FIRE SEASON

by Jad Josey

GIBSON watched as the hills surrounding his land pinked in the fading alpenglow. It wasn't hard to imagine them ablaze, though fire hadn't touched these cypress or redwood or oak for at least a hundred years. He knew it needed to burn. Everything needed to burn eventually. Each season he repeated a silent prayer: *Let it wait until next year.* Then came harvest, then rain, and fire was the last thing on his mind until summer cycled back around.

The screen door banged open, and his oldest boy skidded onto the porch. "Daddy," he said, "Scrubby's on the phone. He says he's coming over for dinner."

Gibson snuffed out the joint he'd been smoking. "Tell him to bring some of his Indigo Rose tomatoes," he said to the boy. "And his tackle box. That son of a bitch has my big spinner."

The boy careened back into the house, the screen door slamming behind him. Gibson listened to him eke out an iteration of what he'd just said, the clang of the phone receiver into its cradle, footsteps clomping up the wooden stairs.

Gibson and Scrubby had known each other longer than their memories reached. Their fathers grew up with four houses between them. After each had married, they lived two streets away from one another. The mailman brought their draft letters on the same day. The last leaves fell as they boarded separate buses in November of 1971 and never saw each other again. When only Gibson's father came back, the two mothers doted on him in tandem. For some time, it seemed like Gibson's father had two wives. Hushed voices flitted like starlings across town. The boys didn't grow up exactly like brothers, but there was never a time they didn't share a familial type of intimacy.

Gibson smiled and fished the roach out of the ashtray. He held the scoop of match flame close to his face. The trees and hills and everything disappeared beyond the hot glow. He looked out at the darkening hillside and imagined the imprints on his retinas were fireflies. When they faded, he went inside to find Anya.

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The brass knocker clunked against the door. Scrubby refused to use the bell and felt inexplicably uneasy about walking into the house—though he'd helped move in the furniture a dozen years earlier, had never missed a child's birthday, even knew where the tin foil was kept.

Gibson opened the door and said, "Only the cops knock, Scrubby."

Scrubby smiled with half his mouth, beard pulled up like a balaclava on his wide face. "Good thing I'm only a security guard."

Scrubby worked at the power plant, a natural gas system that farmed cold ocean water to cool its turbines. He carried a baton, a stun gun, and an expired bottle of pepper spray. There were armed guards there, but Scrubby wasn't one of them.

He stepped inside and the children swarmed his legs and then scattered into other rooms before reappearing like boomerangs. Anya came around the corner, handed Scrubby a tall glass filled with ice and Dr. Pepper, and kissed him on the cheek.

"We're gonna step out onto the porch," Gibson said. "Keep the kids inside, will you?" Anya nodded and pressed her face to his for a moment.

Her skin was warm and damp with sweat. She nudged the men out of the doorway and closed the door.

Scrubby pulled a small glass pipe from the pocket of his flannel. "You got anything to put in here?"

"Give me that thing."

Scrubby handed him the pipe, and Gibson produced a small jar from his coat. He packed the pipe and handed it back.

"Got a light, I hope," Scrubby said.

"I've got everything," said Gibson.

"You always do," he said. Scrubby puffed on the pipe for a while before handing it to Gibson. They settled into a comfortable silence, passing the pipe back and forth until it was gone, and then Gibson filled it again, and the process repeated. They watched the gloaming settle upon the land.

"It's almost time," Gibson said.

"All over the county."

"You got work lined up this season?"

Scrubby looked over at Gibson and smiled. "Only if you'll have me," he said.

Gibson nodded. He stood, and the two men went inside. Gibson's youngest daughter, Penelope, turned into the hallway and walked on tiptoes

toward them, trying hard not to use the wall for balance. She bent and touched the laces of Scrubby's boots. "I like your shoes," she said.

"They're boots," Scrubby said.

"That's what I said, silly." Her freckles a dappled crescent moon. "Your shoes are prettier than mine." She turned and clopped on her heels back down the hall.

"They're boots," Scrubby called after her and Gibson chuckled.

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The children were buoyed by Scrubby's presence at the dinner table. Anya rose again and again to retrieve things from the kitchen: butter, more silverware, the pepper grinder. The kids pecked at their food and crawled beneath the table and fetched glasses of water and tall straws and argued over the colors. Then they cleared the table and stacked the dishes haphazardly in the sink, and Anya kissed them in turn before they skittered off to play.

"There's talk of crews coming through and cutting fire trails," Gibson said.

"They always talk about doing it," Anya said, "but they never do."

"Maybe," said Scrubby.

Anya pulled a thin joint from behind her ear and sat back in her chair. Gibson watched her twist one end shut tightly, then bite off a small divot with her incisors. She leaned toward a candle, the tip of the joint edging the flame until the end smoldered and lit. She took a long drag and exhaled toward the vaulted ceiling.

"It's almost time," she said. "Get it down and trimmed and sold before fire season."

"This is fire season," Gibson said.

"Exactly."

"I'm ready," said Scrubby. He leaned across the table and reached for the joint. Anya took a long toke and handed it to him. "You can pay me the same as last season. I'll camp on the land."

"No traffic in or out," said Anya.

"That's right. I stay here and we handle it all at once. Safer that way."

Simon pranced in, a silver mask around his eyes and an orange boa draped over his shoulders. The other three came marching behind, a cacophony of color. Penelope tilted a cardboard staff toward the adults and said, "You're in need of a show." The other children laughed and danced about, and then they conspired in a semi-circle and traded giggles.

"A show is exactly what we need," said Gibson. He reached over and dimmed the overhead lights, and the children quibbled with excitement. "On with the show," he said.

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The night was blue-black, and the tall trees surrounding the clearing made it feel even darker. The stars felt far away, winking from blue to white. A pack of coyotes yipped and squabbled over something in the woods to the south.

The three of them walked along in darkness for a while. Gibson had the sensation of feeling his pupils dilate. The Milky Way grew into a thick and hazy crease in the night sky. When they neared the chicken wire fence, he turned on his flashlight and found the detached post. He swung open the flimsy gate, and then closed it up behind them.

"Holy shit," Scrubby said. "This is way bigger than last year."

"It'll probably take an extra week to harvest," Anya said.

"When do we get started?"

"Next full moon. A week from today."

Gibson walked ahead of them, his flashlight beam catching foliage and flower.

"You think the kids are okay?" Scrubby asked.

"They're sound asleep," said Anya.

"Come on," Gibson said. "You need to see the Phoenix."

He led them through the rows of plants, all of them taller than him now. They covered their faces to avoid being coated in resin. In the middle of the field was the only perennial of the bunch. At the end of each season, after she had been harvested, Gibson cut back the Phoenix carefully and covered her with a polypropylene dome. This late in the season, her branches were engorged with flowers so heavy he'd fashioned bamboo props to keep the limbs from breaking.

"She'll be the last one cut down," he said.

"Of course," said Scrubby. "There's probably a pound of weed on her."

Gibson looked over at Anya, and he thought about how their smiles had always been almost identical. Sometimes you get lucky, he thought. This was the golden time, the time when the hard work got harder, but the end of the season thrummed out like a beacon. His heart was most full of Anya in October.

They walked back toward the house in silence. At the gate, Gibson put his hand on Scrubby's shoulder and turned him around gently. "This is

mine," he said. "This is what I do. When you're here, it becomes ours. Does that make sense?"

Scrubby nodded. "It all makes sense," he said.

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Scrubby left three fingers from his left hand in Afghanistan, and he brought home dreams of children with their mouths and eyes full of sand. But he didn't seem that different. Not for a few months, at least. He shacked up with Corinne, the girl he'd taken to prom, the first girl he'd ever seen naked, and she changed his bandages and brought him plastic trays of Epsom salts. She bought him beer and then whiskey. She learned to stack the ice high in his glass, pour the Coke in first, then top it off with whiskey. He'd tilt his head and smile at her. He'd say, "Damn, lady. You make a strong drink for a weak man," and she'd laugh and rub his shoulders and tell him how brave he was. His beard grew unkempt, his hair greasy.

The couple came to dinner one night. Gibson was living in a small one-bedroom above a head shop downtown. He'd remembered to walk to the flower stand three blocks over and grab a bunch of sunflowers. What he didn't have were vases, so the lion-colored petals were perched aslant dark brown beer bottles, two stems in each one, leaves tucked up like a mane under the round face of flowers. Anya was late getting home from

class, and Gibson forgot to ask Corinne if she wanted a drink. He and Scrubby were sitting next to the window smoking a joint when Anya arrived. When she saw Corinne empty-handed, she cocked her head in Gibson's direction and raised an eyebrow. "You'll pay for this later, mister," she'd said.

Scrubby lit a smoke as soon as the joint was gone. It started to rain. The drops were bright and tinny against the fire escape, and Scrubby closed his eyes and shook his head.

"The whole night sounded like this," he said. "Like a falling down that never ended. Like light landing on darkness, but mean. Not like lightness at all."

Gibson peered out the window. The night was bright with city lights bouncing off the clouds. Passersby below left heavy footsteps that echoed against the bricks and the glass and the youthful pity of the town. Even the trees were planted less than a hundred years ago. Nothing here was ancient.

"Here," said Corinne. She handed Scrubby a drink. She didn't float the whiskey on top this time. He rattled the ice in the glass.

Scrubby always wore the same sweater back then, a gray cashmere his mother gave him before he left for boot camp in Fort Bragg. Something about the color made his missing fingers starker, the remaining flesh declaring vacancy, his thumb a signpost.

"When Dad sent a photo home from the war," said Scrubby, "Mom said his eyes were different." Gibson had nodded, because he remembered hearing Scrubby's mom whisper those words to his own mother, the two women standing on either side of the open refrigerator door, white eggs hovering in two neat rows between their bodies as they leaned toward one another.

Corinne slid behind Scrubby's chair and rubbed his shoulders. The sound her fingertips made on the cashmere was almost more than Gibson could bear.

"I hope my eyes don't look like that," Scrubby said. "I mean, I hope they don't look different than they used to."

"We're too busy looking at your hand to worry about your eyes," Gibson said. Scrubby laughed and Corinne smiled thinly.

"I'll take another one of these," Scrubby said, shaking the ice cubes in his empty glass. Corinne took the glass without saying a word, but she leaned down from behind him and rested her cheek against his. The rain had stopped, and the street beneath the apartment was filled with the sound of cars pushing through puddles and water finding its way through the gutters. Gibson looked up and found Anya staring at him. She shook her head almost imperceptibly, the corner of her mouth turning up just a bit.

"How about you roll another joint," Anya said.

"Now that's a good idea," said Scrubby.

Gibson reached for his diminishing bag of weed and his papers, keeping his eyes on Anya. She had held his gaze for a long time, until she seemed to get bored and turned toward the kitchen with Corinne. Gibson knew she hadn't given up any ground. She broke the staring contest in a way that made it clear she wasn't even playing the same game.

Corinne left Scrubby a handwritten note three months later. Much of her letter was illegible, the pen dragged inkless across the page, a scrawl of ghosted words. Scrubby brought the letter to Anya to decipher. Both the pen and Corinne's thin cursive recalibrated at the last two sentences. Gibson listened from the kitchen as Anya read them aloud. "Your eyes are different now. So are mine."

"She sounds like a poet," Scrubby said. "A shitty one."

After that, he started pouring his own drinks, and he didn't float the whiskey on top. A few weeks after Corinne left, the deputy sheriff—a rotund and red-faced man who was on the junior varsity team the same year Scrubby was a senior breaking the record for running yards—answered a call about a man at the top of a telephone pole near town square. He'd gotten Scrubby to come down by singing the alma mater over and over. Scrubby spent two nights in jail sobering up before the police let Gibson post his bail.

Gibson found Scrubby a place on the old Lawler farm, a little twelve-acre plot that used to be twelve-hundred. The old man still farmed pole beans and zucchini and artichokes, and Scrubby lived in the scrabbled windmill house where the giant wooden paddles no longer turned. He had a two-burner stove and a fridge with a freezer that regularly froze like a snow cave, but he seemed happy enough. His tabby mouser, Angus, kept him company. Scrubby liked helping Mr. Lawler with the farm chores, something he did without being asked. He worked so hard on the farm that Mr. Lawler finally stopped asking for rent.

In the years before the children were born, Gibson and Anya would drive the dusty farm roads to visit Scrubby. Anya brought wine for herself, and Gibson brought small baggies of the strains he'd been developing in a tiny indoor closet, each one labeled in his neat handwriting. Scrubby was a willing critic, returning each empty baggy with a 3x5 notecard on which he'd scrawled detailed notes about flavor, aroma, potency, and dreams.

The first card: *Piney, citrusy flavor. The smell when you first peel a sheet of bark off a eucalyptus. Almost smoked more, glad I didn't. Tumbled into a creek and just kept sliding. It was day at first, then not. Found a trout but he finned me and got away.* Gibson kept the notes in a tackle box with the rest of his marijuana kit. He looped a rubber band around each stack of ten, placed them in neat columns like a baseball card collection. The twenty-sixth card: *Kerosene. Not*

in a bad way. ~~Hallusina~~ Hallucinatory. Had trouble sleeping. Almost like fever dreams. I turned into smoke and it didn't hurt at all.

They'd navigate those roads home from Scrubby's in the moonless or moonlit nights, and after a while, Gibson would flip off the headlights and skate along the dark band of road. Sometimes it felt like he wasn't even steering the truck, the road pulling them through the first copse of oak trees, the trapezoid of stars static above, the smear of eucalyptus leaning away from the wind, wending their way toward the modest lights of town.

One night Anya asked him to pull over beneath the dizzy sky. They leaned on the hood of the truck, gathering warmth while their exhales billowed. She told him the news and they leaned in silence for many minutes, staring out at the sky rushing in to meet them both. How it was to turn through space faster than anyone can imagine, how it was to live on the fertile crust of a planet filled with troubled, terrifying edges. How it would be now. They drove the rest of the way home smiling into the silence, each of them looking at the other in turn, at the light cutting across a cheek, a forehead. At the darkness left behind.

They bought a plot of land in a crease of hills east of town. It was dirt road and peeling paint and overgrown everything, but it became home. They were six country miles from Scrubby ("Two beers away," he'd say) and they measured their surroundings relative to their old fire escape. *I want*

a three-fire-escape bathroom. The garden is almost eight fire escapes. After some time, they forgot about the fire escape altogether.

Their first boy was born on the same day Scrubby plowed his old pickup truck into a walnut tree. Gibson wasn't there to see his son come into the world, to watch Anya's skin turn dusky and then blue, the nurses scrambling to wrest the newborn child from her arms while they wheeled her gurney into the operating room. Gibson was also bleeding, but far away, his forearm torn open by jagged sheet metal as he dragged Scrubby out of the truck while fuel glugged onto the soil. When the tank was empty and the truck not aflame, Gibson hooked it to his winch and hauled it off the Schmitz farm beneath a night with no stars. He drove Scrubby to the hospital and sat in the waiting room while Scrubby got stitched up. His wife was two floors up with fentanyl running through her veins, a six-week-early baby drinking warm formula and chirping at the bright dimness behind his closed eyelids. Anya's doctor rounded the corner just ahead of Scrubby, whose face lit up at seeing Gibson in the waiting room. He pushed past the doctor and picked Gibson up in a bearhug, then winced at the pain in his back.

"I owe you more than I'll ever have," he said.

"You must be Gibson," the doctor said. He looked at Scrubby's face solemnly and then turned back to Gibson. "I'm glad you're finally here." Gibson stared at him blankly, one eyebrow turned up in confusion.

"Who the fuck are you?" Scrubby said.

The doctor told Gibson about Anya, about their son. Gibson took small steps backward during the conversation. The doctor moved incrementally toward him until Gibson's elbow touched the wall where he hadn't been moments ago. His heart was hammering out a tremoring sadness, a syncopation of guilt and relief at a thing highly anticipated and suddenly over. He was a black box in the middle of his own life, recipient of a thing unearned and deserving of it still.

When Gibson turned away from the doctor, Scrubby was no longer there. Gibson pushed away the urge to chase after him, to finalize the triage of this night. Instead he found his son and held the tiny bundle to his chest. He trembled so much that the nurse paced alongside him, her arms poised beneath the sleeping baby. She followed like a lamprey in the bright white nursery. Whatever had been lost on this night was surely righted by what had been gained.

Scrubby came to the house four days after they were home from the hospital, nearly two weeks since Anya lay bleeding in a delivery room with a newborn clutched to her breast. He knocked lightly on the door, so softly that Gibson's tired brain almost didn't register the sound.

"Only the cops knock," Gibson said as he opened the door.

Scrubby's lip was already quivering, and tears blossomed in his eyes when he saw Gibson.

"I'll never have enough to make it up to you," he said. "But I'll do what I can. You know I will."

Anya was quick to forgive. When Scrubby apologized for the many-hundredth time, she spoke in her frank way. "I will not hear those words again, Scrubby. Not for this. I reckon you'll do something else worth apologizing for—we all will—but don't say it until then." Scrubby nodded. The two of them folded it away in a manner that made Gibson envious.

After that, Scrubby stopped drinking altogether. His daily joint intake increased, but he didn't mention beer or whiskey even in passing, and Gibson stopped offering him a beer as naturally as if they'd made a pact about it. Scrubby would show up with a shirt pocket flush with freshly-rolled joints ("They're thin as toothpicks, Gibson") and the garden continued to expand and provide. On some afternoons he found Anya, her eyes sharp and her brow smooth, staring out at the field with a look that was not unlike the way she looked at their child, then at the newborn, at the children two, three, then four. The seasons moved and they moved along, too.

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At the end of last season's harvest, the two men built a rainwater catchment system. The planting area had nearly quadrupled in size since

the beginning, and the crop had outgrown what Sulphur Creek could provide. They widened the drains on the sloping roof of the house and routed the downspouts to a central filtering station, where the water was gravity-fed into one of the eight 650-gallon tanks dug into the hillside. Scrubby spent two days wiring the pump system, Gibson pacing behind him in spells, hovering over his right shoulder intermittently.

"Goddammit," said Scrubby, pulling a joint from his breast pocket. "Grab a shovel and start digging the trench for the main PVC line." He lit the joint and drew deeply, puffing on it to get the cherry hot. Smoke ghosted his face for a moment, tendrils licking up through his reddish-blond beard. "Just do something different than watch me work."

He reached out to Gibson with the joint.

"Fine," Gibson said, and took a long drag. "I'll go see if Anya wants to roll around for a bit."

"Give me the damn joint back," Scrubby said. "You're full-up on happiness. I need all the help I can get."

The rain started falling on the first weekend in November, and the tanks were topped off before the calendar turned December. They had enough water to supplement the meager creek through the end of harvest season.

"Like a charm," Anya said, looking out over the land and its gathering shadows. It was three days until the full moon.

"Gotta hope for a gentle fire season," Gibson said. He and Scrubby had been collecting supplies for the harvest. To Gibson, it felt like staring at a table laden with food: dishes of potato salad, fresh-baked rolls. Ribs rubbed with sage, mashed potatoes creased with melting dollops of butter. Two pecan pies. A bounty, and all around them desert sands. They occupied the insignificant oasis in the middle.

When the clouds stacked up and crawled their way from the south, he watched the skies nervously. Those clouds were filled with friction and no rain, wound up tight like a music box. He counted the seconds between the lightning and thunder. It didn't do any good to live in the oasis if the desert swallowed them up in sand and heat and wind.

The plants were ready. Every day that passed felt like a day borrowed. "We're so close now," Gibson said.

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Scrubby was near the Phoenix, plucking snails off the dewy mulch around her base and chucking them over the fence, when Gibson approached.

"Anya likes to save those for the chickens," he said.

"I ain't saving no snails," said Scrubby.

There was a rustling in the bushes just outside the chicken wire fence surrounding the crop. Scrubby stood up and peered into the vegetation, tracking the sound with his eyes. A soft, chortling sound started up again, and a thick brown pig emerged and scuttled his way to the edge of the wire. He was covered in shaggy fur that bolted in stark angles from his body. Bits of leaf and debris clung to him. Gibson was immediately reminded of Pig Pen, and he chuckled.

"Nothing funny about that animal," said Scrubby.

The pig burrowed its snout into the soft humus mounded at the base of the fencepost.

"The best thing would be to take it down now," Scrubby said.

Gibson stared at him with his mouth agape.

"Go grab your shotgun and end it." A few months ago, Gibson had traded Scrubby three ounces of last season's harvest for the old 20-gauge shotgun. Scrubby had delivered it wrapped in a thin blanket shiny with gun oil.

The pig stopped rooting in the dirt and looked at the men. Gibson shook his head and scowled. Scrubby stepped toward it with heavy feet, his boots dragging dust high into the air. He raised his hands and the pig hastened backward, small hooves pedaling in the soft soil. Then he was gone, all but the sound of him crashing through the bushes, down the sweeping hill toward the creek.

"This isn't your war," Gibson said. "It's my home."

"It never was," said Scrubby.

Gibson raised his eyebrows.

"My war," Scrubby said. "It never was my war."

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They worked until well after dark. Anya had the children asleep when the men got back to the house. She left two plates of food in the oven and a sticky note with instructions. Gibson turned on the oven and grabbed a beer from the fridge.

"I'll take one of those," Scrubby said.

Gibson was standing with the refrigerator door almost closed. The fluorescent light in the kitchen was flickering. He had been meaning to change it for weeks. He closed the fridge door and looked at Scrubby.

"Just one beer," Scrubby said.

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Well, then," said Scrubby. He pulled out a chair at the kitchen table, but he didn't sit down. He was staring at the tablecloth.

"Listen, how about you and I go fishing tomorrow," said Gibson.

Scrubby was lost in the tablecloth, his eyes glassy.

"Just me and you," said Gibson.

"Twelvemile Creek?"

"Yeah, we can go to Twelvemile. I'll pick you up before sunrise."

Scrubby slid the chair to the table and nodded. He drummed his fingers on the back of the chair and turned to go.

"You don't want to stay for dinner? It's already heating in the oven."

"Naw. You can have my portion." Scrubby walked toward the dark tube of the hallway, then turned back. "You can have my beer, too."

He shut the door quietly as he left, and Gibson sat down at the kitchen table. The windows were open, and the evening breeze was cooler than it had been for many months. He ate in silence and listened to Anya getting ready for bed upstairs. When he heard the click of the lamp on her nightstand, Gibson counted to one hundred six times, then twice more in Spanish, and then he hung his hat on the coat rack by the front door and moved quietly up the stairs, taking exquisite care not to wake her, knowing that if he did she would ask about Scrubby.

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In his dream, the shadows were losing to the light. Every time he thought the darkness would roil forward to blot out the flickering orange glow, the light split into winding rivulets, arteries spilling into veins that blossomed into racing capillaries. The light was winning. He woke with Anya's hand on his shoulder, her fingernails raking his skin, words choking in her throat. The bedroom walls shimmered with an orange glare that made his bowels loosen. He threw back the covers and stood on wobbly legs. "Stay here." He heard his voice as if from far away. One of the children was crying in the bedroom down the hall.

He went to the closet and reached past his winter coats. He found the barrel of the shotgun wrapped in its thin blanket. He shook off the fabric and put the stock to his shoulder, pointing the gun into the darkness of the closet. Then he lowered it and fished his hand to the highest shelf. The five shells were lined up like sentries. He knocked one over, and it cascaded into the darkness. He grabbed the other four and put them into the pocket of his pajamas.

He stepped outside. The pumphouse was burning, flames thrusting high above the trees. Embers were climbing toward the stars. Maybe it would burn, he thought. Maybe it would all burn. He scrambled down toward the fence line, surprised to see Scrubby's truck parked haphazardly across the gravel road. The stones bit into his bare feet, and he hobbled along with the shotgun extended like a joust.

He found Scrubby kneeling, straddling a dark and writhing mass. When Gibson got closer, he saw it was the wild pig. Scrubby's arms were around its neck, his forehead pressed into the ground as he wrestled the animal. When he looked up at Gibson, his eyes were filled with firelight. His forehead smeared with earth.

"Bastard worked open the doors and chewed through the wiring," he said. His teeth gnashed.

The light breeze eddied for a moment. Embers drifted down into the garden like fireflies. Gibson tried to track each one until it winked into darkness.

"Let it go," Gibson said.

Scrubby looked down at the pig squirming beneath him. The animal squealed and bucked. He shook his head without looking up, his hair dragging through the dirt.

"I mean it," said Gibson. He pulled one of the shells from his pocket and chambered it. The sound ratcheted against the night. The pig squealed louder still, the sound pitching above the hiss of flame and smoke, air rushing in to feed the fire.

"I don't reckon you're gonna shoot either way," Scrubby said. He looked like the photo of his father from the war, Gibson thought. Or maybe he didn't. It was hard to know a face from one photograph. Scrubby dug his knees into the pig's torso.

“Don’t make me a liar,” Gibson said.

Scrubby rose to his knees, the animal writhing beneath him.

“When someone gives you a second chance,” Scrubby said, looking down at the animal, “you’re luckier than most.” The thighs of his jeans were slick with pig sweat. He stood and the pig rolled to its feet and careened into the fencing, grinding its shoulder into the metal, hooves trudging.

The flames were quieting. The pumphouse was black and gutted, wooden frame a notion of what it was before. There were no more embers rising into the night, and the breeze was barely a breath. The closest neighbor was three miles east. If she heard the shotgun blast, she didn’t call it in.

In a few short hours, the sun will rise on the smoldering wooden mass of the pumphouse, smoke cupping into the cool air like a candle snuffed out. Turkey vultures will turn above the land, sighting on the carrion below. A mated pair of red tails will screech in the slant sunlight, ducking into early shadows for a rabbit or the duff. Autumn will collect itself in an arching embrace. Not one of them will feel the earth spinning around. Not one of them will think about it at all. It was almost time to tuck the fire-season prayers away until next year. There was work to be done that had nothing to do with ashes or the rising.

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