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Fire on the Mountain

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Fire on the Mountain

Buck and I came upon the old wooden mountain cabin and found my grandfather sitting against the sunbaked wall facing west. We both knew what had to be done. Not far behind us were the military men from Flagstaff, slowly making their way up the logging road we were able to avoid with our horses. We found him in his refuge. His place of meditation since the death of his wife 20 years ago.

My parents let me spend three weeks with him each summer. He would drive me through the small town of Page, AZ, across the long desert plain, 10 minutes to the ranch. The 260 acres of ranch, cattle and horses, feeding at the stream. Once a symbol of freedom, his ranch stood alone in the wilderness. The mountains behind the pastures were his as well, we would go to the cabin in the hills on hunting trips each weekend.

Now, "for the sake of progress", and "the good of the whole", my grandfather's ranch, and his horses and mountains were taken. Taken by the government under the precept of *E Pluribus Unum*. The men in suits told him he should feel proud, he was helping the U.S. Government fight off the evil empires of the world by giving up the ranch that was his, and his fathers before him. "It's a perfect location, really." Said the man from Flagstaff. Trying to make small talk with a 15-year-old. Underestimating my rage, he wasn't ready for the "fuck off" that was my response.

He didn't go without a fight. Covering the windows with planks, only sunlight and a shotgun barrel could seep in and out of our home. I knew how to use a gun, and they hadn't yet shot at me. We would shoot out the lights of the cars that carried the men in suits. Soon the suits changed to uniforms, the cars to dull olive jeeps, the government brought force to take him from "their" ranch. We fought, but he was old and tired, Buck too, and I was young. So Buck and I returned to the woods for one last time. Not to hunt, or fish or look for stray cattle, but to find my grandfather and what he found at the cabin—to live and not die without living.

We went inside the cabin, smelling the dry wood burning in the stove—seeing on the wall the medal of honor, signed by Harry Truman. I saw the pictures of my grandmother, hugging the man in uniform.

I found my keepsake, his worn saddle & side pouch, canteen half-full, and I took it from the cabin. Buck piled the old wooden chairs beneath the large rectangle table that always gave me splinters. He took the oil-burning lamp from the nightstand and poured the golden oil across the pile that I added to with the pictures.

Outside the sunset, we sat beside the dead old man one last time. He was just too tired of fighting, we all were. And knowing he had fought his last battle, he returned to his mountain cabin, to watch the sun fall one last time behind the ancient mountains. We knew the time had come, as the men drove towards us in those military jeeps. Buck jumped up, and I followed behind him, preparing ourselves for the final act of rebellion.

Hurriedly, Buck slid his arms under the old man's powerful shoulders, as I grasped the worn leather of his dirty cowboy boots and walked towards the pile of history. Inside, we laid his body on the table; Buck struck the match. The golden oil lit softly, and filled the cabin with a glow like a scarlet sun setting in the mountain air. We walked out of his cabin, eyes filled with tears as the cabin burned with the smell of the campfire he built for me years before. The government officials watched in disbelief as Buck stood with his arm around my shoulder. The hot sun baking my neck, the snapping of the fire filling the air, and the feel of the golden smoke in my lungs and eyes as I watched the fire on the mountain.

— Christopher Harnish '94