

FIRE ANGEL

By Alexander Saxton

The heatwave stretched deep into October, and the leaves in the hills were turning red even as they browned and crisped and drifted to crumble into dust against the dry ground. It was almost forty -- hot as it'd been in August, and the lake was bathwater. They were out on Thom's boat, him and a few guests--friends-of-friends stopping through town on their way to a reunion. That whole afternoon they cruised the steaming lake, drifting up along Cannon Rock where the kids were still cliff-jumping--cliff-jumping in October--and then down to the five-lake join, where the gas-barge was still serving ice cream, and the Crab Cabana was still putting coronitas upside-down into cups of margarita slush. All of this in October, and in the soft blue haze of the longest wildfire season he could recall.

The day before, as he'd driven through the hills, alone, he'd wondered that the woods hadn't burned already. They were so ready to go: souls just waiting for the Fire Angel. Sometimes when he was doing yardwork alone out front, he'd heard the dry branches crackle and thought the woods were trying to call the fire to them; that they wanted to burn--to release their carbon to the wind and let the whole cycle speed to its logical end.

He'd called his daughter that evening but hadn't been able to get a hold of her. She was busy up north, working long hours like he had when she was young. He was proud of her, but he worried. She looked so tired every time he saw her. And it was fire season up there, too.

After his guests had browsed the lewd t-shirts at the Crab Cabana, he took them cruising down Farshore, where you could still see the black shards of burnt tree-trunks rising from the green, now yellow, foam of new growth. Along that shore you could still find the usual monumental cottages, but here and there between them were the foundations of older buildings which had burned and never been rebuilt. They looked like the ruins of some ancient world.

"Wow." One of his guests, the kid, asked Thom to slow the boat so he could get a better look. "Were you here that summer?"

"No, I was still working 80-hour weeks up north," Thom said, as they drifted past bare cement foundations. "I knew a few people who lived here though. Some of them stayed behind to try and save their places. Cut down the trees nearby, pumped water up from the lake to spray down everything in reach. Most of them got burned out anyway. It was a bad fire."

"Were these cottages or houses?"

"Houses mostly, back then. Cottages now. After the fire most of the locals sold out and moved into town."

"When I was a kid," said the kid, as if it was so long ago, "we got evacuated once. The fire was only a few kilometres up the valley. The smoke was thick. It smelled like a campfire inside the house."

"Well, that'll happen. Forests burn from time to time."

"Not like this, though," said the kid's mom. "When I was growing up we had a big fire once every five, ten years. Now, it's every summer."

"Or fall," the kid quipped.

"Hah," said Thom. But *Christ*, something screamed inside him. *Christ, it's October, how can it be like this?* "Well, it's a big issue, as you can imagine. Forestry industry says they should be allowed to cut more, since it's going to burn anyway, and all that carbon's going to end up in the atmosphere. But you've got a big environmental movement in the province--people blockading the lumber camps. And I get that--but if it's all going to burn anyway..."

He could feel his guests quietly disagreeing, but they didn't say anything out loud. He was grateful for that. It was a nice afternoon. The warmth and sun and the blue-green lake, and the smoke not as thick as it'd been the last few days. You only got so many afternoons like this in one life, and it would be a shame to spend one arguing politics.

~~God~~ Even the thought of that made his palms sweat on the wheel of the boat. And anyway, how do you win an argument you're not sure you still believe? How do you believe an argument you're not sure you can win? He felt his chest clench and his pulse tap, but none of his guests pressed the point, and they all drifted on in silence past the last of the burned foundations, which yawned like brown craters in the shore; like desert shrines; ersatz abu simbels consecrated to no god.

"Have you seen many wildfires?" The kid asked.

"A few," said Thom. "Up in Alberta, and two summers back around Salmon Arm."

"Ever see the Fire Angel?"

Thom turned. "What was that?"

But the kid was just looking out at the shore. He hadn't said anything, and he glanced back, confused.

"Sorry?"

"Nothing." Thom smiled, but he felt a little sick. "Must've been daydreaming."

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That night after dropping his guests back at the Best Western, he came home to a message from his daughter. “Hey Dad, sorry I missed you. Busy busy, but we’re racking up the overtime. I hope you’re safe. The Fire Angel’s visiting us up here too. Lots of love, catch you soon. Bye.”

The brief sound of her voice made his dark house seem all the more empty. He called her back, but she didn’t pick up the phone.

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The next day that haze of steam on the lake had thickened into thin blue fog, and the air smelled of woodsmoke. He’d loved that smell once; it’d been the smell of summer holidays. Now it was the smell of being alone. He spent the first half of the day answering emails, and then he got a call he almost ignored but then spent forty minutes on anyway. He was supposed to be retired—but nobody’d ever taken that idea seriously, him least of all. So maybe this was what he got.

The company, you understand, was in court again. They’d won in Alberta, but the case had been appealed to the SCC, and everyone expected the ruling to go against them. This wasn’t America—not yet. So now everyone was calling him because they wanted to hear it was going to be okay. Well, it wasn’t. None of it. It was all not-okay already. But he was starting to think of himself as an old guy, and starting to find he just didn’t care anymore. He’d worked hard his whole life. Now he was the age when you were supposed to enjoy the spoils.

He noticed he’d been doodling absently with an orange highlighter on a post-it note. It started out as the Statue of Liberty, maybe, but at some point he’d added a pair of spreading, orange wings. He crumpled up the note and threw it away, and then made his excuses and hung up the call. He threw his phone into the crotch of the leather sectional and went outside; drank a beer on the dock, watching the smoke thicken, and then crumpled up the can and threw it into the water. Then he peeled off his shirt and swam out to his boat, his stout body bronze against the blue-green, against the white plastic of the hull.

When he turned the key the motor’s rumble comforted him, and he cruised the lake, following the same route he’d taken the day before. It was still almost forty, and cloudless, but the smoke was so thick the day felt overcast; almost like a real October afternoon. At Cannon Rock, no kids were cliff-jumping. At the five-lake join, the last remnants of the floating shanty were uncoupled and drifting home. He filled up at the gas-barge, and one of the shirtless twenty-year-olds told him they were closing down for the season, finally.

“Pushed it out an extra month this time, duder; honestly the weather’s still good? But the fires’re gettin’ bad, bro. I’ve had a headache for like three days.”

“Don’t take up smoking, I guess,” Thom said, trying to be funny. But the barge boy just gave him a confused look. “You’re full up, bud; you can pay at the counter.”

The smoke had only thickened by the time he settled up. You could barely see Farshore. But it looked like the crab cabana was still open, so he cruised over, his boat smelling of sharp gasoline, and he drank a bulldog alone while the waitresses wiped down tables and stacked chairs. He’d been hoping to strike up a conversation; not in any lecherous way, but just to--shoot the shit with someone, find out about their life. But the servers were all busy closing down. Last call came at three-forty-five PM. After that he drifted out along farshore to look at the skeleton homes.

By now you could barely see them, though. The smoke was dense as pea-soup, and he knew he should be inside; that it was dangerous to be on the water with so little visibility. He wondered vaguely how many packs-of-cigarettes-worth of cancer he was breathing every hour, and he found he didn’t care that much. He wheeled the bow toward home.

Then halfway down the lake he came across something wondrous. A moose, swimming steady through the smoke from the direction of farshore, where the blue haze was thickest. It was all the way out over the deep, more than a kilometer from nearest land, and it seemed there was no way the animal would ever make it. But he was so calm, so purposeful in how he swam, with his great antlers spreading like the yardarms of a ship. Thom slowed the boat. A strange, overwhelming urgency was building in his chest. The moose was huge; you never realized how big they truly were until you saw one in real life; it was almost the length of his boat, mighty and dignified, and he felt the same way he’d felt as a boy, sitting on the transom of an old tin boat back East, and watching his father swim powerful lengths out into the lake and back. Then suddenly, as awed as he’d been by the greatness of the moose, he was struck and overawed by its smallness compared to the immensity of the lake; the monumental grandeur of the hills and woods around him.

He was in the midst of everything. And it was all alive. And he was just a speck.

That urgency seized hold of him, and he realized how important it was for that moose to reach the near shore alive. He ripped his boat around and plied close, keeping his vessel athwart the lane another passing boat would have to use to move down the lake. He decided he was going to shepherd that great animal all the way across; to use his boat and his body as a moving buoy, offering shelter from other speeding boats. He would help. It was critical to help. And as he kept pace alongside the moose for the next hour or however-long-it-was, he imagined what he’d do if the moose began to founder, and how he’d use the rope and life-preserver to save it, and what a good deed, a mitzvah it would be to have rescued that creature from the lake. He imagined how proud his daughter would be when he told her on the phone.

But no other boats went past. And the moose made its steady way to nearshore without his help, to disappear among dry, wooded slopes. He was denied his chance for atonement, and he was alone again.

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That evening he had another message from his daughter waiting at home.

“Hey Dad, sorry I missed you again, things are wild up here. I guess they’re a mess down your way, too. I’m watching the news right now and everything’s about the Orphan Lake Fire. It’s crazy. Looks like they’ve already evacuated farshore? Are you still at home? Give me a call when you get this, hey?”

“Or at least grab me a picture of the Fire Angel...” he swore he heard as well.

He called her back, but couldn’t get a hold of her, and one part of him felt a bright, bitter surge of anger toward her, but another part realized it was his own fault. He’d said something to her once--or a hundred times--when she was growing up. “You go north for a couple of years. You make some real money, and after that you do whatever you want with life.”

Of course, being a good father, he’d followed his own advice. But a few years can turn into a few more, and it’s easy for your sense of ‘real money’ to shift once you’ve got a taste of it. So by the time he finally came back South he found his daughter had followed him north; up to the Peace River and then Fort Mac; to the portables built out on the muskeg of Treaty 8, and to the renovated upper-storey offices in Edmonton. He’d come back south to find she’d gone north; and that her mother had simply gone.

So he was left alone in the big house he’d built by that deep green lake.

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The next day the smoke was so bad you couldn’t see the boat moored thirty feet past the end of the dock. A few flakes of ash tumbled down like snow onto the deck. Midmorning, an emergency alert blared on his phone. Time to evacuate. He answered emails instead, and took a call, and discussed media strategy for the hundredth time. 2300: that’s how many barrels they’d spilled, tainting the groundwater of a town. And part of him still believed that was the cost of doing business; of a strong economy and modern life and bit of prosperity for everyone. And another part of him believed-- Someone came to knock on his door and he didn’t answer. He heard them walking around outside the house calling out the evacuation order, but held perfectly still in his office with the lights out until they moved along.

Then came another intolerable call, and when he finally hung up there was another message from his daughter, and this time he could tell from her voice that she was afraid.

“Please get out if you haven’t already,” her message said. “Please.”

He tried to call back, but the line was tied up. He laughed a little, at himself, because of course it was. She worked for the same company. They had the same problems.

So he left another message.

“Hey, hon. Nothing to worry about. The fire’s all over the other side of the lake, and it’s too far for the sparks to jump. I’ll be alright.” He hesitated. Then his last words were, “I love you, hon. I should’ve been there more.”

Then he waited out the day inside. Smoke pressed against the glass, and everything stank of cured meat. He drank stale coffee and scrolled the news and socials. One colleague was over the province in a chartered jet, and he posted a photo of Orphan Lake. It was like a mushroom cloud; it billowed yellow toward God and outer space. “Uh,” the caption read. “That’s a big one.”

The fire had lit five hundred thousand hectares.

Perversely, as the day faded and darkness fell, the evening brightened. The smoke was thinning, and as he stepped out onto the deck and down to the dock he thought it must be because the fires had died or the winds had changed and turned them aside. But then as more smoke cleared and the grey sky blackened above he saw the black hills across the lake were limned with a sullen glow, and red reflections were dancing on the water. A slow understanding seeped into him; that the smoke was clearing only because the fire was so near at hand that its plume rose directly overhead.

He felt a strange relief.

The black curtain’s weight rippled through thirty thousand feet of sky above him, blotting out the stars. In birdless silence, he could hear the fire’s approaching roar across the water, like great engines, crashing trains. Sparks like flares, like dying comets, fell slowly to drown in the blackness of the lake. He sat by the water and watched the horizon turn: from dull red, to orange, gold, and then to nearly white. He let the smoke fill him. From time to time he wet his throat from a lukewarm can of beer.

Then the Orphan Lake fire crested the hill. It was like nothing he’d ever dreamed.

One moment there was a bright line at the hillcrest; then it erupted down fifteen hundred feet of slope like a matchbook catching flame; a sound like thunder cracked across the water, and then the furnace-blast of dry air rolled over him; even here, two kilometres across the lake. Suddenly all the world before him was a cataract of flame. A great wind tore his clothing as the fire drew breath, and then the flame; red, gold, and colours beyond white, fountained to heights he could scarcely comprehend, before bloodying into a blackness darker than any found between the stars.

The sight destroyed him.

He watched the woods annihilated. He watched monumental hills burn down to the bone.

He was in the midst of everything. And all of it was screaming as it died. And it was all his fault, wasn't it.

He buried his head in his hands and the wind ripped over him in its suicidal hunger for the fire. It dragged a moan from his lungs as it passed. Then he heard a clear bright sound and raised his eyes to see a figure standing on the water.

She was so beautiful.

For a moment some synapse misfired and he thought his daughter had come home. But she was tall as pines and her bones were charcoaled wood, and she was raimented in many-coloured flame. Her wings spread wide behind in fulgent glory, and she burned across the lake with both hands wide in benediction.

The heat of her approach dried all tears; and he stood--not to flee, but because he realized he'd been expecting her. And when she stood before him in her heat and smoke and fog he reached out to her, up to her, like a child, and welcomed her ashore. And as his skin caught flame he knew he'd finally helped as he'd longed to on the lake before; and as his fat crackled and burst, and the wind bore drops of his fire into the dry grass, the angel moved through him and past him and up onto the near shore of the lake, and up through the big and empty house that he had built, and onward, and forward toward a restitution.