

Playground in the Fire

by Nick Antosca

People questioned my motives when I became a smokejumper again. They said I had a death wish, or that somehow by going into battle against the big Pacific Northwest forest fires, I was still trying to put out the flames of the burning car in which my sons Jake (age three), Billy (five), and Frank Jr. (seven) had died. But they were wrong. Although I lived with a hot hollow grief in my chest, I didn't have a death wish; and although I would have died to bring my sons back, I didn't need to lash out against implacable forces. It just happened that, alone and insomniac and thirty-eight years old, I realized I wanted to fight fires again, as I had when I was younger.

The season was almost over when I joined back up, but before it ended, I would jump into three fires.

The first, in late August, began with a lightning strike on the western slope of Whisperpine Mountain, which sits in the shadow of Mt. St. Helena. We suited up and took flight. Not one of the other men bumping around in the plane's hold was older than twenty-eight.

We jumped below the Whisperpine fire and began to establish a fireline. The summit was rocky and bare, so the fire would keep climbing and burn itself out, we hoped. Winds were light. Smokejumping is not a crew-based tactic like regular firefighting; because of terrain and limited manpower, jumpers often perform tasks solo. I headed up the mountain alone to gauge the fire's speed and distance.

Tragedy had dulled my ability to feel fear. From the fire's edge, I watched the live pines burn slowly. Without much dry undergrowth to ignite, this fire would be easy to control. Then I was startled to see something moving around in the flames, unmistakably alive.

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A little boy.

He was six or seven, brown-haired and fair, wearing blue jeans and a blue t-shirt and white sneakers. He danced back and forth playing some fanciful game, leaping from log to log, untouched by the flames. At home in the fire.

Abruptly he froze. Cinders gusted hotly upward, swirled around him. He turned and, with a calm expression, waved hello. I waved back, and his face lit up—as if he were surprised I could see him. Then, remembering something, he scrunched his brow in thought. Suddenly, he pointed to the west, up the mountain diagonally. Then turned and sprinted uphill, chasing the heart of the fire.

Bewildered, I climbed higher and moved west around the edge of the blaze, where I found what the boy must have been pointing toward—a dry stream bed filled with dead, potentially incendiary undergrowth and timber right in the path of the expanding blaze. I radioed the others, and we scrambled to set up a fireline in time.

The line held. The fire never reached the stream bed. Eventually it burned itself out.

I thought afterward about the boy in the fire. Couldn't stop thinking about him, in fact. He'd been so carefree, playing his game in the swirling heat. A ghost, or a hallucination.

* * *

At the beginning of September, we jumped into a fire that was eating its way across Castle Valley. The wind was coming into the valley from the west, driving the flames toward the base of Mt. Allison. You can't let a fire climb if there's fuel above it.

About an hour after we jumped, I saw the boy again. A jumper

named Javez was with me. We were moving around the fire to trap it from the north when I glimpsed human movement in the flames and stopped. It was him, frolicking among the crackling trees—and there were others with him! A boy in overalls, a girl with a bow in her hair. They were swinging sticks at each other like swords as burning branches fell around them. It was as if in the heart of the fire, a cool, peaceful world existed.

Then the brown-haired boy turned and saw me again. The others looked, too. They waved. The kind of wave people give at the beach, a why aren't you coming in the water? wave. But, as I said, I didn't have a death wish.

"Hey!" I roared. "Hey, come here!" Beckoning.

Javez looked where I was looking. He didn't seem to see anything. "Who's there?" he yelled, alarmed. "Hendricks follow us?" Hendricks was the youngest.

The child shrugged apologetically. And I understood: Just like I couldn't enter the fire to meet them, they couldn't step outside of it.

"I was wrong," I told Javez. "Keep moving."

We fought the Castle Valley fire for three days. Again and again I saw children—dashing lighthearted among the black hulks of burning trees, lost in their games. Sometimes I thought maybe I was hallucinating, my senses broiled. But I saw their faces as they played, and I heard their voices, jangly and musical. None of them looked like my sons.

In the weeks after Castle Valley, their images stayed with me. Playing and laughing among hot winds, inside storms of ash and cinder. It felt tragic to me—I sensed they were trapped in the fire, forced to follow it. Did they ever age? Could they ever get free?

When one fire died out, did they cease to exist, then return to life in a new one?

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The Harrow Gulch fire started small. Like Whisperpine, it had begun with lightning. We landed on the north side of the Gulch and moved down through sparse woods and tall dry grass toward the skinny creek at the bottom. The fire was on the south side; this way we could fight it from below, trap it between the river and the dry bluffs above.

But something happened just after we started up the south side. The wind turned. The blaze came back down at us. We turned back toward the river, moving fast because if the flames jumped the creek, the fire would be chasing us uphill on the north side. We could feel a ferocious heat behind us as we crossed the creek and started up the north side. I began to fall a few steps behind. I looked back and saw the fire jump the creek. It started rolling up the north side like a lazy tide. The trees and high grass were crisp and with grim clarity I foresaw a blow-up—the moment when wind and heat and topography come together to stoke a fire so hot it ignites the oxygen and becomes a fast, fatal tornado of heat. You can't outrun a blow-up.

There was only one tactic left—the one every jumper is afraid he'll have to turn to one day. I screamed at the others to come back. They kept going—I watched Javez disappear into the trees. They weren't going to beat the fire to the top. I took out the cigarette lighter I carried and I set the dry grass all around my boots on fire. A circle of fire. I stepped out of it and watched the grass burn up fast and hot. The flames spread outward from the circle but I stepped back inside it and lay face-down in the ashes. Downhill, I heard a sudden satanic roar, like a blast furnace turning on: It was the blow-up, happening now.

The fire whooshed uphill. I heard it coming—then I saw a churning wall of heat and the treetops curled. The ravenous front-line flames rolled overhead in a gale of burning wind, ate the trees, incinerated the grass.

Except for where I lay, in the ashes of my fire.

Like a breaking wave, a blow-up rolls in and chews everything up and then it's gone. I lifted my head. The forest around me was crackling, burning—I was in the fire—but the inferno of the blow-up had passed me by. Close to the earth, I could breathe.

Little crunching footsteps approached me. There he was—the brown-haired boy. Coming up the hill, making an exultant chugga-chugga-chugga noise like a train. He saw me and stopped. I blinked sweat out of my eyes. He smiled at me—a joyful smile, free of worry, free of history. Then a freckled boy came trotting up the hill behind him, playfully kicking the ashes, and stood beside him. A laughing little girl in a yellow sundress was next. She seemed to be chasing a butterfly, although there was nothing in the air but black ash. She stood with the two boys.

I looked at them. “Who are you?” I rasped. They looked at me strangely. “Can't you get free?” I said. They cocked their heads as if they didn't understand the question. Their smiles went away.

“Are you trapped in the fire?” I said.

The freckled boy stared at me. “We're not trapped anywhere,” he said.

The girl in the yellow dress said, “We make the fire. We keep the fire. We tell the fire where to go.”

And the brown-haired boy said solemnly, “We love the fire.”

Then they dashed upward, following it, leaving me there half-buried in the ashes.

