

## Aflame

For two days, my parents sat under a glowing sky and waited for someone who would never come. The hills would have been quiet, nature having a sixth sense about these things and the flames still out of hearing. I imagine my mother sipping a drink in the red twilight, numbing herself. My father tracing the ridges of her hand in arthritic circles. *Please, I tell them, it's time.* But they don't hear me. I see the phone lines on the Eastern slopes wilting into coppery rivers.

On the third day, a state forestry worker named Rémy Desjardins hazarded the long climb up Mount Rojo's gravel track to inform my parents that the state of California suggested they evacuate.

I picture Rémy's forehead shining with heat, charcoal thumbed across his face like war paint. He'd noted an old Bronco in the driveway that looked well-maintained. My father seemingly in good condition when he answered the door and a flash of strawberry curls from the kitchen doorjamb. My mother's voice asking who'd come to visit.

"How fast is it moving?" my father had asked.

"Forty acres or so, every day."

Here I see Rémy's grave look. A business-like nod from my father.

"We'll be out as soon as we can."

Rémy had backed carefully down my parent's rutted lifeline, his radio crackling with news from the mountain's firebreak. There were others to warn, and it wasn't until after the forestry department's defenses collapsed that he thought again about my parents and realized something hadn't rung true.

Even thousands of miles away over the phone I could have told Rémy exactly what struck him as off. The unnatural soft-spokenness of my father, a humbleness forced upon him. The permanent smile, as if he was forever trying to remember how.

When I was ten I'd dyed my hair red from its natural brown and run through the dry pine air to let it dry. At that time, we only came to the cottage twice a year. "Oh, but you don't have red hair," my mother had said and shampooed my head three times. I sat in a tub of rose-colored water, the dye bleeding

down my back, while she shuffled her fingers against my scalp. “You shouldn’t try to be someone you’re not.”

I barely knew my older sister before she ran away into the hills. She was a smudge of memory, a foreign presence on the cottage’s mantel. I couldn’t tell you exactly when my parents built their insulation to deal with her absence. I didn’t realize that when they started avoiding the phone it was to keep from falling more deeply into themselves, I just answered and passed it to them. To me she was still there, still a possibility. But by the time I was fourteen my parents were already old and crippled from seeing their daughter’s face smudged across endless milk cartons. It wasn’t my face.

Rémy had found photo albums in the ruins. I asked him to stop telling me details. It was morbid. He didn’t say anything for a long time, and I think I hurt his feelings. He’d failed too, and we both hurt.

The fires had picked up speed from the relentless Santa Ana winds on the fourth day. Trees starved for water since February spontaneously burst aflame. He’d driven frantically at the end, the only man available to climb through the hills and rescue the struggling residents. They’d mostly moved there to avoid everyone, in cottages without electricity, running water. Whatever particular remove they needed from the world, Rémy drug them out of it. Two firefighters died, arson investigations began. In his counts at the evacuation station he remembered my father again and checked the latest aerial pictures of Mount Rojo.

“Your dad just...he just wasn’t there,” Rémy said. “He stood in front of me, but I don’t know if he ever heard me. I don’t know why they stayed.”

Rémy is a good man. He tells me that they might have made it out, that there were no bodies found in the initial search, but here I don’t believe him. I imagine my parents staring into the black tree line, the gravid air, the clouds of ash. I look into their hearts, see the stillness.

And it’s here, while they wait, that I lose them.