

September, 2003: Before our very eyes, with each passing second, the wilderness, in all its lazy, late-summer magnificence, surrendered to the heat. You could almost hear the trees drying out, feel the forest's slow beatdown from the sun, anticipate the next lightning strike that would ignite its target as cleanly as a match against flint. The helicopter had flown away, its wingbeats replaced by silence. My gaze traveled from the toes of my Whites fire boots outward, over the edge of the rock, to the tops of the shrubs, a half mile away to taller pines, then out to where the earth curved up again, mixed with more boulders and ledges, finally meeting with sky. The mountains pulled my eyes into their soft, blue depths, blurring my focus for a moment. The late afternoon light transported me back, for a moment, to the most innocent of times, staring at mountains in Vermont as I sat as a child in a field. Those were older, rounder mountains, now far away, on the opposite coast from where I stood.

Deep in the drainage smoldered the lightning-caused fire that our crew, the Kern Valley Hotshots, has been assigned to take out.

We began our descent in treacherous footing. Some boulders rested against others, forming chasms between five and ten feet deep, through which determined shrubs poked. We tested our footing on rocks, jiggling and slipping in our boots, sliding on patches of dead leaves and dirt. Branches scratched and slapped. Sweat mixed with dust, becoming the first of many layers of grime that would stay on our skin for the next few days.

We started at the top of the fire, which was out, but still hot in a haphazard collection of places. The narrow burn spilled down the hill, about half a mile long and quarter mile wide. It wasn't huge, but the attention to detail made me feel as if I were cleaning someone's mansion, scraping every corner, revisiting this room or that room time

and again. We sought wildland firefighter's gold: cool, dark dirt. We had to dig deeply for it, but once we found enough of it, we would be able to keep the heat out for good. The only water we had on hand was from backpack pumps, whose streams fizzed into oblivion in the hot ash, quickly depleting each five-gallon supply.

A crack of branches, a strange, thudding vibration underfoot, furious cries of *ROCK!*, then into my consciousness crashed a boulder the size of a small car descending through the brush from above. We all ducked and scrambled this way and that, hoping for the best, not daring to expect the worst. It missed us all.

The next moment, we were back to work, with a bit more energy. The adrenaline wouldn't last long, but it put us on edge – in a good way. It reminded each where we were: in Nature's territory, where things don't happen according to plans or human logic. To fight against this, we always planned all the more.

All afternoon, we poked and prodded this fire. I kept working one part, down by the bottom, trying to get a cleaner scrape next to a massive field of hot ash. Roots of a tree in the green extended under the line near here, likely continuing into the burned area. This should have been a warning. Those of us who were working that spot should have put our heads together and pledged unceremoniously to hack up that root, unearth it, throw dirt on the spot, widen the line. We could have also deepened the trench at the very bottom, where it curved around the fire and headed back up the hill.

Instead, I let the other crew members get further and further away from me, and I didn't ask for help. I needed it. My entire body buzzed with a dizzy, flu-like ache. This was common at the end of every shift, yet I felt disconnected and alone in my suffering – an

attitude that is death to a crew needing to function at its best. When the body starts to give out, the mind must take over. But the mind can do funny things in such a state.

The sunlight was gone, evening shadows setting in. Exhaustion kneaded the muscles of my legs and back, growing heavier with bend, each swing of the tool. *It's done*, I said to myself. The dirt was exposed. I had cleared the white ash around my section. It wasn't going anywhere. They kept asking me how I was doing down there, and I kept telling them it was almost done. Finally, I came up to join the rest of the crew – for debrief, meals-ready-to eat in boxes, a campfire, my warm sleeping bag, the inky clear sky glinting with stars. A tidal wave of sleep swept me up and hurled me onto the sands of unconsciousness.

Hours later, I awoke to the sounds of Kyle scuffling on his sleeping bag and distant shouts, the buzz of the chainsaw, an orange glow below us. The fire had crossed the line. I pulled up my sports bra from around my waist, my T-shirt still wet from sweat of yesterday (or hours ago, who knew), and donned my stinky yellow shirt. I shoved my feet into moist, stiff boots, grabbed my tool and pack, and joined a few other crew members who were already walking down.

With dread, I realized that the fire had crossed exactly where I had last been.

A couple of the guys had started a trench along the bottom of the new fire line. I dove into the trench work, furious at myself for having let this happen. We could have been killed. With every swing of my tool, I attempted to take more earth and throw more dirt than I ever had before, to build a fuel break that would end every fire in every forest now and to come. I wanted to make up for my mistake, to cut it out, leaving the deep chasm of the trench between that mistake and me.

“This line was so good it held on both sides,” Leif deadpanned.

We got our work done quickly and tied it in. I imagined that everyone was avoiding eye contact. It was about 2 in the morning, but we would be up until first light, making sure this fire didn't go anywhere. I sat on the trunk of a huge, downed tree. Albert, who had been with me when we were here last, looked over from his station about thirty feet away.

"What happened, Goolia?" he asked. His tone was friendly and conversational, as it always was with Albert. But I knew what he meant.

"I don't know," I answered lamely. Then, the more accurate statement. "Obviously, the line wasn't secure. And I was the last one there."

This was my confession. But unlike most confessions, there was no relief in it. Albert didn't have the power to pardon me. He didn't say anything more. I sat there on my log, occasionally looking into the black, but mostly watching for sparks from the burning pile of brush inside the line, and trying to stay warm – in both body and spirit.

Dawn came. Merciful, sure, dawn. The rest of the crew, awakening, would take over for us. I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep until I did one thing. Ron, our Superintendent, was standing off to the side of our camp, putting his pack on.

"I need to talk to you," I said.

He waited while I spoke. If he seemed worried or surprised, Ron never showed it. This time was no exception.

"I was the last person there, at the line where the fire crossed," I said. Immediately, a weight lifted and I felt like crying with relief and remorse. Tears welled up.

"Well, you learned something." When Ron said something like that, it sounded less like a father, and more like a brother.

“Ultimately,” he continued, “I’m responsible for this crew. I’m responsible for what happened down there.” He knew I took my job seriously, he told me. His manner wasn’t warm and consoling. Nor was it distant or disapproving. It was just factual. In not being any more or less than that, it was compassionate.

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The fire crossing the line that early morning was one of many times in my life when I believed I had fucked up beyond repair. The thing is, there has never been such a time – at least not yet. Instead, there has been the fear to doing so, the fear of being cast out, unforgiven, of irreparably making the wrong decision – that has guided choices I’ve made for much of my life. Alongside that, a brightly singing counterpart, disguised as bravery or even fearlessness, has attempted to stave off another unwelcome fate: of being trapped, missing out on something that is just beyond my reach if I don’t pursue it with all I have.

Wildland firefighting was the stranger who visited my consciousness and offered a chance to escape. For me, the heart of its joy was reinvention. Even my spark of an idea to fight fire offered a chance to leave behind my tendency to overthink things. From the moment I searched up the websites for the US Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management on a day off from my newspaper job, most of my consciousness turned not to self-reflection, but survival. Each step forward held the question, *Can I...?* and subsequent answer. *No, not yet, but I must keep trying and trying...until, YES!*

My leap of faith in pursuing this inkling more than 20 years ago, the favoring of action over thought, changed my life. In a semi-triumph, for a time, I was able to slip into a new identity, one that sometimes distracted me, made me forget what I didn’t like about

myself. Most of the time, though, I was forced to face the very parts of me that I was trying to ignore.