

**THE BURNING OF NELLIE'S MOUNTAIN\***

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**by Susan C. Bridges  
Monroe, North Carolina**

The plane caught the sparkling glance of the sun as it climbed out, engine droning, into the blue spring sky over the gully-seamed mountain ridge. Nellie Handy had seen it before, nearly every day since sometime the second week in February, making slow circles back and forth, up and down the valley nestled deep in the Blue Ridge. Like a cat's cradle between the gnarled hands of the uplifted ranges it wove, threading through the clouds at each summit and gliding down again, over the carpet of spreading pine towards the newly-sown fields far below.

A tiny bee-like thing it was, Nellie thought bemusedly, leaning over to prop up the next length of hardwood before bringing the head of her axe down with a satisfying crack, splitting the seasoned and fragrant log cleanly along the grain. It fell to the earth, and she used the toe of her worn leather boot to nudge it to one side before setting up another in its place. Beads of sweat gathered at the edge of the scrap of homespun cloth she used to tie the sparse grey hair away from her sun-roughened visage. The tendrils around her temples always came loose when she worked, had since she was a girl, and Nellie had learned if she wasn't to go crazy raking it out of her eyes every few seconds, a kerchief was in order.

There was a time when Nellie would have rolled her pale blue eyes in sharp disdain if she had come upon a woman on the road dressed as she, herself, was today. As it was, vanity had gone the way of the wind as she had struggled here on this patch of cleared forest land, living hand to mouth most months. The money she made wouldn't afford her the good cloth she liked; her cotton housedresses were worn and faded, but her stockings were of wool and she had her own hand-knitted sweaters or Henry's old hunting jacket to wear on cold days. Once tall, red-haired, and willowy, Nellie Handy had retained a hardy spirit, but her shoulders were rounder, her arms more sinewy, less plump; her cheeks had deep hollows in them and the thin skin around her eyes was quite wrinkled.

Overhead, the single engine Cessna whirled in a steady descent as it turned again toward the valley, which was obscured from the old woman's sight by the trees. Out from the depths of a sunstreaked puff of white soared the plane, its wings vibrating slightly in the turbulence off the mountain's summit. Nellie threw back her head with an arm shading her eyes as it buzzed by, low enough that she could almost make out the tiny dot of the pilot's head through the windshield before the blinding sun speared her retinas. Muttering soundlessly, she returned to her task. The plane disappeared, leaving only the sound of the wind whispering through the tall pines surrounding her bare yard.

It was of a world not her own, that plane. It came from the cluster of civilization seventy miles or so to the east, away from the mountains; the land was quite flat there. Nellie knew nothing about it, but every day it had been there, sometimes twice, and always flying the same pattern, the same direction; from the south it came, and always disappeared over the trees to the north. She wondered about it, a reminder of the world that surrounded her here on this lonely mountaintop, a world that she had never seen, and never would. She had heard only vague snatches of things about the towns in the valley, and beyond. She had listened, growing more and more nervous as she heard about the speeding cars, the tall buildings that crowded out the sky, and the dirty brown river, choked with weeds and silt and surrounded on both sides by grey factories that hummed and pounded, drawing in water and cotton and people, spewing out trucks loaded with textiles bound for cities far away. All smells and noise and darkness, she thought, taking the life out of a person and giving precious little opportunity for winning it back. Nellie knew she would stifle in a place like that.

She glanced at the pile of wood, which had grown to a proper size, and heaved the axe into a nearby stump. Gathering up an armful of short logs, she stumbled across the yard to the great iron washpot hanging over a guttering fire. She fed the fire, carefully kicking the logs closer together as she held her skirts out of reach of the flames. Climbing up on a fat, overturned log, she checked the boiling linens, stirring the chortling water with a wide paddle. The acrid smell of strong brown soap mixed with the smoke of the fire below stung her nostrils, and she blinked her eyes distractedly, her face muscles twitching like a squirrel's. She made a soft clucking sound in her throat, and satisfied, climbed down from the log.

The sun shone warmly down upon her back as she made her way to the fence, dragging one four-foot length of wood under her arm from beside the pile she had just replenished. Taking hold of a weathered beam which had fallen to one side during the winter just passed, she removed the rotten log and set to work replacing it with the new one. Her hard fingers grasped the splintery surface of the wood unmindful of its rough texture. Soon she had the fence repaired, and stood back a moment to survey the structure. The logs wove back and forth neatly in a giant zigzag all the way to the woods behind the house, interlaced on top of one another in the old mountain fashion which needed no nails to hold it together. Granted, it needed repairing every spring, Nellie thought ruefully, but work gave her purpose. She needed to do it as much as it needed to be done.

She eyed the worn logs a moment more, and a thin smile curled its way across her cracked lips. Henry, rest his soul, couldn't have done a better job, she thought with a sudden flash of insight. Who needed a man around anyway? Turning, she shuffled off in the direction of her cabin, running her eyes along the edge of the porch where the first March flowers had poked their heads up through the leaf-littered yard, even before the grass had begun to grow. They waved their still-closed buds at her as she moved past them, graceful as swans on their tall stems, and she calculated that she should see bright yellow blooms within the week. She stepped up to the porch as the breeze brushed her cheeks, holding the promise of something warmer in its playful caress.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the fox, a dull streak of muddy red just the other side of the woodpile. From out of the dry brush under the trees he ran, and then she saw the small rabbit who skittered before him, just out of reach of his blackened forelegs and panting snout. The dun-colored quarry hurtled onward, with white-rimmed eyes and erratically-charging feet a blur. Nellie zoomed into the house, grabbed the shotgun from its pegs, and took careful aim just behind the rabbit's left shoulder. Then she stopped, and lowered the rifle open-mouthed, for the rabbit suddenly did a funny thing.

Nellie's wrinkled cheeks folded into a grin, for she could see she wouldn't have to waste a shot on cheating the fox out of his rabbit dinner today. Chuckling delightedly, she could almost taste the succulent meat of the hare as she watched him run straight into the fire under the great iron pot in the yard, where the laundry was boiling merrily. But before she had a chance to fetch a hoe to pull him out with, he charged straight out again, tumbling and tripping over the rocks which circled the flames.

Like a cannonball dripping sparks and hot yellow flame he rolled, and Nellie stood transfixed as he drew the fire from under the pot right after him. The dry brown grass caught and burned like tinder, and the rabbit was quickly consumed as her yard fed the widening pool. Dropping the shotgun, Nellie hitched her stained and tattered skirt around her thighs, catching an end of twine which hung from her waist and knotting the fabric up with it. She didn't stop to think, her mind strained toward the well at the end of the yard, pulling her body with it as she ran with outstretched arms toward the trough.

She reached it, hardly winded, and noted with a thankful prayer that it was full. She drove the wooden bucket into the water with a force made to part the Red Sea itself, and headed back across the yard.

As she reached the spreading flames and tossed the water from the bucket, she saw the futility of running back and forth with water from the well, and she thought to try beating them out with the boiling laundry. Nellie sprang up onto the log with a vigor she hadn't thought she had. Drawing the paddle through the sheets, she cursed violently when the heat seared her palms as they came in contact with the wet material. Ignoring the pain as best she could, she flung the laundry on the ground below, and stumbled down after it, waving her steaming hands in the brisk wind.

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Kurt Lowe eased in the yoke and felt the plane pitch down to begin the descent toward the valley. Before him, the landscape slipped under the nose of the slowly moving aircraft, changing from the deep blue-green of mountain pine forest to plowed fields to still winter-brown lawns closer to the towns. His sharp grey eyes held the images brief seconds before moving on to the next sector, always watchful, ever mindful of the direction of the wind and the young vegetation on the land below. He watched farmers turning under the red clay soil with ancient tractors, long-bed trucks and tiny automobiles traversing the highways and roads like so many toys, each with his own destination and purpose, unaware that from above, Kurt watched diligently. Were it not for the newness of flying, the job of fire patrol pilot could have become rather dull for the young man of eighteen. When they spotted a brush fire, his partner Scotty would radio it in, and they would circle above the area until the rangers and firefighters came. Then they would move on, continuing the hundred-fifty mile sweep of this portion of southwest Virginia. They had found two minor blazes already that day, and Kurt was filled with purpose as his eyes strained toward the ground, missing nothing, having carefully memorized the route and familiar with every barn and tobacco field over which he flew.

"What time you got?" Scotty murmured distractedly, as alert as the young man next to him for signs of smoke.

"About half past eleven," came the reply, "We oughta go in soon to refuel and get some lunch."

Scotty, a veteran of many springs of fire-watching, settled his long frame more comfortably into the seat and nodded his grizzled head in silent assent. Reaching into his left shirt pocket, he withdrew a semi-crushed packet of cigarettes and lit one.

Kurt promptly opened the small window at his elbow. "Won't be able to see any smoke down there for all you're making up here," the boy grumbled half-jokingly, blinking his eyes as pungent blue wreaths drifted past.

The old ranger snorted indifferently. "Fat lot of good it'll do up in these mountains anyway," he muttered after awhile, gazing down at a deserted logging road. "By the time we get somebody up here, half the forest usually goes up. Trails get blocked in the spring by swollen streams and fallen trees, and it takes too damn much time to clear the way sometimes. It's like shuttin' the barn door after the horse gets away. . ."

Sometimes the old ranger's stony pessimism got under Kurt's skin. He wondered if the ranger truly felt as he said, and sighed, thinking how good it was to be young and not jaded.

They flew on in silence for a time. As they cleared the top of another ridge, Scotty suddenly lifted

his head and stared out the windshield at something in the distance.

Kurt glanced over at his partner. "What do you see?" he finally asked after a moment. Scotty squinted his eyes and continued to stare, frowning. Kurt eyed his instruments, shaking his close-cropped blonde head. Like most old-timers, the ranger never said anything unnecessary. Waiting, trying not to appear impatient, Kurt looked once over the nose of the spotter plane, but couldn't make out anything unusual.

"Ah..." Scotty leaned back in his seat, a skeptical frown between his bushy brows. "It's almost too small to bother with. Probably one of those old mountain farmers lit up his rubbish pile as soon as he saw us go by. As long as he sticks close and doesn't go in to take a nap while it's burning, it'll probably be OK. Let's go in and to heck with it."

Kurt nodded, deferring to the more seasoned ranger's experience. He guided the plane expertly to the south in the direction of Danville Municipal Airport. But as they neared the sector where the tiny wisp of smoke rose directly to the west of the aircraft, he was impelled to swivel his head once more in that direction. Something itched; for some reason leaving that small stream of smoke behind was bothering him. He met Scotty's eyes then, and the question formed in his grey eyes. Something about that fire... he telepathed, unwilling to put words to his fears lest the old forest ranger think he was being squirrely.

Scotty grunted noncommittally. "Why don't you ease on back over that way?" he said suddenly, gesturing out the window with his thumb toward the ridge where the smoke rose, a little darker now, and perhaps thicker. "Just remembered --ain't no farmer up on that ridge. Just a little clearing, where that old woman was with the big kettle in her yard. Seems like she had a little fire going under that kettle."

Kurt gasped and nearly stomped the rudder in alarm. The plane responded with a slight jolt. Embarrassed at his lack of coordination, he tried to control the tremor in his voice and asked, "Shouldn't we try to alert the ranger station?"

"Now, don't go off half-cocked, boy," Scotty answered, the mike already in his palm. "I'll call Jacobs and tell him what we're doing. He'll be ready to send somebody up there if need be." Scotty quickly keyed the instrument and relayed the coordinates in a clipped tone, his craggy face belying no emotion as he spoke. "Calm down, son," he reprimanded when he had finished. "These farmers ain't going to appreciate it a'tall if you was to put this bird smack in the middle of one of their cow pastures 'cause you wasn't payin' attention to your job."

This observation had the intended effect, for Kurt forcefully calmed his trembling fingers by breathing out and in, once... twice, emptying his mind of the weakness of concern and fear. There were no more mistakes. They flew quite smoothly toward the western ridge. Scotty grinned once, surreptitiously, at the young pilot's intense concentration, his brow furrowed, his grey eyes rhythmically scanning instruments and his hands calm, sure as they rested on the yoke. That boy is the image of what a young pilot ought to be, thought the old timer. Like somebody fed him the knowledge of how to fly all at once, through a vein. It sometimes made Scotty feel good just to realize how well Kurt knew what he was doing.

The minutes ticked by, and as they neared the ridge where the smoke rose steadily, Kurt dropped the nose and the plane picked up speed for the initial run directly over the source of the smoke. At the low altitude, the thick forest impeded their view, but as soon as they broke clear of the trees Scotty looked down.

*"Jesus Christ!"*

Kurt was kept busy with the plane's instruments as he brought the nose of the Cessna back up and climbed out above the ridge, but he caught the burst of anger and disgust in his partner's voice. Scotty was already on the radio, telling Jacobs to get the fire and rescue team up the mountain pronto, and yet still Kurt was not prepared for the sight below him when he doubled back to circle the woman's yard.

From the machine high above, the young pilot bent his golden head to look down and the air, as if his eyes were lightning-quick release mechanisms, left his lungs in a sucking gasp. Even as they watched, the flames burning the winter-dry grass below leapt higher, circling the spot where the woman stood beating and flailing at the fire that threatened every moment to snatch at her. Other areas nearer the cabin were blackened and smoking, but it was plain to see the mountain woman fought a losing battle. Already she was cut off and held nothing between herself and death but a ragged and scorched piece of damp cloth.

Kurt searched the area frantically for some clearing or stretch of road on which to land the plane and run to her aid. There was nothing. The forest was too thick, the twisted road up the mountain too rutted and narrow, the only clearing was the woman's tiny burning yard. Within minutes the cabin caught fire, and the flames leapt into the trees. Kurt circled, sighting down one wing, but powerless to do anything to stop the destruction. Horrified and breathless, he looked once at the old ranger. Scotty's face was a frozen fixture in granite, his eyes moist, though from the smoke that blew tauntingly in the window or something else Kurt could not discern.

A low, panicky moan curled out of Kurt's throat. He shot his partner a hopeless yet still disbelieving stare as the old ranger voiced the answer to the youth's unspoken question, the inevitable, horrible truth that hung heavily in the air above the burning mountain.

"Nothin'. Ain't a damn thing we can do but watch."

Kurt's will would not accept that; he screamed inwardly for a way to get to the old woman. And then, as they began the third circle around the burning yard, he saw her fall, and choking sobs rose in his throat even as he struggled to guide the plane steadily out of the fire's updraft. How he managed to keep one corner of his mind on flying he couldn't have said. In his young heart he, too, was fighting fire on the ground below, although he was sure that somehow, he would win. His mind struggled to assimilate his duties with the hopelessness of the situation, and after a time he found that he could not. There was nothing he could do but fly the aircraft, forget the old woman, fly the plane, and it hurt. It hurt to be human. It hurt to think. He could not think and fly the plane, and so Kurt became a machine. He felt the hurt drain out of him slowly, piercing through his eyes and his fingertips as they rested stiffly on the yoke. His fingers curled, and he wiped at his cheeks and chin, at the cool wetness he found there. For a moment he felt sleek, young, and in control again... doing his job. He glanced at Scotty, and felt a twinge of relief as he found the ranger's calm, but red-rimmed blue eyes. There would be time for talk later, when they were back on the ground.

For the next twenty minutes there was no sound inside the cockpit save the droning of the small plane's engine, and from below them, the dull, roaring, hot breath of conflagration. They waited for the rangers and fire crew to gain the area, and then they turned slowly, expertly back toward Danville, the plane once more catching the glint of sunlight on the windshield. No one noticed. Below them, the task began of halting the blaze on the ridge, where the tiny leaves were too new and the young grass too sparse to be anything but nourishment to an early spring spark.