

Mittens and Things

The fire didn't burn everything, it spared the junk. I step over the cast iron sink that hasn't seen a kitchen since Mama installed one of them undermount ones. This one's in the side yard. Just two days ago a pokeweed tall as me was sticking up through its drain. The flames took the weed and left the sink. If the fire had been greedy, really itching to take something worth taking, it would've torched the Oxbow place or Carson's Ranch. I suppose fire ain't too finicky though; maybe it's just downright lazy. Everything this side of the creek was like kindling, especially the Pine Glen Mobile Home Park where I live – I mean *lived*.

It wasn't the first fire to hit Marwick Valley. The last one scarred half the mountain. After the rains came, the runoff brewed the ash into a thick sludge that choked the creek. Cissy and I were spearing half-dead carp till we couldn't take the smell. After that, Mama prepared an emergency bag in case we ever got chased away again. It lasted a few months, but then we started borrowing from it. Aspirin when we caught the flu, candy bars when we were sick of eating healthy stuff, and cash when the septic tank got clogged. When the fire struck this time, the bag was empty.

The firefighters told us to stay away. When a fire burns a home, things like bleach and batteries get toxic, they said. The older mobiles might have asbestos in the debris. The men are too busy with other parts of the fire to stop anyone, though. Besides, the folks here are as stubborn as stubborn gets. The trees are like telephone poles now, so I see our neighbors clearer than ever. Most everyone's doing the same as us. Walking with their heads down and kicking stuff over. Thinking.

“Watch out for nails, Jed,” Cissy says as she sidesteps a section of fallen roof.

“Mama says if you step on one, you’ll get lockjaw.”

“Oh yeah?” I say.

Cissy leaps onto what remains of our oven, and she spins like the ballerina in the little jewelry box she has – *had*. “Yep, she don’t care none though. Says if we get lockjaw, she’ll save some soap on account of us not being able to sass her.”

“That woman hasn’t soaped my mouth since I was younger than you,” I say.

“Besides, there’s no soap left. Ain’t nothing left.”

“There’s this,” she says plucking the naked blade of a shovel from the ash.

I search her face for sassiness and find none. Cissy seems to be handling things well for an eight-year-old. Her glass is always half full as the saying goes. Mine? It ain’t even half empty. Thing’s bone-dry.

“Handle’s gone,” I say.

“So.”

“So? What good’s a shovel blade without a handle? Or a shaft for that matter?”

She stoops down and scoops ash like she was scooping ice cream. Sure as shit, she uncovers a pair of cinder blocks. Not exactly gold, but worth a few bucks anyway. She stacks one on the other and sets the shovel blade on top. Then she puts her hands on her hips all ladylike and gives me the stink-eye. If not for them blackened knees, she’s the spittin’ image of Mama.

“Go on, Cissy. Put ‘em in the pile.” Our job is to find anything worth finding while Mama helps at Mrs. Spencer’s. Mrs. Spencer is still at the gymnasium. If her home looks like ours, her wheelchair won’t much help her find anything worth finding.

“You think Mittens is okay?” Cissy says motioning toward the spot where Ruthie’s home used to be.

Mittens is tough like an alley cat even though there ain’t no alleys in Pine Glen. He once killed a rattler and left it on the porch like some trophy. Only thing is, he’d disappear into them woods a couple days at a time. I hope he wasn’t too deep when the fire struck. I don’t want to discourage Cissy, though. “Mittens is fine. That cat’s smarter than Ruthie. He’ll turn up.”

“I hope so,” she says. “Except for Mittens, it’s just *things* that’re gone. They can be replaced.”

That’s what everyone’s been saying at the gymnasium. Each time someone starts to cry, someone comes over and hugs ‘em and says that. Cissy’s just repeating it like a parrot.

“How’s everyone gonna replace all their things with no money, smart one?”

“I don’t know, *Jed*,” she says. “Insurance?”

We’re in the outline of the family room now; the entire ceiling’s one big skylight. A sofa that was already a dinosaur when we bought it secondhand is now a fossil, all springs and charred frame. Man, I remember that sofa. When we were little, Cissy would lay on it longways like she owned it. She wouldn’t budge when I’d try to push her aside, so I’d just sit on top of her. Then I’d act like I was just sitting on the cushion, and I’d yell for Mama and ask if she knew where Cissy was. Cissy would giggle until all the air was squeezed out of her. Eventually, she’d pinch me, I’d scoot over, and we’d sit side by side watching cartoons.

Sweat’s stinging my eyes so I dab at them with my sleeve. “What do you know about insurance?” I say.

“Just what people been saying.”

I roll my eyes. “Ain’t no one in Pine Glen able to afford insurance. Not enough anyway. What else they been saying?”

“That God’ll take care of us.”

I’m not sure of that either, but Mama says to have faith and I’m trying.

Cissy and I are inspecting pots and pans when Mama returns carrying a duffel bag. She enters from where the front door used to be maybe out of habit. Her pantleg’s torn below the knee. Dirt cakes most of her face except her cheeks where the tears have turned it to mud. We ask if she’s okay and she says she is. The tears are for us and Mrs. Spencer and everyone else.

“Lord knows I’ve had nothing before,” she says. “Besides, this ain’t nothing. We’ve got each other.” She pulls us into a tight hug and says God’ll take care of us.

I carry the bag containing everything Mama salvaged from Mrs. Spencer’s home. It’s light enough to carry with a finger. We drive toward the school. The street sign says Pineview road. I wonder if the folks in charge of naming streets will give it a new one. We leave our section of the neighborhood where the homes were destroyed and pass a section where the homes were saved. It’s like when two blocks in a domino chain are spaced too far apart and they stop knocking each other down. One home is gone, the next is fine. We know most of the neighbors here. They were huddled in the gymnasium same as us waiting to hear. Now, many are away helping others. Some are even boarding folks on account of the gymnasium being full.

I get to thinking again. If I take a break from school, I can get a job. Mama already said no way, but I’m thinking there *is* no other way. Last summer, Mr. Carson said he needed help mucking the barn and cleaning the chicken coop. If the creek’s not

flooding, I can walk – walk from where? I don't even know where we'll be living. We'll probably be leaving the valley altogether and moving to town where Mama works. I worry for Mama and Cissy. Here in Pine Glen, we poor folks are just poor. In town, poor folks are – well, I'm not sure they're safe.

We arrive at Marwick Valley Junior High. My school. My new home. Red Cross trucks are parked where the school buses unload. We accept water bottles and supply bags from volunteers at the doorway. Inside, it smells like sweat. Strangers are carrying huge strips of cardboard that look like flattened boxes. There are fewer cots now and they're spaced further apart. It makes sense since the lucky ones have returned to their homes. Still, people are starting to pour in. We find our spot that Cissy nicknamed *the Fort*. Mama goes to see Mrs. Spencer, and Cissy runs off to visit with some classmates near the food tables.

I get to people watching. Two girls younger than Cissy are playing tag. A little boy is petting a dog wearing a vest. A preacher is leading a small group in prayer. Mama is whispering something to Mrs. Spencer. The woman slumps in her wheelchair, and mama wraps her arms around her. I later learn that the fire had engulfed her box spring and mattress along with the envelope in between. Payback for her not trusting banks.

Volunteers are unfolding the cardboard box-like things and attaching them to bases so that they stand upright. Partitions to give folks some privacy. I offer to help. We arrange them end to end to make rectangular “rooms” around clusters of cots. By the time I'm done, a line is forming at the food tables. When I get to the front, I'm greeted by an apron-wearing Cissy and her friend Ruthie whose eyes are red and puffy.

“Can I help you sir?” my sister says.

“Sure. I'll have the daily special,” I say.

She nods to Ruthie who hands me a plate.

“What do I owe you?”

Cissy pretends to think and then says, “that’ll be *all* your money.”

I dig into my pocket and pretend to hand her a wad of cash. “Here you go, ma’am. That’s everything I have.” That part’s true.

Cissy pretends to count it. “Thank you, sir. Enjoy your dinner.” She straightens her apron. “Next!”

As I walk back to our area, I realize I’m grinning. Good ‘ole Cissy...serving up food *and* smiles. I hope the smiles rub off on Ruthie. She seems to be having a tough time.

After dinner, we help folks who need it. I carry boxes of diapers and other stuff from the trucks. My friend Mike is here too, and he grabs the other end of the heavier boxes. He says we’re returning to class the day after tomorrow. I don’t like school more than any other kid, but it’ll be good to go back. I joke that the walk *home* will be short.

After rinsing off in the mobile shower unit, a semi-truck with a bunch of doors on the side, I return to the Fort. Mama, Cissy, and Ruthie are there sitting on our cots. The overhead lights in the gymnasium are now off, and a small lamp plugged into an extension cord lights the space.

“Ruthie wants to pray with us,” Cissy says.

Nightly prayers have been a routine for our family since I was little. Ruthie’s folks aren’t the praying type. We all hold hands and Mama leads. We pray for Mrs. Spencer. We pray for the victims and volunteers. We pray for strength. Cissy and I take our turns. We pray for the sick and the hungry. We pray for peace. We pretty much pray for everything ‘cept things. It ain’t proper to ask God for things.

“Ruthie, would you like to take a turn?” Mama says. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“Yes, please.”

It’s the first thing I’ve heard her say all day. She clears her throat and looks at Mama who nods. “God, please protect Mittens.”

It’s quiet for several seconds as we wait to see if she’s going to say more. Finally, Mama says amen and then we all say it. Ruthie too.

Mama walks Ruthie back to her family’s fort. When Mama returns, she flops onto her cot and falls asleep without kissing us on our foreheads. I’m sure she didn’t forget on purpose. She’s had a long day. Maybe she thinks we don’t know any differently. We usually pretend we’re snoring – sawing logs, as Cissy says – when Mama comes in. I’m getting too old for that anyway. I suppose other family traditions might be over too. At least we got to praying.

I say goodnight to Cissy and turn out the light. Sleeping in the gymnasium is hard, mostly due to crying babies. None are crying now, though. Yesterday, Mike’s sister Maggie was sitting right there on the bleachers nursing her baby. I meant to look the other way, but somehow, I found my eyes locked with Maggie’s. I tried so hard to keep my eyes on her eyes rather than on the boob, it just made things worse – like I was staring at her. I was worried she’d be angry, but she shrugged and smiled. I suppose all the babies are asleep now or have boobs in their mouths.

“Jed, you awake?”

I roll my eyes. Cissy’s version of a whisper is more like a hiss that’s louder than normal talking. “Yeah.”

Her cot creaks as she shifts. “What are we doing tomorrow?”

“Same as today, I suppose. Looking for stuff we can save from the house and then helping folks who need it.”

“Think we’ll find anything else worth finding?” she says.

“Sure,” I say. “Fires are funny. Sometimes stuff you think will burn doesn’t. Mr. Cheshire said he found a box of cereal today.”

“Really?”

“Yep. He was telling folks that his Rice Krispies were crisped but the Cheerios were cheery. Meaning the Cheerios didn’t burn.”

She was quiet for a moment probably trying to decide if I was telling the truth. I was. That is what he *said*. Was *Mr. Cheshire* being truthful? Folks say that man lies like a politician. I didn’t tell Cissy that part since I didn’t want to squash her hope.

“If you could find one thing that wasn’t burned,” she says, “what would it be?”

“I don’t know. Maybe my baseball glove. What about you?”

“You know that box of photos Mama keeps in her closet?”

“Yeah,” I say.

“Remember that one where I’m riding piggyback on Mama, and she has her arms around you? We’re all smiling, and I look like a bunny rabbit with my teeth? I want to find that.”

I feel guilty since I was wishing for *things*. I mean a photo’s a thing too, but it’s got no value. It’s more like a memory. I know the photo, the only square one in the box. It used to be rectangular, but Mama scissor-cropped everything above the front door on account of the bird poop splattered across the gable. I hold the image in my mind. Mama’s hair was so long. Cissy had it tangled in her tiny fists reining her like a horse. My pants were too short like a flood was coming. I was wiggling out of Mama’s grasp

while she tried to tickle a smile out of me. Behind us, red and yellow potted flowers sat on the porch, wood-colored back then. Now it's white – I mean it *was* white. Now it's gone.

Everything's gone. My brain already knew this, but all at once it feels like the rest of my body just caught up. Suddenly I'm shaking, and my teeth are chattering something fierce. My heartbeat is thumping in my ears. Cissy asks if I'm okay. I try to answer but my breath is stuck, and the words are trapped behind it. What would I tell her anyway? I've been pretending to be brave for her and mama – being the man of the house and all – but dammit, there ain't no house! I'm just as scared as they are, maybe more so. Cissy asks if I'm crying. It's the one thing I promised myself I wouldn't do, but I'm blabbering like a baby off the boob. One cot squeaks then another, and next thing I know, my eight-year-old sister's got her arms around me. She's crying too. I wonder if she's doing it to save me the embarrassment of being the only one crying. That girl's tough as a cut of rawhide. Either way, it makes me feel better, like we're a team. Eventually, she returns to her cot. Soon she's snoring.

I'm still thinking about that photo. When we go to the house tomorrow, that's what I'll look for. Just like Mama cropped it, I'll take a pair of scissors and cut around the outline of our bodies. Then I'll stick the three of us on a new background like a beach or a mountain or Disneyland. On second thought, maybe I'll just keep the house there to remember it by. I kiss mama and Cissy on their foreheads, and then I fall asleep. In my dream, I don't find my baseball glove or the photo, but I'll be darned if that cat doesn't strut right out from between them spindly trees and purr for Ruthie.

– END –