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### On Fire and Family

The roaring crash at my back spins me like an out-of-balance top, and I see the old corncrib crumple, sparks spewing in a halo of destruction.

“Come on!” Grabbing at my grandson’s wrist, I pull him after me. At thirteen, he’s too young to battle this blaze. “Hurry! If something happens to you, your dad’ll kill me.”

We sprint a wide curve around the burning corncrib, head for a safety zone.

“See that field?” I point to the spring green of wheat across the fence line. “That won’t burn. Get out there.”

I run back to the prairie, panting, but the men are gone. I’d whirled from one crisis to the next since I’d seen grass flaring beyond the tree line. How long? I don’t know. Looking at the March sun won’t help, even as I glance at it, slanting in from the southern sky. How long since we’d set the fire? I don’t know. Now the corncrib smolders and the fire marches west: a towering whirlwind flicking flame tips and ash debris from its edges. Mute, I watch as an Old Testament image of God’s saving promise threatens

destruction to any animal not fast enough to flee. Hawks circle. A vulture mounts the vortex, wheels, his dark wingtips limned in sun.

I suppose I should have known burning the corn crib was a dicey idea at the very least – a catastrophe at its worst. But I didn't. It seemed a good idea. There were men, you see, whose opinion I respected: my son and nephew, both grown and practical men, and two neighbor farmers who grew up north of us and understood things like farms and fires and prairie.

The morning began simply enough: my son, nephew, grandson, and I picked away at the old corn crib, testing the strength of rusty nails frozen in timber, dragging out bent pieces of tin, and debating how, exactly, we might dismember the building enough to push it into a backhoe dug trench – a trench the cousins had begun to fill over the weekend with dead trees and generations-old machinery bits. And then the neighbor brothers drove up, Gary and Dave, and suggested we just burn it down. Simple.

It's said that if you want to make God laugh, make a plan; you could also say that if you want to tempt the fates, try out a good idea. The corncrib's dry timber and left-over straw exploded into an inferno, sparks flew over tree tops into prairie grass, and the spirit of the land, dormant for so many years, crackled into freedom.

"You wanted to burn the prairie, and we got enough here to watch. I'd say let her go!" So yelled my farm neighbor, Dave.

"Jump on!" Gary said, motioning for my son Stephen to straddle the front of his ATV, and Stephen jumped on – two men on a headless horse to outrun a prairie fire.

Dave turned, grabbed a handful of tallgrass, twisted it into a torch, and began dragging the fire off to the south. My nephew David, the fourth grown man in this, “we got enough here,” followed.

Some instinct beyond my knowing had whipped the four men into action while I stood stunned – until the crash of the collapsing corncrib spurred me and I dragged my grandson out to the safety of an open wheat field.

Sure, I’d set it up, called the family home for Mom’s birthday party, pleaded for help before they all scattered – and for three days, they’d hauled and cleaned on a farm that hadn’t seen much attention since Dad died fifteen years ago. But some other Master Plan added the themes of death and resurrection and spun them through a family’s legacy with the land.

The older grandsons, grown men, claimed their patrimony on the legacy of memory. They remembered their grandfather, and the farm, alive and working; they’d guided the younger ones on forays across the land. Then, like seed, they scattered, leaving only Stephen and David to come to the farm with me today. And now they’ve stepped forward, and I stand at the fire’s edge.

I feel useless standing and watching a smoke tower no matter how mesmerizing; mostly I feel a knot of fear in my chest. Twisting up a grass torch, I begin inching fire toward the north fence line.

So, Prometheus, was this how it all started? This good idea to set fire free? Fire as gift and curse, creator and destroyer. Was there some mitigating detail you forgot, some invisible silver cord to unite good with evil and keep destruction at bay?

When we were growing up, Dad rarely burned. We mowed, plowed under the stubble, harrowed and disked. A youngster during the Dust Bowl days, he'd been one of the first to build a series of terraces across the land to control erosion; maybe burning felt too chancy.

I thought it romantic and exciting. Springtime smoke towers on the horizon flipped book pages on the winds of imagination – a nighttime menacing horizon; Zane Grey's cowboys outrunning fire; settlers frantically plowing breaks around sod houses. But I had to admit, this fire didn't feel particularly romantic.

What is it, this fire thing? Prometheus, the Phoenix, God's tower and Hell's punishment, a home's comfort. A primary force in stories, in lives. And this fire, on this particular farm, stirring ancient echoes of a call I didn't know I had sounded.

As it turns out, Dad was wrong about burning the grasses along waterways or roads. But I don't even have to challenge him with that idea – only thinking it brings his voice, floating in from the country cemetery, "We had plowed lands, not prairie." True. This prairie dates from the mid-1980s. He seeded the farm into native tallgrass after he and Mom moved into town.

Fire, as it turns out, is a natural part of the prairie's evolution. That's evolution's job – taking a life force and shaping it to conditions. Some 8,000 years ago, receding glaciers left the central plains rich in top-soil, grass, animals, and enough wide space for spectacular storms. In those far-off days, lightning set innumerable fires; the prairie hid tubers and seeds beneath the surface and grass roots ran twelve-feet deep. Burning rids the matted buildup and renews the land – a symbiosis that allows each to live. That's what I'd learned. But symbiosis needs to be done with care or you risk disaster.

I hadn't set a firebreak around the old corn crib; the sparks jumped, and wind wove the fire. I hope that with a little luck, the elements have come together of their own accord: fire, wind, earth, and men to guard.

When I was young, my solitary wanderings took me beyond the fields through the pastured woods. I became adept at listening for the crack of a twig, a rustle of leaves from some small animal's hunting story. I'd hear a meadowlark mother scrabbling, crying pitifully, as she lured my feet from a nearby nest, tucked-in under a grass clump.

Perhaps five hundred years ago, as second daughter with little dowry, I'd have lived my life in the silence of a convent's stone walls. Prayer would have given my place and reason for being. Or would my questions still echo in the empty spaces: Who am I? What defines me?

How is it this farm, owned by a now far-flung family, defines me more than my work or my years in New York or Mexico or any of the other places I've lived? Most of us evolve from our story of origin, for good or ill, but why this farm, this family?

Below these burning grasses, burrowed into the black dirt, hides life that blooms with each spring's rain. Maybe that's what the farm, the family, cultivates: deep roots that allow me to bloom with each changing season.

While I ruminate my own connection to the land, view what I know, David returns to check in, tells me Dave drove over to the west side, asks if I'd seen Stephen.

"No. I haven't." I glance at the sun; it's lower. The knot gets tighter in my chest.

"The fire jumped the draw – started up the west side. That's why Dave took off. I think I'll mosey on down to the woods and see if I can find Steve," David says.

“Okay.” I don’t tell him how worried I am, how useless I feel, about the tightness in my chest, but I know my nephew well and I know he doesn’t tell me how worried he is.

Instead I watch him go, turn back to work, wonder at the uncountable hours I’ve spent in my head, amusing myself, driving a tractor along a furrow. I don’t remember the exact trail of my fantasies – love found in one way or another – but the same impulse arises to distract myself.

The fire is fierce and I am afraid for my son.

A matted clump of tallgrass flares and I jump aside. I notice Michael picking his path down the waterway toward me.

“You okay, Grandma?” A frown etches his forehead — the same kind of frown his father, my second son, makes when I do something he considers less than sensible.

“Yeah, Michael, I’m okay. You want to learn how to do this?”

He nods – so brief I could have missed it if I didn’t know him. An only child, he’s well-protected, hasn’t yet learned risk. Yesterday when his parents left, he had to decide whether to stay with me or go with them. It took awhile.

“You’ll be okay. The wind’s behind us. Look, turn this way.”

I shift my body so the wind blows at my back. Michael follows.

“Can you feel the wind on your neck?”

Michael nods.

“And the fire’s in front of you?”

He nods again.

“That means the fire will blow away from you and across the ridge. You’re okay. Now watch what I do.”

The worried look disappears as he watches me twist a torch, light it from a burning clump, and drag it along the base of unburned grasses.

“See? Think you can do that?”

A one-shoulder shrug accompanies his nod.

He walks beyond me. As his torch catches, he flinches and drops it. Tearing off another handful of grass, he repeats his actions. This time, the tallgrass flares.

I watch him inch the fire northward. With each spent torch, he creates another sentence in his own fire story. At last, he walks back.

“That’s pretty cool.” Soot, rather than a frown, streaks his forehead.

I measure our progress – about twenty yards from the north fence, I guess. I turn to survey the burned grass behind us. A Kansas homestead – a quarter of a mile wide, north to south, and a mile long, east to west: one hundred and sixty acres – this much is ours, down through five generations, down through roots running deep.

A chill catches in the sweat of my neck, and I shrug my shoulder to swipe at it. The wind has shifted to the northeast – a good sign, blowing the fire back from the fence line and away from jumping into the neighbor’s pasture.

I grunt as I bend to resume working. My mother gives these same little grunts, both as she lands herself in a chair and as she gets up. On her, it’s charming; on me it sounds old.

I glance up. My nephew strides back along the fence line, his shovel riding his shoulder. The sun hangs a hand’s breadth from the horizon.

“Hey, Auntie!” he calls.

“Hey, David. Where’s Stephen?”

He nods in the direction from which he’d come. “They’re heading this way.”

He trades his shovel for my torch and begins pushing the burn north. I lean on the shovel, stretch my back. I feel my body take a deep breath. The fear knot relaxes.

Stephen tops the rise, walking along the fence line. He swings a length of wire with something burning at the end, lighting grass. Gary follows on his ATV and Dave drives the truck.

The sound of calves bawling for feeding time drifts across the fields; from the unburned cedars of the east pasture comes the evening call of wild turkeys. Stephen reaches the end of the fence line and turns to meet his cousin. Their fire lines meet at the tip of a V, smolder into each other.

Two men face the west and the burned off land, face the setting sun, watch as the last strip of grass withers to smoke.

Michael and I walk over; Gary and Dave join us. We stand as farmers do at the end of a day, talking, reliving the story.

“You see how that wind shifted?” Dave asks. He shakes his head. We grin.

“Couldn’t beat the timing,” Gary agrees.

Stephen demonstrates his baling wire tool - an old leather glove soaked in kerosene, wrapped in wire.

“I gave it to him when I drove around to the west side,” Dave said. “Saves your back.”

Night creeps into our quiet conversation and erases our shadows. Yard lights blink across the countryside. We linger, reluctant to leave, to break the spell that holds us.

But the world demands action: Michael and I to travel east to our Kansas City homes; Stephen and David to begin their drives west; Gary and Dave to evening chores. We nod farewell. We'd done our work and reclaimed the farm.

And the spirit that bound us in a ritual of fire stretches, sighs, flows back into the land.

The End