

FIRE ON THE MOUNTAIN

By Sabrina Wagganer

“Everything in the universe has an opposite: hot — cold, good — bad, inside — outside. You have a right and left side to your body, a front and back. Every up has a down, and every down has an up.”

I looked at the mountains surrounding Estes Park as I contemplated Bob Proctor’s words. We’d arrived just in time today to see the cloud of smoke erupt from Cameron Mountain and blow south, billowing up into a dirty thundercloud that seemed to hover over the Stanley Hotel. How anyone could think that raking the forest floor would prevent these disasters was beyond me.

“The Stanley,” is also known as Overlook Hotel in *The Shining*. Where the hotel is usually a collection of white, red roofed buildings that scream old elegance, today they were ominous.

I took another sip of my whisky. Elkin’s Distillery Company called it a pumpkin whisky. It had strong flavors of cinnamon and clove; started smooth and finished with the bite of a homemade moonshine that hasn’t been given time to mellow.

Angie sat beside me, her head on the picnic table, using her arms for pillows. Maree, Angie’s best friend, sat across from us and gave me a helpless look.

I lightly rubbed Angie’s back. “How are you feeling, baby?”

“My head hurts so bad.” She took another sip of Sprite.

“I know you want to see the sun set in the park, but the mountains may be too high to see it good up close.” I’ve been to the Smokies and lived in the St. Francis

Mountains of Missouri. When you're up close, there's fewer colors and more shadows. "This won't be the last trip up, and Maree is always welcome to come with us."

She wasn't having it. All she's talked about for two weeks is seeing the sun set in Rocky Mountain National Park (RMNP) and hoping that the elk would be down from the mountains to watch it with us.

This was our third trip to the area. We love Colorado, but I was beginning to see a pattern in her.

I followed my shot of whisky with a Sprite as we sat, killing time as we waited for the sun to get lower in the sky.

SATURDAY MORNING

We entered the park on a reservation we'd placed two weeks ago. It was abnormally hot for September at 97 degrees. A small herd of elk had been resting in the shade near the park's entrance, the bull laid off to the side, chewing cud and watching for predators as his harem lounged.

It was Maree's first time to Colorado, so we'd taken her to a portion of the Rockies called Moraine Park, an iconic valley that sits between the Cub Lake Trail and Bear Lake Road where you can see Stones Peak off in the distance.

My first time here was late in October. The elk were in the valley by the dozens and spectators had no fear of the giants. We had enough sense not to get too close, but we traipsed through the field and towards the stream near where they were grazing to get a better look. I'd noticed that the field was getting marshy, so I'd taken off running to

get through it faster and only succeeded at ruining my suede boots and slinging the stinky mud up the back of my pants and sweater.

This trip, there were tourists in the stream instead of elk. I must admit, I was jealous of them playing in the water, but I didn't want to risk a run-in with a snake to get to where they were.

As we were talking to Maree about the features of the park, a shuttle bus came up the road. I hadn't yet been to Bear Lake, and Angie said it was a must-see, so we hopped aboard the empty shuttle as it finished its route and made its way up to the Bierstadt Lake Trailhead. Angie made small talk with the shuttle driver, who had encased her cockpit in opaque plastic to keep the cool air in and the coronavirus out. I walked around the shuttle, dropping windows, and looking for the area with the most breeze.

The shuttle was a hotbox, and I'm not a good-sweating person, so I stood with my head by a window.

The driver was a woman of retirement age. Her small, forest green army pack matched her shorts and her brown hiking boots were a peculiar choice for driving but matched the fashion trend of the park's visitors.

"Snow's a-comin' Monday! I hope you girls head home before then."

I heard Angie tell her that we were heading home Monday morning as I sloshed my water over my forehead, then ask if the driver thought the snow would help put out the fires in the area.

"Oh, yeah. The snow will be good for it...should snuff it right out."

Later I would realize this wasn't logical, but for now all I could focus on was the damn heat. I splashed my face again and dripped some of the warm water down the back of my neck.

“Are you okay?” Angie asked.

No. I’m freakin’ hot.

Angie has told me for years that Bear Lake is one of her favorite places to see up here, but every time we’ve come there’s been a line of traffic to get up there, so we’ve just skipped it. When you’re on a shuttle, you get to bypass all that.

We finally turned into the parking lot of the “Park and Ride,” where two white charter busses were loading. “That’s the one you want. Better hurry.” Then she yelled to the other driver, “I’ve got three more for ya!”

She thought he was leaving, but we were the first on. The seats in the back of the bus sat a little higher than the rest so we went back there, and I opened more windows. They reminded me of the food slots you see in prison cell doors they were so tiny. *Would it kill them to cool these things? It can’t be safe for passengers.* I took a drink of my lukewarm water and rubbed more across my forehead and hairline as I sat down.

More people starting filing onto the bus and with each person that entered, my anxiety rose a notch more. I’m a bit of a claustrophobe, but my anxiety over small spaces with lots of people has been practically non-existent since Angie and I started dating four years ago. Today, the heat and the thought of these people being infected with COVID-19 brought my claustrophobia out of hibernation, opening its eye and peeking out at all the people.

Everyone on our bus could be a model for REI with their boots, hiking sticks, and backpacks. One couple had a fancy backpack for their baby, who was a little fussy from the heat. They were going to have a long day.

Meanwhile, the three of us sat in the back of the bus, out of shape poster children for a Nike commercial. “Just do it.” Hop on that bus, go up the mountain, withstand the heat, and have an adventure.

The adventure started with a winding ride up the mountain. The bus drivers shift must have been near its end because he sped up the mountain and around switchbacks. One false move would either send us or another vehicle pummeling over the edge.

Either the air up here was cooler, or the air flow was better, but my dominant thoughts were troubled by lack of emergency services at the top if I survived this ride. *What if I hyperventilate because I can't breathe? What if my anxiety kicks into high gear? What if I pass out? What if Angie falls? Or hurts herself? Or, or, or....*

Jesus, Sabrina. Get ahold of yourself. Angie laid her hand on my thigh. She can always tell when my brain is getting the best of me. I took a deep breath through my mask and closed my eyes for a moment.

Despite my anxiety, when I opened my eyes I noticed several large piles of wood stacked in a cone shape on the way up the mountain side. As we pulled into the unloading area, there was another pile. This one had a sign nearby that talked about an invasive beetle species that destroy pine and spruce trees. Typically, cold temperatures and hard winters will kill many of the bark beetles larvae, but warmer temperatures over the last 10 years have caused a rise in beetle numbers. Trees already weak from low precipitation cannot survive the beetles. The forestry is doing what they can to prevent the spread of the pests, and to prevent the diseased trees from being kindling for a wildfire, but because of the extreme dry temperatures of the warmer months they can't do prescribed burns until winter when controlled burns are less likely to get out of hand.

We exited the bus and walked up the path. I was still a little dizzy from the trip up, but soon forgot my anxiety as we got our first look at the lake.

The water was clear, and so still that it could be glass. The surrounding spruce trees and Hallett Peak reflected on its surface. Boulders of various sizes dotted the edge of the lake and there were several places along the 1-mile loop to stop and take photos. Steller's Jay and ground squirrels darted over the paths and trees, water flowed down a fall in the distance, and tourists took selfies at every bend.

I found a path to the edge of the lake. The water wasn't dirty, or mossy, and the rocks weren't covered in algae like they are at home. I dipped my hand in and was surprised to find that the water was cold. I splashed my face, neck, and arms before posing on a nearby bolder like a "mermaid," for Angie to get a photo. She laughed and knew that I was feeling better.

The next path to the lake had a bench at the end that a middle-aged couple occupied. Angie snapped a photo of them and admired them for a moment longer before she approached them to see if they would like to exchange phone numbers for her to send it to them. They were ecstatic to receive the candid image.

Another couple, who'd been walking behind us, approached a boulder surrounded by the lake water. He sported a camera and she, a short skirt. As we watched her jump from rock to rock and climb up the boulder, we realized she wasn't wearing anything under her skirt. Embarrassed to have noticed, I walked down the path a bit further. Angie and Maree stayed behind to watch as the woman mimicked Sharon Stone from *Basic Instinct*, flashing her photographer as she lewdly crossed her legs.

We came to a stream, no more than a foot wide, trickling down the crevices of the mountain and into the lake. My previous splash had already evaporated, so I stopped

and dipped my hand into it, repeating the ritual. The mountain tops we could see didn't have any snow on them, but the stream was ice-cold, colder than the lake.

As we finished our hike, we saw people perched in an alcove up the bluff from the path, and the lewd couple caught up with us enough that we saw part two of her tease: climbing the bluff to sit on a ledge, her male companion snapping photos her entire way up.

“Wow.” Maree let that one word drag out since she was speechless.

Angie said, “You know they're going back to their hotel for a full night of sex.”

I was happily preoccupied with my GoPro, watching a ground squirrel cautiously and curiously approach it before darting between Maree's feet as it ran away.

Bear Lake is gorgeous. I can understand why it's one of Angie's favorite places to visit. The bus trek down the mountain was better than the ascent. We claimed the back of the bus again and I set my GoPro to record out the back window. The bus again stopped at trailheads along the way: Glacier Gorge, Brierstadt Lake, and Glacier Basin. We hopped back on a shuttle, this one cooler than the last, where Angie made small talk with the driver again.

“We're supposed to have the biggest drop in temperatures on record between now and Monday. Where are you ladies from? Are you heading home tomorrow?” She answered his question and told him we were spending tomorrow as our last full day before leaving Monday morning. Since she lived in Boulder for a few years after graduating college, she knew how quickly the snow could create problems traveling. She asked his opinion about the fate of the fires with the coming weather.

“The fire will melt the snow and evaporate the rain before it has a chance to help kill it.”

I looked out the window as we approached the foot of the mountain and saw the cloud of smoke moving over the park from behind The Stanley as Angie convinced the driver to save us some steps and drop us off at our car.

ELKIN'S DISTILLERY

I stood up, balancing myself as the pea gravel rolled under my feet. We drove back down into the valley and around Estes Lake to re-enter the park.

Ten cars were parked along the road watching a huge herd of elk graze as the sun set. There were three or four bulls in this herd, each placing themselves between their cows and potential threats. Two park guards stood with the rest of us, protecting the herd as much as they protected the people who might forget that these beautiful 700-pound creatures could gore them to death. Their bugle is majestic to witness, but it should be remembered that it's typically a bull's way of letting you know they're there and to keep your distance.

Deeper into the park a mule deer and her two fawns cross the road.

It's quickly growing dark as the sun sets behind the mountains, casting their shadows on the valley. Angie's headache is raging, and nausea has set in. She has me pull over for a few minutes. She dry heaves. We get back into the car and start making our way back to Estes Park. The smoke from the Cameron Mountain wildfire has spread and created enormous thunderclouds. We wonder what a thundercloud like that is capable of as we admire the colors painted in the sky as the sun finishes setting.

I pulled into a gas station for fuel and water. Angie was feeling like she could be sick again.

The road in and out of Estes Park winds through the mountains. Drivers risk overheating their breaks if they hold them too long as they come down the steep inclines and around the sharp curves. Maree kept me talking about my hometown as I manned the wheel for my first after-dark driving experience down the mountains.

Angie laid in the back seat, quiet, after I'd convinced her to nurse a water to rehydrate. Halfway down, she reanimated and begged me to pull over. There was a line of cars behind me and pull-offs were limited. When I finally found a driveway, she jumped from the car just in time for her gyro, or what was left of it in her stomach, to make its appearance. Nightfall brought the cold air with it, and my shorts and sleeveless shirt wasn't forgiving. I shivered, but not from the cold. I was worried, but hopeful that making it to a lower altitude would relieve Angie's mountain sickness.

The farther we got from Estes Park, the better she seemed to get. I dropped her and Maree off at our hotel in Broomfield and went to Hops n Drops to get takeout. We'd been to the local bar and grill the night before. They had an extensive menu, good food, and we all had something else we wanted to try. Even if they weren't hungry when I'd dropped them off, it had been nearly nine hours since lunch, so we needed to eat something.

ASH SUNDAY

A good night's sleep helped all of us. Angie and Maree both woke up smiling and went to breakfast for some girl time while I stayed at the hotel. It was Labor Day weekend, but we still had homework due today. I finished reading a portion of

Gutkind's book, *You Can't Make This Stuff Up*, and searched for non-profit organizations I could work with in my grant writing class.

We spent our last full day in Colorado in Boulder, shopping and exploring. We saw groups of happy cyclists and read about the bicycle theft problems of the city. We watched a contortionist fold himself into a box and talked about how he probably made more money in a year than we did. We strolled the Pearl Street Mall and saw Trumpers protest and yell to everyone who were following mask mandates that it was their right to not wear them. When we saw two men yelling at each other over the current political issues, we stopped for a moment to watch. Verbal insults were the only thing exchanged during that fight.

Before heading back to the hotel for the evening we stopped at Costco to stock up on snacks for the 12-hour drive home. As I parked, I noticed something falling on my car. It looked like snow, but the temperatures were still hovering around 96 degrees, even though it was late in the afternoon. We got out, and it was raining ashes.

It was sporadic at first, but by the time we came back out, my car had specks of ashes all over it. The air was thick and smelled of wood fire. I'd never seen ashes fall from the sky as they were doing now. The air was so ashy that we couldn't see the mountains in the distance. Buildings that were more than a half a mile away slowly came into view through the haze like ships emerging from a morning fog.

HOMEBOUND

Over night, the wind had carried chunks of ash from the Cameron Mountain fire to our hotel in Broomfield, just north of Denver, where they collected on windshield wipers, in the crevices of car doors, and cracks in the pavement.

The air was still hazy as we started east to St. Louis on Interstate 70. I had witnessed historic moments this weekend. Fires don't usually get as close as they were to the Rocky Mountain National Park, and when they do it's bad. Bark beetles have destroyed acres of forest faster than the National Forestry Service can clean up; perfect kindling for a wild fire with an insatiable appetite. The dirty thundercloud we saw form Saturday had been caused by gusting winds fueling the fire, which was only 10% contained at the time. Before the Labor Day weekend concluded, it had tripled in size, devouring over 100,000 more acres. I feel like we witnessed the direct effects of climate change.

As dangerous, terrifying, and detrimental as it is, the ash that's left will provide nourishment for the land to sprout anew. The fire forced the elk to come out of the mountains early for their rut, or else we wouldn't have seen them, and once the vegetation starts coming back, all the animals will return to their homes deeper in the mountains.

I watched from the back window as Denver disappeared into the haze like a ghost ship.

Experiencing Bear Lake with Angie and Maree was worth the anxiety.

The heat was worth seeing the elk.

Elk are massive, regal beasts that may appear docile, but their 40-pound antlers could tear a human open with one whip of their head.

We live in a country that has a variety of climates, terrains, and species. Temperatures and temperaments are on the rise. We have a wonderful privilege to protest and disagree with our government without being imprisoned for it, and even though the political climate is hotter than it's been in years, eventually we'll have another leader, one who will hopefully be an icon of grace, gratitude, and love for all the people who make our nation such a magnificently diverse melting pot.

We have fires on the mountains in Colorado, Oregon, and California. They're eating away our forests and killing our native species and neighbors. There are fires on Capitol Hill and in every major city in our nation, killing the spirits of those who reside there and, in some cases, literally ending lives.

Every time I turn on the news or get on social media, I feel appalled at the humanity our country seems to be lacking for our environment and towards each other.

Bob's coaching lecture rings through my mind, "Everything has an opposite. For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. That's the universal Law of Polarity."

Just as sure as gravity exists, so does polarity. I know everything will get better because even the worst climates have an equal and opposite.

That's not just hope. It's science.