to our departure; to reorder, revise, undo them. But they are my reality, and Tommie's, no matter how many times I try to change them. How could I possibly undo them? I think they started when I was a baby; no, even before I was born, before my mama was born. She is no different than me, doing her best to live the life she was given. But they come, these moments, whether we want them to or not. They are bound together by a force more powerful than time.

It is pitch black. I can not see him, but I feel his beard on my cheek like steel wool. He holds me gently while he hurts me. Then I am alone in the dark, like a corpse in a coffin. I dream it over and over.

I know it troubles her, Marybeth's house burning, the fire trucks in the street. I should have told her, explained it all, for my sake more than hers, poor dear. I just couldn't disappoint her, not that she would have understood. She has become a girl again, calling me Mother. Flowers and vegetables are her children now. It's a wonder how she makes them grow. If only she had nurtured me so well. But there was always the grief. It constricted us like a malignant tumor. The more we ignored it the larger it grew, until that is all that was left of us. It is hard, sitting with her when she thinks that I am her mother, knowing that I will never get what I need from her. I know the fire didn't help. I feel bad about that. It brought back old memories.

Whatever I have become, I could not help it. I have fought against it, but I could not get beyond their expectations. They have condemned me to be what I am, needing someone to look down upon so as to raise themselves above the smallness of their lives. I was a convenient target with no-one to defend me.

Perhaps the judge has done me a favor, perhaps now I can finally get beyond them.

A moment can change everything. If only we knew which moments as they are happening. I might never have walked into The Lantern that night, might not have let Fred buy me a drink. Or maybe I would have kept dancing with him, left with him instead of with Tommie. But I'd gone with Fred too many times before, or guys just like him. I didn't want to be that girl any more. Looking at it that way, I guess I did want to change my life; I guess I did know that it was one of those moments, or at least hoped that it was. As strange as it was, dancing with Maytag Man in his khaki Dickies and pocket protector, the weird kid from across the street, I knew. Right from that first dance it felt like I had a chance to be something better than that town had ever let me be before.

He was so innocent; I practically had to pull him off his bar stool. You could have driven a semi between us, him holding my hand outstretched all proper and with his other hand perched like a bird on the small of my back. Come here honey, I said, and hold me like you mean it, and I moved in real close and rested my head on his chest. I could feel his heart pounding so hard I thought he would die. He turned his head as far away as he could get it and put his hands on my shoulders as light as leaves falling on a heifer's back. He's a quick learner, though. I'll give him that.

He was like a yearling bull let loose in the spring. He hardly slept that first week, between partying all night and his job at the water department. He couldn't leave it alone. Maytag Man was making up for lost time, all those years shut in with Marybeth and her grief, him missing out on the fun in life. He got so worn out. He needed something just so he could make his shift at the water plant.

I never meant for it to get out of hand. I only wanted to help him. Next thing I know he's in Savemore with a shopping cart full of Drano and rubbing alcohol. There's more to life than a nine to five, he said. Nothing to mixing chemicals, he said, been doing it for years at the water plant. He might as well have put an ad in the Sentry Tribune; cars coming and going twenty-four seven. It's all over now. Nothing left but this truck and camper and the open road.

I really screwed up. It is my fault he lost his job at the water plant, that Mama is all alone. Before me he never missed a day, not in twelve years. But he wanted me like I had never been wanted before, and I needed him, his passion, his innocence. Does that make me so bad? He has never blamed me. Not even when the judge gave his verdict. He lost everything: his home, his job, his town. He says that I am all he needs. As long as he has me, he says, he has everything. Me.

The flames reached so high in the sky. I couldn't help but get excited, feeling the heat on my skin. It was as if all of the passion we had shared in that house was bursting into the sky. The flames beckoned me like a lover. In that moment I knew that I belonged to them; I was stolen from them once but they are always there, waiting for me. Then the ashes floated down on us and I became terrified with the realization of what I cannot undo.

“There's a fisherman's access up ahead. I want you to pull in there. Just do as I say, Honey. We're out of town and never goin' back. That's what the judge ordered. He never said anything about how far out of town. Come on, Honey, let's get in the camper. I want you, Mr. Maytag Man. I need you to make me feel good. I'm so full of misery I can't hardly stand it. Fill me with your love, Tommie. Fill me to the brim.”

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Tommie's camper is parked next to the river. Hidden in the dark is the ruffle of her fins. She has traveled a thousand miles from the ocean, climbed rapids and dams, always fighting against the current. Her once silver scales have turned bright red. Rotting flesh hangs loose from her gills and tail, but she is undeterred from the urgency of her quest. Methodically she twists and flops, stirring the shallow water's silt and gravel into a slight indentation. The partner she has chosen, red and rotting also, dances beside her. Then, side by side with mouths wide open, full of the rapture which has been the siren song beckoning them on their mortal journey, she spreads her eggs in their natal stream as he covers them in milt.

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“Jimmie, keep the kinks out of the hose! We’re going live here, kid! Let’s act like we know what we’re doing, O.K? Half the damn town’s watching us, for Christ sake.”

Got to admit I woke up half excited today. Dry training is one thing. Gets old and routine. I could do the drills with my eyes closed. But today’s the real deal. Haven’t been on a fire for I don’t know how long. Thank God and little children for Meth dealers. The hazmat team spent two weeks going through the place. Said it’s a wonder they didn't blow themselves up.

“Jimmie, for Christ’s sake boy, keep the damn kinks out of the hose. They open up that hydrant and the water pressure coming through that kink would throw ten men off the hose. You don’t want that hose slappin’ you upside the head do you? No? Well neither do I, or any of the rest of the crew.”

God damn kid. Dumb as a rock. But absolutely fearless. Too stupid to be

afraid. One thing's for sure: if I ever get in trouble I hope he's close by, 'cause he'd walk through a wall of flames twenty feet tall to save me.

Never would of figured old Tommie to get mixed up in the stuff. Momma's boy if there ever was one. Damn good guy, though. Before Grace got ahold of him, that is. Worked at the water department since the day he graduated. Never tasted alcohol or women, straight as an arrow. Then Grace gets a hold of him and whamo! Instant Darth Vader.

"Hey Butch, come here. See her? There in the bushes. Yeah, over there, peeking through the raspberries. That's Grace's mom, you know. Crazy as a loon they say, ever since her old man died in a fire. Guess she's plenty interested in what's goin' on here. Hey Butch, you ever get a piece of that? No not her, for Christ's sake! It's her daughter Grace I'm talkin' about. You know..... Old Scar Face. Hear she is a wild one, scratch your eyes out. No wonder old Tommie went loco. Fuck silly I guess. What about it? Was she as good as they say Butch?"

Guess I'll never know now. Her and Tommie are leaving town tonight: judges orders. Leavin' town with nothing but the clothes on their backs and that old camper of his. God damn shame what she did to him. Feel half sick burnin' his house down. Got to be done, though; no question about that.

"Hey Jimmie! Let that be a lesson to you, boy. Be careful when you're out chasin' that poontang. Don't be goin' fuck silly on me like old Tommie did. Look alive, guys. Here comes the Chief."

My ain't he purdy, all decked out in his dress blues. Going to a parade I guess. He won't be getting' his hands dirty today. Again. Like to see him do an eight minute mile. Don't have to, I guess. Not when you play golf with the mayor.

"Ready here, Chief. Yes, sir. Waiting for your command, sir. Yes sir! It is a good day for a fire.

Hey Butch, what you say we head down the river this weekend? Throw some beer in the rig and head out, just you and me. Leave the women and children to their misery. Salmon are runnin' hard down past Cow Creek I hear. Like to tie into one of them! How about you? Are you in?

Oh, Oh, here we go. Looks like they've torched it, Butch. God damn it Jimmy, look alive! Get ready for some action boy! This ain't no drill here, this is the real deal!"

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October 2016

The September sun filters through the deep canyon walls and shimmers on the swiftly flowing waters of the river. In the dark depths below the rapids she rests, gathering her strength before climbing ever higher. She fights her way laboriously upstream, alone in the midst of others, hundreds of iridescent flashes of red. Her struggle is unseen, unwitnessed by the people in the town, as if she did not exist. The intense light of August has faded with the leaves, still green but lacking the eager vibrance of becoming. It is a season for reflection, and preparation. Firewood is split and stacked. Gardens are harvested and canned. It is also a time of celebration and color. Chrysanthemums, Asters and Marigolds herald the passing of the season.

There is a lightness in his step, as if he has been released from the burden of the summer's heat. He is invigorated by the chill and fresh scent of bloom and sagebrush in the air. For a moment he senses the promise of something new, unspoiled: a beginning. He walks, almost skipping now, down the sidewalk

through the heart of town, a town not unlike the one he left behind. On the same river even, one hundred miles downstream but three hundred miles through the mountains by road. Just far enough. He turns onto a side street, a block and a half up the hill to the recently poured concrete walkway, straight and true, that leads to his front door. On either side of the walk are raised beds filled with tomatoes and peppers and garlic, potatoes and squash and pumpkins. Next to the porch is an explosion of zinnias, red and gold and violet. By the side of the house an old woman rests in a chair under an apple tree, her head drooping in slumber. A young boy and his mother are waiting for him on the porch. The boy rushes out to greet him, hugs his leg. He picks the boy up, holding him in one arm and wraps his other arm around the boy's mother, holds her close, kisses her on the cheek just below the scar he does not see.