

Indian Summer

I climbed over the side of the boat, winded, cold, but with a smile on my face. I hauled the battered surfboard out of the freezing alpine reservoir and onto the boat. I threw my dripping lifejacket off and wrapped myself in a dry towel. The light wind toyed with my hair and I continued to grin. Ruedi Reservoir is where the nautically-inclined residents of the Roaring Fork Valley go to get their fix of the water, whether it be sailing, kayaking, lake fishing, or cliff jumping. This is where I found myself on the third of July – a hot Colorado’s summer day. Eight of us who all happened to have the day off from work headed up to the reservoir to beat the heat and mess around on a friend’s boat. We spent the morning and afternoon surfing, swimming, and zipping around the lake as fast as we felt comfortable. We ate packed lunches and hoped to better our tans. And the water – recent snowmelt from the surrounding mountains – proved more than refreshing. As the sun began to sink in the afternoon sky, we lounged around the boat, enjoying the soft sunshine and fresh air.

We pulled onto my friend’s street and carefully backed the boat into the gravel driveway. Nearing 5 PM, our stomachs growled. Some friends went home while we wrung out towels and dried wet hair. As we walked into the house, eager to give our already-sunburnt skin a break from the UV, someone spoke up. “Yo, guys, you see that? That smoke?”

I looked towards the direction he pointed and saw a small plume of smoke just a few miles west of us. “Isn’t there a fire ban?” someone asked. I said there was. We heard sirens in the distance. And the black plume continued to rise higher and higher. Despite being unordinary, we figured it unimportant and went inside.

It had been a bad winter. 2018 snow totals were underwhelming, winter started late, and spring had come early. The ski industry suffered; tourists didn't want to visit Aspen since the slopes had such little coverage. Owners of restaurants and bars grumbled about a lack of patrons. Ski patrol had difficulty opening many runs on the mountains. And a low snow year meant poor runoff into the rivers. The newspapers claimed it was one of the worst years for runoff in recorded history. Many creeks and streams ran dry and the major rivers were hardly more than a trickle once the summer months arrived. The rain didn't help – or the lack thereof. Day after day, for weeks, the sky bore a bright blue and the sun shone with great intensity, but still no rain. It felt nice at first. People everywhere basked in the sun, warming their bones from the previous winter, but the rain never came. The sun beat down on the valley with unrelenting heat; all moisture evaporated into the thin mountain air.

The fire began at the gun range. A young couple had decided to go shooting on the afternoon of July 3rd. They used tracer rounds which help the person firing the gun to see where the bullet went. Some have called them “fire bullets” because they light up and glow after being fired. One of those tracer rounds must've landed in some dry grass, sparking a small brush fire - and it grew quickly. The afternoon winds stoked the flames into a blaze that quickly got out of control. As we drove to grab some food after our day on the water, we passed the fire. “Holy shit” I thought, realizing how quick the flames seemed to lurch up the hillside. Not only that, but they were heading directly toward my friend Jacques' house. We continued driving to one of our favorite places to eat. A small pizza place named simply “New York Pizza.” As we ate our slices and sandwiches, Jacques walked in. “Hey, aren't you supposed to be evacuating right now?” I asked jokingly. He laughed and brushed it off. We sat around talking for a while, laughing and

joking with each other while enjoying our food. After twenty minutes of this, Jacques got a phone call. He answered and listened, saying almost nothing. He said “okay,” and then hung up. He suddenly stood up and said, “I think I’m being evacuated, I gotta go,” and left. He wasn’t laughing anymore. Neither was I.

Later that night, I drove to my friend’s house. I got on Highway 82 and headed up-valley. Cars lined the highway and people stood atop their vehicles taking pictures of the fire roaring in the hills above. I felt in awe of how much it spread, and how large it had become. I took a detour to the local high school to get a better view of the blaze. I parked my car and walked to a grassy area where people stood watching. As we watched the hillside erupt with fire, nobody said a word. Crickets rustled and chirped from the tall grass, while adults and children alike stood locked in a unanimous silence. Nobody dared speak. I heard sniffing from a few crying softly, which made me tear up as well. I could hardly fathom what I saw. We always knew this to be a possibility, living pressed against the wilderness, but seeing the flames unfurling with the wind made me feel helpless. The flames left a path of glowing embers sparkling like city lights in the distance. That sparkling had an inexplicable beauty to it, but I felt queasy, knowing that this fire had long-passed the threshold of control. The feeling welled up inside me, along with the tears, that something terrible was coming.

I awoke the next morning at home; the Fourth of July. I stumbled out of bed groggy and annoyed. I had to be at work in an hour. At this point, I was accustomed to working the Fourth, but I certainly never enjoyed it. As I looked out my window, I saw the hazy skies and was reminded of the fire. My friend Jacques’ house had thankfully survived the night. And after I took a quick shower and ate an even quicker breakfast, I left for work, but not before telling my parents to call me if there was a chance we’d have to evacuate. I drove the 20 miles up to Aspen

to start my shift at the ritzy country club where I worked. And being the Fourth of July, I was swamped all day. Halfway through the shift, I felt on edge and needed a break. I walked out back by the dumpsters where I found the entire kitchen staff standing on the loading dock, staring. I walked behind them to catch a glimpse of whatever they were looking at. It stood before us, a massive column of smoke, rising and unfurling itself into the sky. It twisted and squirmed in slow motion. Indeed, it was from the same fire as last night, only much, much bigger. I texted my dad to make sure everything was fine, and he said all was well, so I returned to my shift.

I finally escaped from work around 5 PM, eager to begin the Fourth of July festivities. I sped along the highway towards my friend's house. As I passed the town of Basalt, the flames came into full view. It could only be described as nightmarish. Flames consumed trees and exploded into the sky. Helicopters swarmed like angry bees, drawing water from the river and dumping it on the fire. The air pounded with the spinning of their blades like war drums. I decided to take the exit and drive into town. After parking my car nearby, I stood on a bridge above the river and watched the chaos unfold before me. The scene was deafening. Smoke continued to pour from the flaming hillside, where flames tickled power lines and consumed pine trees whole. Like the night before, people stood in stunned silence as the fire threatened to consume their town whole. I watched with them, again teary-eyed, as the helicopters continued their desperate attempts to put the blaze out. The flames were close to town. Really close, and getting closer.

I arrived at my friend's house to see everyone enjoying themselves, eating and laughing. As the sun dipped below the horizon, the sky turned a brilliant pinkish red as the sun became obscured in a thick haze. Knowing that this stunning sunset was owed to a wildfire was conflicting, but we couldn't help but appreciate the vibrant colors that lit up the entire sky. Not

knowing how to feel tore at my insides. When the sun disappeared completely, we began to settle down a bit, heading downstairs to watch a movie. Suddenly, from upstairs, our friend's dad called. "You guys have to come see this, out on the street." We marched upstairs and on to the street. The glow was spectacular. Apocalyptic. The fire had made its way down the valley and encroached on us once again. The fire hid just out of view, but we could see the pulsating violent glow it produced. Hundreds of cars drove down the usually-quiet street, and in their head lights I noticed small flecks in the air. It was ash. The debris from the fire rained from the sky like a soft winter snow. A random car pulled up next to us and told us that the adjacent trailer park just got an evacuation notice. That was less than a mile away. Just as the car pulled away, my phone rang. It was my dad. I answered. "Hey, I think it's time to come home."

I got in my car and sped up the hill to my neighborhood. I watched the ominous flicker of the fire in my rearview while I navigated hairpin turns. Before I arrived at my house, I saw my father and my sister standing on the street, watching. I pulled over and joined them. The rapturous sight ahead of me lay beyond comprehension. The flames had crested a nearby hill and moved towards us. The wind whipped in our faces, stoking the flames. My sister's eyes watered and my father talked with the neighbors in hushed voices. Once again, we heard sirens in the distance. A state patrol officer flew past us at top speed with sirens and lights blazing. Through their intercom they screamed, "everyone off the street, you're next to evacuate, go!" My sister and I, nearly frantic, went home to pack, while my dad opted to stay and watch for a little longer.

We quickly arrived at our house and started packing immediately. Charlie, our 15-year-old shepherd lay asleep on the carpet, snoozing soundly. Luckily, we had prepared for something like this, staging fire safes and photo albums in the hallway in case something like this ever

happened. We knew the risks of living in fire country, but we always felt it a distant and improbable possibility. But now, confronted with an actual wildfire bearing down on our neighborhood, I found it hard to stay calm. I hustled to my room and scanned the space. I breathed in the scent of my sheets for what I thought might be the last time. I felt frozen, unsure of what to pack. I packed some clothes, a few framed pictures, my laptop and valuables, but not much more. In that moment, my possessions felt completely insignificant. I felt nothing for the contents of my room when my entire house, the entire neighborhood, stood in the fire's path. Across the hall in her room, my sister scrambled, packing up everything in sight.

We packed all the necessities for our old dog, and all the other essentials, then waited. I walked out to the front porch and called my mom. She had been catering and couldn't get to our house – apparently, they had closed the roads. She answered the phone, frantic. She described driving on the highway down-valley next to a burnt-up hillside reminiscent of a volcano. But she was safe at a friend's house who she had been catering with earlier. I told her we'd already packed her things and that she didn't need to worry; the flames had started moving the other direction and we appeared to be in good shape. She replied that our neighborhood was under pre-evacuation notice – meaning the authorities could tell us to leave at any moment. As I told her, for what seemed like the hundredth time, not to worry, I realized that I couldn't see the flames anymore. The obscuring smoke from the flaming mountain again drifted towards us. The wind had shifted once more, pushing my hair out of my face and making me squint. I told my mom I had to go, as smoke flooded my eyes and nostrils, and that I would text her. Less than five minutes later, the skies opened up pouring ash onto our unsuspecting house. We choked in the thick smoke. I told my dad, who had come home 20 minutes earlier, that we should probably leave. He agreed, thinking it foolish to wait for an official evacuation notice. Though he agreed, I

could see the pain in his eyes. He had designed this house himself and built much of it with his own hands, and now the fire threatened all of that. We woke the sleeping Charlie and put him in my car. He hadn't been in a car in multiple years, but these were desperate times. As I put my car in reverse and pulled out of the drive way, and as the dog stumbled to regain his footing, my headlights shone on my house and the ash falling on top of it. My childhood home. Countless memories lived inside those walls, and now, as I pulled out onto the street in front for what I thought was the last time, my eyes flooded with tears. The unthinkable was upon us, and we could do nothing. We solemnly joined the line of cars on the street – others evacuating the neighborhood.

We rendezvoused with my mom at her friend's house and did our best to settle in. Charlie eventually went back to sleep, as did we, hopeful that our beloved home would survive the night. And it did. It survived the night, but three other houses weren't so lucky. The flames encroached as far as they could, but the bold actions of firefighters and civilians alike saved the neighborhood. We stayed evacuated for another couple of days before we were finally allowed to return home. When we did, we found a thin layer of ash and blackened Aspen leaves in the yard and on the driveway. Once again, I breathed in the familiar scent of my childhood room as the column of smoke continued to build out front. We stayed under pre-evacuation notice for another 21 days.

We got lucky. The devastation could've been far worse. Firefighters responded with incredible quickness and bravery which saved hundreds of homes. The Lake Christine Fire wasn't the worst fire in Colorado in 2018. All said and done, almost 13,000 acres burned, bringing three homes to rubble with it. The Spring Park Fire in Colorado burned over 100,000

acres, and that doesn't even hold a candle to the wildfires in California that same summer. They killed people. As of mid-December, the Camp Fire in Northern California has taken the lives of 86 unsuspecting people and has turned the entire town of Paradise to a smoldering rubble. The Carr fire torched over 200,000 acres and took the lives of six. Those fires torched hundreds of thousands of acres, destroyed hundreds of homes, and took human life with it. Soot and ash clouded the skies of many western states. Alerts were sent out citing hazardous air conditions. The apocalypse seemed realer than ever before. And we'd heard plenty about fires. They would dominate the news cycles nearly every summer with tales of loss, destruction, and tragedy. But we didn't pay attention. It wasn't until a fire came knocking – pounding – at our door that we realized the gravity of the situation – the power that nature can exert on the unsuspecting with hardly a moment's notice.