

The Watchers

by Jake Barnes

It was fire season. It hadn't rained for months. People stood outside their houses looking across the way to the yellow field and beyond that the yellow hills. Up at the top, a quarter mile south, billows of black smoke crawled up the faint blue of the sky. The hills were parched. Homeowners watched anxiously. The fire trucks crawling up the hill looked like toys. Residents below hoped against hope that the wind wouldn't change. If it did, we could be toast. Some of us would stay and fight with garden hoses; others would grab their cats and birdcages and run.

My wife and a neighbor lady are standing cheek to jowl. They are transfixed. The neighbor points to something up the hill, in the direction of the fire. My wife shades her eyes. The neighbor's husband and I stand side by side by the mailboxes. He fidgets. He wants to get back to mowing his lawn, but he knows his wife would have a fit. I feel a kinship with the younger man. I want to go inside and work on my story. It's half done. I hate that. When I'm writing, I don't like to be interrupted. I like to finish what I start at one sitting. It's hard to pick up the thread later on. My wife keeps looking around. She's keeping track of me. She's afraid I'll wander off. Leave it all up to them, the two women. Standing guard. Protecting our property.

