



with beauty like this daily"—she swept her hand in a half circle—"they can't know how spiritual it is."

He looked around and nodded, smiling.

"If you ever wanted to talk to God or minds from the past, this would be the place, not in a crowded church. So anyway, maybe I should study hermits. Maybe hermits are people who want their lives to have meaning but realize they can affect nothing but themselves. I don't know. I'm just thinking. Excuse me for getting off on a tirade."

"It was great. Most people don't let you into what they think, and you never know them. So, thank you."

His red hands were resting on his thighs. "My grandfather was a farmer, and I think his life had meaning. At least, he said he wanted his work to have meaning. But he wasn't a recluse. Everybody loved him. He worked hard, but he said it was good work. He never made much money."

"Love and good work. That should go on a list. These histories," she flicked the books with her fingers, "say most times and places women were excluded from government and the military, as if that was what mattered. Well, who wants it?"

"Really!" He laughed.

"They say women were confined to tasks relating to food and clothing. What's wrong with that? Those are good tasks. It's more meaningful, far as I'm concerned, to invent knitting needles than send an army on a rampage."

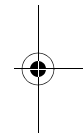
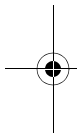
"Or plow a furrow. Or make furniture."

"Right! That takes skill too. And it means something."

"Better a bee hive than a bomb. Did you know it was only about a hundred years ago that the moveable hive frame was invented? Before that they had to destroy the hive and kill the bees to get the honey."

"We're back to bees."

He laughed at himself. "Sorry. My brother says I'm as hard to stop as a case of hiccoughs. I think bees are endlessly fascinating, you know? You could never come to an end of learning about them. I haven't been able to get up here yet to find that wild colony. I've had so many overtime days lately I can barely get my laundry done. I've never seen the forest so dry."





“Sounds as if our people are all gone to New Mexico. Are we short-handed?”

“We've got two Hopi Category Two crews in pocket at Fort Tuthill. The Boise Shots from Idaho, Mendocino and Redding and Stanislaus crews from California are coming in on stand-by detail.”

“Forest Service chess. Move up your pieces.”

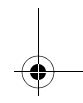
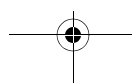
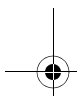
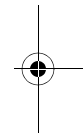
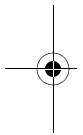
He nodded. “If anything gets started around here, we'll need those pieces or we could lose it. All we have to have is one escaped camp fire on a windy day to be in big trouble again. Is that smoke over there, beyond that ridge?”

“Sorry. That's the old dump smoking up. Part of this job is learning that you shouldn't call every

Flagstaff
December, 1894

snowflake falling from a flat grey sky on December 5th as winter circled round again. By mid-month, weather was so cold that Mormon Lake was frozen solid and work on the reform school and court house were suspended. Coasting and sleighride parties under a full moon riding high to the north were quite the proper caper for the young people, and children skated on the Rio de Flag after Sunday School. Mid-day ice thawed to mud, moving the Babbitt brothers to announce that two hundred and fifty feet of plank sidewalk would be built on San Francisco Street in front of their store to make passing easier for ladies shopping for Christmas toys. Though Ella ordered many items from Ward's catalogue, she felt that local merchants should be patronized and was grateful to have her passage to the Babbitt store facilitated.

She divided her attention between holiday preparation and concern for action in Washington. The McRae plan reforming the forest reserves, defeated in previous sessions of Congress, was proposed again with amendments that altered its character. Concentrating on increasing the access of settlers rather than protecting the trees from destruction, anticonservationists added proposals retaining the permit





system of timber cutting, prohibiting the sale of timber to outside concerns, and allowing virtually unrestricted mining. The bill passed the House on December 17th.

In the Senate a substitute bill was proposed by a Colorado Senator, one that illustrated how much at variance many Westerners were with conservationists over the question of forest reserves. The measure provided that future reserves be created only to insure the continuous supply of timber for states in which they were established. The bill passed the Senate and died in conference. Once again she wished for statehood so that Arizona would have representation in Congress, someone who could vote on matters that would affect all in Flagstaff.



In the pale afternoon of the 19th of December, wrapped in her shawl, she stood well away from the window in the back bedroom. Though the room was so cold her cheeks tingled with it, she had come in from the kitchen so that Pearl and Earl would not see her watching Ollie and John Woody out by the barn talking, their breath rising in clouds.

"I'll have a go at it," John had said.

She had not been comfortable. "You don't have to speak to Ollie, John. He's but newly sixteen."

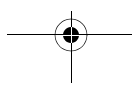
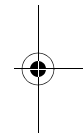
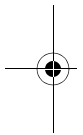
He had shaken his head. "Want a boy to act the man, you have to treat him like one. I had rather have his okay."

"But what will you say?"

"I'll say if her father was alive, I'd ask him. As it is, I'm talkin' to you."

It was several weeks past, after the cattle had been shipped that they had gone over the year's accounts on the back porch, Pearl gone to school and Earl next door playing with the Hochderffer children in late autumn sunshine. Then he had spoken. Sitting on the steps, she had shown him the accounts kept in a school notebook so he would know what lay behind her urging in the fall that they hold on to the best of their weaner yearlings.

"See, this is the number of yearlings we have, and this right here is what we could have got for them sold out of first hands



at last month's prices. Here is what I figure our expenses were. They're lower than most because you're such a good manager. So you can see we would have made some money."

He had nodded.

"Now if we multiply number of yearlings by additional weight they might have on by spring or early summer, we get this number. And here is what I'm figuring the price will be in spring. Multiply by the extra weight, and you get our profit then. Subtract what we would have realized last month, and you get this much more money. So it may have looked short-sighted, but you can see we might do better by them as long twos next spring. The bedrock way prices are now, it costs us too much to sell them."

He had sat on his boot heels in the dirt beside the steps. "It's pretty slim, all right. I can see you'd have but little mind to let 'em go at that rate. Yessir, it's better we waited." It was the first time he had said "we."

He appreciated her showing him how the money stood, he said. Grateful that she trusted him. They had their range stock together. Times were still chancey. He'd been figuring on it. "Maybe it would be the ticket if we was to pardner up on all our operations."

She stared at him, feeling that time had stopped .

He was looking at his hands as they turned his hat around and around. "What I'm getting at is, in these hard times it might make good business sense if we was to get married. Keep expenses for both of us down. I could be some help to you around the place. Take some of the work off your shoulders."

Lizzie had guessed right! *He is a straightforward manly fellow of healthful and uncorrupted nature, unafraid to tackle, no, address himself to anything that comes his way.* However, he was also a cowboy of little learning. He was not the man she wanted for her future.

His eyes went to the shed opposite. "Ella, would you do me the honor to be my wife? I vow to take care of you the best I can, if you'll but give me the chance."

She was surprised at how strong her heart was beating. She had spoken never a word to him of the thoughts that went deep

with her, what she wanted of life, what her dreams were. He knew nothing of what was important to her, less even than Lizzie. She knew little of him, of what he believed a wife or a husband should be, how they should behave. It would never do. If she married him, she might be the rest of her life in Flagstaff.

“You do remember that though I have been alone these three years past, I never applied for a divorce?”

He nodded. “You’ve earned one if ever a woman has.”

“I would have to go to court. Have you thought of choosing someone young and unencumbered?”

“I want you. It don’t matter how bad the rope is tangled, we can get it loose.”

It was an honest and sincere offer to which no blame could be attached. He was a good man who had said, “take some of the work off your shoulders” and “take care of you the best I can.” Oh, that was a wonderful thought! She felt hesitation. “I wouldn’t be your servant. Or your prisoner. I wouldn’t vow to obey you.”

“Word I said was pardner. The thing is, I’m getting of an age to want somebody to love me, if you think you can.”

It was that which had thrown her off stride, his naked statement about love. Darting about in her mind, she could find no kindly words of refusal for so worthy an offer, especially from a man on whom she had come to depend. Supposing he should break off their arrangement if she said no? No man had ever said to her, “I want somebody to love me.” So many men knew nothing of love but the word; suppose he should prove an exception? It would be cruel to refuse such a sentiment, how could she hurt him?

She sat staring at his face, his averted eyes. Would it not be a wonder if he should prove to be a man who truly cared about more than bossing in the bedroom and the kitchen? If it were managed with care, could he want what a woman wanted him to want, more easily than a man with his own ambition fixed? She felt roiled from the bottom to the top.

He deserved a loving answer. Before she knew she had decided, she reached out a hand but could not touch him. “I’d be proud to.” She found she could not say “wife” or “marry”



and was afraid. Her mind veered away from the words, frightened as a horse from the smell of bear.

So it had been agreed between them, and she meant to give good measure for her bargain if he did: she would not cheat him of any love he deserved. Good measure according to her light. She would not live his life to the sacrifice of her own.

One thing she knew, though she had consented to marry again, she intended to have no more children. First with child when her years were but eighteen, she had been disgusted by the whole affair, furious about the sick mornings, the grotesque and swollen body, the shapeless clothing, the crippled movement. Though it was a blessing to be without the monthlies for a spell, there followed the mess and humiliation of the birth itself and the bloody aftermath. One woman in fifty died of it.

She intended not to have that outrage visited another time upon her and knew now of ways to avoid it. Her sister had written that something called a Female Preventive or Cervical Pessary could be bought in Ohio for one dollar, though since the Comstock Law twenty years earlier it was termed obscene and could not be sent through the mail. There were powders and sponges and alcohol washes for women who knew what to ask a druggist for. Her sister had said such methods enhanced romantic love as, fear of future burdens gone, a man and woman could truly join in care for one another.

She had not told Lizzie or the children that she had agreed to marry Woody, could not get the words past her lips. For so long she had been proud to be independent, able to make her life out of her own doing in that rough country, that she thought of herself as stronger than the ordinary women who might look at her askance. Though she had thought of a husband to make her respectable in the eyes of others, now she feared they would think less of her if she was half of a pair and him only a rawhide rancher. Hardest to bear was the thought she might think less of herself.

Now he was letting the cat out of the bag by telling Ollie, and she was so afraid she sat down on Pearl's bed, feeling all atremble. He was a rough Westerner with no idea of how to



talk, just what she had wanted to escape. Had she made another awful mistake?

The bed frame creaked under her. She had built it herself with scraps of lumber from the mill. Part of her mind thought she would have to get a screwdriver and tighten it up again.

Ollie was watching Woody close, and when he spoke he looked more gawky than anything else. Suddenly he put out his hand and Woody took it. Ollie was grinning. He put his left hand up on Woody's shoulder, and she saw him say, "You bet. You bet." It was done then. She would have to go on

Woody Mountain
Monday June 25 and 26, 1990
four days past Summer Solstice

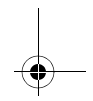
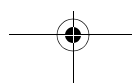
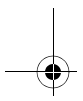
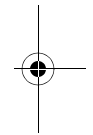
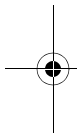
every afternoon.

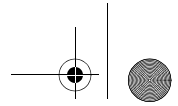
Temperatures rose to ninety degrees plus in Flagstaff, on the deserts to 120. Relative humidity was still only five percent. With fire danger all over Arizona rated Extreme, commercial logging and chainsaw use in the forest had been curtailed for weeks. The pines on the mountain had a hot weather smell. Half butterscotch, half turpentine. Sun did not reach the window sill on the south wall of the tower. Flying ants on lavender wings emerged from holes in the ground, swarmed around the tower, lost their wings and descended into the earth again. Creatures from Greek myth.

After lunch that Monday, she sat in her underwear on the window seat clothed in wind and sky, watching great white cumulus clouds balloon above the Peaks, swelling out of themselves. "Is there noise up there in the clouds when they do that?"

At 13:30 Baker Butte reported drift smoke coming up from below the Rim, close to the location of the big fire three weeks earlier. The man on Buck Mountain saw it too and radioed a cross, but she couldn't find it. A Blue Ridge range technician, out on the edge, said he could see fire half a mile to the south.

The Hopi dispatcher took control of the forest radio, his fire traffic taking precedence over everything else. He notified the fire boss on the Long Valley district of possible trouble and told him he had telephoned to the dispatcher on the Tonto. Within minutes he had six engines, two water tenders, two big Model





70s and a dozer on the road and was calling every five minutes for “any Coconino Hot Shot Crew.” Drivers had taken empty buses to New Mexico a week earlier to bring the crews home when they were ready, but it was the first she had heard that they had been released and were on the road. She leaned out the window and complained to the trees. “Nobody ever tells lookouts anything.”

By 13:40, with no Coconino unit on the Rim except that one range technician, who advised “It's building, Mo, keep everything coming,” another engine had been dispatched and so had both the Mormon Lake and Blue Ridge hose caches. The Long Valley fire boss radioed from his truck to ask whether the dispatcher could vacuum up any Indian crews. As they talked, she could hear a voice in the office on the telephone ordering air tankers and a lead plane. A second dozer was reported available, and a scramble started to find an operator for it.

At 13:51, with no answer from the Hot Shots on the road, the Stanislaus crew was ordered from the Kaibab. A patrolman was sent to the Rim road to direct public traffic away from danger, and north end units were moved to Happy Jack in the center of the forest and told to stand by. Her back turned to clouds white as soap suds above the Peaks, she watched a monstrous black smoke billow up on the horizon and tilt toward the northeast.

The dispatcher reached the Flagstaff Hot Shots on the highway east of Winslow at 14:00 and diverted them south. At 14:07 the first units began to arrive at the Rim with people and water. At 14:10 the district fire boss radioed that fire was climbing fast in a strong wind and he doubted the Rim road would hold it. A group of summer houses was two miles from the front.

The pitch of voices was rising, and she was safe and barefoot. She listened as the Mormon Lake and Blue Ridge crews came within radio contact and were told to turn south, as the Forest Management Team was activated, as smoke jumpers were ordered from Cedar City. But even with her binoculars, she couldn't see the Tonto and Coconino Air Attack planes above the smoke.



Radio transmission from the fire was erratic. A voice would fade to nothing or cut out in mid-sentence, and the dispatcher asked the Moqui lookout to stay in her tower until further notice to relay. The fire boss on the Flagstaff district called to Woody Mountain and Elden. "Extend until dark."

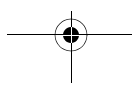
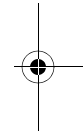
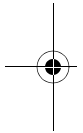
When she went down the stairs at dusk under a quarter moon, her brain was ringing with the constant sound of voices with orders, requests, warnings, and she forgot to run back up the first flight. Barricades had been set up to block the Rim road. And air space above the fire had been closed to sightseers. Water trucks and caterers with food had been sent down the Happy Jack Road. She sat in the cabin listening to communications she half understood. By then the fire was burning in 120 acres below the Rim and twenty on top. Hundreds of people were there with tons of equipment. They would work all night, their voices dim in her sleep.

Before she was quite awake next morning, she heard calls from the fire on the radio. She opened her eyes, turned on her back, and punched her pillows up to lie and listen. The voices were ordering people and more supplies or asking when they would arrive, but there was no detail to give her an idea of how things were going.

The sky she could see through the trees on the horizon beyond the Navajo Reservation, usually apricot pink at dawn, was orange brown with smoke. Windblown branches on trees outside made moving shadows on the wall. She knew that people on the fire line had probably not yet had any sleep.

As air warmed, radio traffic from the Rim became erratic again, with parts of sentences appearing and then breaking off. Sometimes she thought she could hear Coconino or Tonto people talking to each other. Apparently there were planes over the fire for a second day.

After breakfast when she carried the radio up into the tower, the column of black smoke still stood heavy on the horizon. Morning was breezy, warm, and clear with no sign of clouds. Bad weather for firefighting. In the prime burning conditions after 10:00, danger increased, and the broken transmissions she could hear were more urgent.





"It's making a run! Start your back fire! Now! You've got two minutes!" Later—"You gonna be able to hold it?" Then silence for a while and suddenly: "—flames curling over the road! Pull back! Pull back!"

Wind picked up in the afternoon, blowing the roiling smoke off to the northeast across the Reservation. Sun burned through the west tower windows. "I wouldn't want that job for any money."

At one point she thought she heard a faint radio voice shout, "Deploy fire shelters!" She increased the volume, but there was nothing else. Fire shelters meant someone on the ground had been over-run. God. Oh God. It hurt to think of. A few minutes later she caught, "—crew is cut off."

She realized she hadn't heard Charley come into service in the morning, hadn't heard him on the radio all day. He was without a doubt down there. Everybody who could drive had gone down with a load of something. "Who?" she said aloud. "Who's cut off?"

Half an hour later she heard a dim call for hel-evac. And then the radio went silent again.

The solitary afternoon wore on with no news, no activity, no fires on the north end of the forest. A few clouds drifted through the sky, trailing shadows behind them across the trees, and dissipated. "Human bodies are so pitifully vulnerable. All those people on the fire, naked inside their clothing, facing towering flames with hoes and shovels." She was safe and comfortable and alone and out of things, too tense for reading. Wind was gusting at twenty-five to thirty.

At four o'clock the dispatcher called 4-3. "Van, I need to confirm that all Coconino people are above the Rim."

"That's affirmative, Mo."

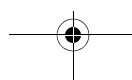
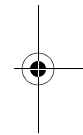
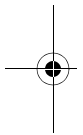
"And all Coconino people are okay?"

"That's affirmative."

"Repeat—all Coconino people are above the Rim and unharmed?"

"Affirmative."

Now what did that mean? Somebody below the Rim hurt? Was that where the crew was cut off?





At the end of a day that had seemed longer than usual, she went down the stairs to the cabin. Setting the Forest Service radio on top of the refrigerator, she flipped a switch on her cassette radio for the evening news. The first words she heard were: “—six firefighters killed and five badly burned this afternoon as fifteen hundred people mounted an all-out assault on a five-thousand-acre wildfire that has destroyed fifty-seven cabins and threatened others northeast of Payson.” She stood numb. Six dead? No. No.

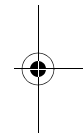
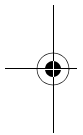
The newscaster went on to talk of a fast-moving front throwing sparks out three-quarters of a mile ahead, of fifty Hot Shot crews, continuous drops of fire retardant from seven slurry bombers and water from six helicopters, but she dropped into a chair waiting for names. All up and down the Rim firefighters silent, listening. Searchers reporting finding a hard hat and a body and part of a fire shelter. And another body. And here's another. Five men and one woman had died nearly instantly of inhaled, super-heated air in what survivors called “a tidal wave of fire.” Others had been carried out to hospitals.

“Who?” she whispered. The newscaster answered, “None of the victims were identified immediately by Tonto National Forest officials, who would say only that they were from two twenty-member crews.”

“So that's what you meant—all Coconino people are above the Rim and unharmed. You knew about it then, hours ago. All our people with their tender, naked skin are safe. But there are families—” She sat and grieved for people she did not know, mourning centuries of dying—“all of us, all of us.”

The fire seared her mind. It burned out of control for nearly a week, charring forty-five square miles of forest, destroying seventy-five homes and involving 2400 firefighters from several forests, people from the Rural Metro organization, sixty men from the Arizona National Guard, Southwest Indian Firefighter crews, and a crew from the Perryville Prison, all working shifts sometimes as long as thirty to forty hours. Suppression cost was seven and a half million dollars.

Temperatures in the southern part of the state had been above 120 degrees during those Solstice days. There had been





too many agencies on the ground for effective control, communications confusion, not enough radios to go around, fire behavior no one had experienced before. And always the wind rushing at Arizona out of the southwest.

