

JERRY OLTION

THE MIRACLE

WHEN THE SHORT, WIRY bush burst into flame less than ten feet in front of him, Greg Murry shouted "Holy Moses!" and leaped back in surprise. His involuntary reaction didn't take him very far; he'd just panted and puffed his way up Pilan Hill's two-mile jogging trail and he was exhausted. He took another couple of steps backward, stumbling on a jagged rock in the trail, and looked around sheepishly to see who had set him up for the practical joke.

He was alone on the hilltop. Long stalks of green grass waved in the faint breeze wafting up the west slope, and a couple of turkey vultures circled overhead, but that was the only sign of life or motion anywhere nearby. The grass wasn't tall enough to hide anybody, and the nearest trees were a hundred yards downslope.

The bush, growing from a cleft in the rock outcrop at the very top of the hill, crackled and spat sparks. It was about thigh-high, and scraggly looking. Windswept. Greg had no idea what kind it was. In the evening light the flames in its branches looked blue-hot, like a gas burner. There was no smoke, but a peculiar smell bit Greg's nose when he sniffed. A chemical smell. He took a cautious step toward the fire, wondering if somebody had left a camp stove whose fuel tank had burst in the sunlight, but he couldn't see any evidence of it. No sign of charcoal or ashes from a picnicker who hadn't put out his fire, either. Just the rock and the burning bush.

Yeah, right. A burning bush. Any minute now he'd hear a thunderous voice telling him to fall on his knees, and then a couple of stone tablets with the Federal Penal Code engraved on them would fall out of the sky. Greg didn't buy it. This was far more likely a fraternity prank, or even his roommates having fun at his expense. He looked around again to see if he could spot the idiots who were playing with matches and gasoline, but they must have had a remote igniter or something because the hilltop truly was empty.

The bush was burning, though, and Greg didn't have anything to put it out with. He'd taken a long drink from his water bottle before he'd started his hike, but he'd left the bottle in the car as he always did, counting on the drink to hold him until he got back. He'd left his T-shirt in the car, too, so he couldn't beat the flames out with that. He supposed he could try doing it with his cutoffs, but he'd just as likely catch them on fire and then have to run back down for help in his undies.

No, he would have to stamp it out, but to do that he'd have to wait until it burned down some. If he tried it now he'd singe off all his leg hair for sure, and probably melt his running shoes as well.

The leaves seemed to be lasting an awfully long time for such a bright blaze.

Greg squinted, looking into the glare, and thought he could still see a green tinge to them. They weren't even curling. He held out a hand, but felt no heat. When a spark jumped out and hit his knuckle he felt that, though. It burned like crazy until he stuck it in his mouth.

Warily watching for more sparks, he backed off and waited for the fire to burn itself out. He was glad the grass was still green from spring rains; if it had been dry, the whole hill would have been ablaze by now.

It took a couple of minutes, but at last the flickering flames died down. Greg approached the bush cautiously, a little bit spooked by the whole business. The hair on his arms was standing up, and it felt like the hair on his head was, too.

The leaves hadn't burned, nor had any of the twigs. The bush looked as healthy as ever. Greg spent a long moment trying to decide if he was still agnostic. He'd always said it would take an unambiguous sign from God to make him a believer, but he wasn't sure if this was it. There could be a perfectly natural explanation for what he'd witnessed, though he had no idea what that explanation could be.

"Well?" he asked, figuring he'd give the Deity a chance to clarify His meaning, figuring also that one word couldn't be used against him very well if this was a practical joke and someone was recording him. But nobody responded either way. At last he said, "You'll have to do better than that," and raised his foot to crush out whatever flames might remain.

He stopped with his shoe still upraised. He didn't want to stomp on a perfectly good bush, especially the one growing at the very top of the hill, but the damned thing had been burning just a minute ago; he couldn't very well just leave it. He pondered his dilemma for another minute or so while his pulse returned to normal, but as his muscles relaxed again he realized he did have another option. That big drink of water he'd taken at the bottom of the trail hadn't all sweated away...

Grinning mischievously at the thought of peeing within sight of anybody who might be looking at the hill, he unzipped his shorts, took aim, and let go.

The flash of light when the stream of urine hit the ground at the base of the bush was like a strobe going off. Greg heard a pow! like a firecracker exploding, and felt every muscle in his body twitch in a single convulsion that sent him a couple feet into the air and six feet back, to land sprawling on his butt in the dirt path.

His entire groin felt as if he'd been kicked there, but his left thigh hurt even worse. When he sat up and ran a hand over it, his fingers came away red with blood. He'd landed on a sharp rock. Standing up, he zipped his shorts again and bent around to look at the wound. It wasn't pulsing, but it bled freely from a shallow cut about an inch long.

The bush stood mutely ignoring him, normal as could be. "To hell with you," Greg muttered, and limped back down the trail toward his car.

When he got home just before dinner, his blood-soaked T-shirt tied around his leg, his three roommates crowded around the bathroom to hear his story while he cleaned himself up. He stuck to the facts; weird as they were, there seemed no point in embellishing anything. Even so, he didn't expect anyone to believe him, so he wasn't disappointed when his account of the burning bush that hadn't burned and how it had somehow thrown him backward drew derisive laughter from Dan and Tom.

Brian didn't laugh. Normally Brian was an overbearing pain in the ass and Greg had expected him to lead the assault, but this time he stood in the doorway quietly shaking his head until the laughter died down and then said in a level voice, "You got a direct sign from God and then you pissed on it? You're lucky you got away with your life."

When the laughter quieted a second time, Greg turned toward him with a blood-stained washcloth in his hand and said, "I thought of that. I thought about a lot of things while I was walking back down to my car and bleeding all over myself, but I don't think God had a whole lot to do with it. I mean, it was just this bush flickering blue and yellow and throwing off sparks. No voice or anything. Wouldn't there have been a voice if it was God?"

Dan and Tom laughed again, but whether at Brian's discomfiture or Greg's earnest reply Greg couldn't tell. He said, "Hey, you guys weren't there. It was strange as hell. Anybody would have considered the possibility, but there just wasn't any proof."

"No proof?" Brian's voice echoed in the bathroom. "A burning bush that isn't consumed isn't proof?"

Dan said, "We've got no proof anything happened, when it comes to that. Greg goes jogging and comes back with an owie and a silly story. Maybe he's putting us on, eh?"

"I saw the damned thing," Greg growled at him. "And it zapped me when I tried to make sure it was out. I don't know what the hell it was, but neither do you. Or you," he said to Brian.

There was an uncomfortable silence, then Dan said, "Okay, so tomorrow we go have a look."

When the four roommates jogged onto the rounded top of the hill the following afternoon, they found the bush already afire, crackling and glowing even more powerfully than the day before. Sheets of blue flame danced in its branches, and glowing fireballs swooped away in the breeze.

"Holy shit," Dan said.

"Wow," said Brian in an awe-stricken whisper.

"Told you so," said Greg.

They stopped a dozen feet or so away and watched the bush crackle and spit sparks.

"It's not fire," Tom pointed out. "It looks more like some kind of electrical discharge."

"Smells like it, too," Dan said. "Isn't that ozone?"

Tom nodded. "Static electricity used to build up on sailing ships and sparks would shoot from the masts and stuff. They used to call it Saint Elmo's Fire."

"This isn't a sailing ship," Brian said. "It's a sign from God."

Doug and Tom -- and even Greg now that he had some support--chuckled at Brian's earnestness, but their laughter died pretty quickly. Everyone just stood there in a tight pack before the bush, waiting to see what would happen next. For a group of college guys around a fire, they were awfully quiet.

The flame -- or static discharge, or whatever it was -- began dying down. At last Tom, a botany student, stepped closer and peered into the crackling blue aurora. "I think it's a wild huckleberry," he said.

"Often noted for spontaneous combustion," Dan said in a mock-instructor voice.

"Not a hawthorn?" Brian asked wistfully.

"Sorry." Tom had longer hair than the others; wisps of it drifted upward as he stood by the bush. The mysterious fire was going out, though, and his hair began to lie flat again. The bush flickered for another minute or so, growing gradually dimmer until the flames could no longer be seen. Tom crouched down and reached out gingerly to touch it, but Brian said, "Don't!"

"Why not?"

"It's...not right."

"Oh, come on." Tom steadied himself with one hand against the rock, and yelped when his fingers touched the ground. "I definitely got a shock there," he said. His hair stuck out again.

"God doesn't want you to --"

"God doesn't give a shit," Tom said, and he grasped the bush with his other hand.

Nothing happened.

Greg let out a sigh. He'd been glad to have his story proven true, but he didn't want anybody to get hurt over it. "So what do you suppose is going on here?" he asked.

Tom looked up at the sky. It was mostly blue, with just a few puffy clouds off near the horizon. "Well, if we were in lightning territory I'd say there was a big static buildup here, but since we get maybe two thunderstorms a year in this part of the country, I don't think that's very likely."

"This isn't very likely," Dan pointed out.

"True. And it's got to be something like that. I think those sparks we were seeing were ball lightning."

Dan was a geology student. He said, "You get ball lightning from earthquakes sometimes."

Tom nodded. "Yeah, but we haven't had an earthquake around here in years."

"Not true," Dan said. "We get little ones all the time. We had one three days ago, in fact; one-point-six on the Richter scale. That's barely big enough to feel, but it might still be enough to generate ball lightning."

"But we got some just now," Tom pointed out. "And Greg got some yesterday, too. So unless we're getting a whole string of little quakes timed perfectly for our amusement -- I don't think that's it." He let go of the bush and stood up. "I think it's regular static electricity. When I got zapped, it was because my tennis shoes were insulating me from the ground. I didn't have a charge until I touched the rock with my hand, but then I did and that's why I didn't get shocked when I touched the bush. I was already charged up. Probably still am. Anybody want to test the theory?" He reached out toward Dan.

Carefully, like the alien and the kid in the movie ET, Tom and Dan stretched out their index fingers toward one another. When they were a quarter of an inch or so apart, a spark leaped between them and Dan jerked his hand back.

"Hah," Tom said. "Static electricity."

"That doesn't mean God isn't behind it," Brian said defiantly.

"God is a generator" Greg asked.

"Maybe a big battery," Dan said.

"Or a crashed UFO buried in the hill," Tom said, "with its nuclear reactor still going."

"Get real," Brian demanded, but he was drowned out in the laughter as his relieved roommates speculated on the nature of God.

All the way back down the hill, they tried to top each other. "The mother of all Van de Graaf generators," one would say, and someone else would say, "Cats. Hundreds of cats rubbing up against glass rods."

BUT GOD, it turned out, was a burning bush. Or so claimed the horde of pilgrims who crowded the top of Pilan Hill the next day. Brian, of course, was at the head of the throng, and his picture made the front page of the newspaper that evening. Greg's name wasn't even mentioned, though Brian swore he'd told the reporters who had really made the discovery.

On the TV news that night, dozens of people claimed to have heard God speaking from the bush, commanding them to preach his gospel or warning that homosexuality was going to make everyone burn in Hell, even giving one woman what she claimed were sure to be winning lottery numbers. A priest and a rabbi were more cautious about declaring it a miracle, but they only got a few seconds of air time. The zealots made better press.

During the news broadcast, Dan and Tom started calling Greg "Moses," and kidding him about tablets. He went to bed early.

Greg's physics instructor, Dr. Richards, mentioned the phenomenon in class the next day, saying he was sure there was a perfectly rational reason for whatever was going on up there-- if indeed anything was going on at all -- which prompted Greg to give his account of what had happened to him. He told about going up the next day and how Tom had decided that it was static electricity.

"Theorized," Dr. Richards said. "Your friend was unable to decide anything, based on the evidence you've presented, but his theory is certainly sound. A little testing should either confirm or disprove it."

He arranged to hike up to see the mysterious bush that afternoon with Greg, but as they drove toward Pilan Park with their bag full of instruments in the trunk of Greg's car, they discovered a throng of people completely surrounding the hill, crawling over it like ants on an antpile that had just been kicked. At the top of it, clearly visible even without binoculars, pulsed a flickering blue aurora at least ten feet high.

"It seems to have grown in intensity as well as popularity," Dr. Richards remarked as Greg drove slowly through the packed parking lot.

"I wonder if all the extra people have anything to do with it?" Greg asked. "It was bigger the second time, when there were four of us, than it was the first time with just me."

"Possibly," Dr. Richards said. "That's something to consider, but it could simply be growing in intensity for some other reason."

Greg had to stop while a line of white-robed Krishnas or some such people crossed the road in front of the car. All but the first one had their eyes

closed and were holding onto the waist of the person in front of them. "It went out, though," Greg said. "Both times, the...whatever it was went out after a couple of minutes."

"It doesn't appear to be doing so now," Dr. Richards said, peering through the throng toward the top of the hill.

"We'll never make it up there," Greg said. "Not through this kind of a crowd."

A TV reporter had been standing beside the right front fender of the car, trying to get one of the white robed people to say something for the camera, but they ignored her. Frustrated, she turned around, looking for a better interview prospect. With a what-the-hell sort of shrug, Dr. Richards said, "I think I can get us a free ride. Hang on." He opened the door and stepped out beside the reporter. "Excuse me," he said. "I'm Dr. Richards from the university physics department. You wouldn't happen to have a helicopter, would you?"

She didn't, it turned out, but when word circulated among the other reporters that a physics professor wanted a ride to the top, one of the stations that did have one volunteered to ferry him up there. Within an hour Dr. Richards, Greg, two cameramen, and two reporters -- one of them the woman they'd met first -- were hanging on for dear life as the helicopter pilot hovered over a level spot on one of the hill's upper flanks, trying to clear a spot to land. Flying dirt from the rotor-wash finally accomplished the job, and he set down long enough for everyone to climb out. Greg grabbed the backpack full of equipment they had brought from the university. The two cameramen walked backward in front of the reporters and Dr. Richards, clearing a path by refusing to acknowledge that anyone might be in their way, and in that fashion they made it to the top of the hill.

Two men and a woman, all three dressed impeccably in powder blue tailored suits and wearing enough gold jewelry to set off an airport security alarm, waited for them a few yards from the bush, which crackled and spit sparks fifteen feet into the sky. They each carried a bible open to the early pages; they'd evidently been reading aloud or giving a fire-and-brimstone sermon on Old Testament law until the helicopter disturbed them. Whichever, they had obviously set themselves up as figures of authority, either trying to cash in for themselves or else holding down the fort until Falwell or Robertson or one of the big players showed up. Brian was there, too, but he was three or four rows back among the common rabble. Evidently his stock had dropped when the preachers showed up.

Greg snickered when he saw them. "The father, the son, and the holy ghost?" he whispered to Dr. Richards.

The physics professor laughed. That seemed to be the signal the triumvirate was waiting for; the woman stepped forward and said, "Who are you?" They could hear her clearly even though there must have been thousands of people on the hilltop. Everyone was listening to hear the inevitable confrontation.

Dr. Richards said, "We came to see if we could figure out what was causing this."

"The Lord is causing it," one of the men replied, putting as much thunder in his voice as he could manage.

Dr. Richards grinned. "In that case, we'll find out how He's doing it. Greg, the electroscope, please."

Greg reached into the pack and brought out the glass ball with the metal rod piercing its side. Inside the sphere, a thin gold leaf stood out at right angles from the rigid plate at the end of the rod. Dr. Richards took it from Greg, turned to the cameras, and said, "An electroscope detects the presence of a static electrical charge. The farther out the gold leaf extends, the greater the charge. As you can see, we're in the presence of quite a charge indeed."

The woman pushed into camera range. "You have no power here!" she shouted. "This is holy ground."

"It's a public park," Dr. Richards said. "And it looks to me like there's plenty of power here for all of us." To Greg he said, "How about the grounding wire?"

Greg took the coil of 10-gauge house wiring out of the pack. They'd only brought fifteen feet of it, not expecting nearly as big a display as now flickered and spat before them, but Dr. Richards took it from him and uncoiled it anyway. It was stiff material; it had three thick conductors shrouded in heavy insulation and it would stick out about three feet before it bent under its own weight. He held one end as high as he could over his head, and extended the other end toward the bush.

"Don't!" all three of the bible-thumpers shouted, and about half the crowd echoed them.

Dr. Richards ignored them all. "Stand back," he warned. "This shouldn't be dangerous, but you never know." And with those words, he stuck the lower end of the wire into the ground at the base of the flickering, spark-spitting bush.

The display immediately went out, to reappear at the top of the conductor, a glowing spherical corona discharge three feet over the professor's upraised hand. Coming from a wire, the blue glow and flying sparks seemed almost normal.

Looking just a little like Thor, the god of thunder, Dr. Richards turned to face the cameras again and said, "There you have it. Definitely an electrical discharge."

The bible-thumpers, sensing that they were about to lose their hold on things, shouted, "These people are blasphemers! Stop them from desecrating the Lord's holy work!"

Not everyone in the crowd was a religious fanatic, but enough of them were.

Roaring like a football audience when the home team scores a touchdown, they surged forward, the people in the rear pushing over the ones in front who didn't get out of the way. The woman preacher lunged for Dr. Richards, but he lowered the upraised end of the wire and forced her back with a shower of sparks. Greg and the reporters moved in closer to him while the two camera operators stood back to back like two besieged cavalymen in Indian country and aimed their cameras at the crowd.

The preachers tried a simultaneous assault, and this time Dr. Richards let them have a direct zap from the tip of the wire. He didn't even have to touch them; as soon as they drew close, an enormous arc leaped from wire to preachers, connecting all three in a momentary circuit that blew them backwards, their hair sticking straight outward and sparks dancing on their gold jewelry.

The flying preachers crashed into the people behind them, slowing their advance, but the crowd on the other side was still coming. "Behind you!" Greg yelled, and Dr. Richards swung around with the wire, spraying sparks and lightning bolts like water from a fire hose. The fortunate leaped back before the electricity hit them; the less so flew backward involuntarily when the current jolted their leg muscles.

Shouts of anger turned to shouts of dismay. Dr. Richards circled around and around, but even so, the pressure from behind as more people rushed the top of the hill kept forcing people into the path of the discharge. Greg expected to be overrun and crushed any minute now, like the soccer fans in Liverpool who'd been caught against a fence during a riot, but as the crowd thickened, their electrical contact with one another allowed the jolts to spread through the entire throng, and the ones in back began to turn away.

Also, the discharge seemed to be growing stronger. Now lightning sprayed out six or seven feet from the end of the wire, and grapefruit-sized balls of plasma broke free and drifted like balloons over the heads of the crowd. Occasionally one would descend and burst with a clap of thunder, sending another wave of static electricity coursing through the tangle of bodies.

Eventually the tide turned, and the angry mob of religious pilgrims became a fleeing horde of terrified refugees. The ground rumbled with their retreat as they fled down the flanks of the hill, careening into one another and screaming for God to save them.

"Looks like God's on the side of science for a change," Greg said, but then he looked up at Dr. Richards and realized he'd spoken too soon. The entire length of wire was glowing blue, and the discharge at its tip continued to grow.

"It's getting kind of warm," the professor said nervously.

"Can't you let go?" Greg asked.

"Not without getting zapped myself when the circuit breaks. And you guys will get it too if you don't move clear."

The reporters and camera crew backed away a few dozen feet, but Greg stayed put. He took off his T-shirt and wadded it up for Dr. Richards to use as a hot-pad, and helped support his tiring upstretched arm.

Greg hoped the camera guys were getting this. He and the professor looked impressive as hell, a little like the famous statue of the marines raising the flag atop Mount Suribachi on Iwo Jima.

"It's starting to fade," one of the reporters said after a minute or so, and sure enough, in another minute the discharge had dwindled to a faint glow and an occasional spark at the tip of the wire. Dr. Richards nodded to Greg, who backed away, and then he tossed the wire aside and stepped backward himself.

Deprived of its lightning rod, the bush flickered a couple of times, like a guttering candle, then quieted again.

The hilltop still buzzed with the shouts of the angry, confused mob, which had come to a halt a quarter mile or so below. The shouts grew louder when people realized that the discharge had stopped, and the leading edge began moving back uphill.

"Uh-oh," Greg said.

"Quick, jump up and down!" Dr. Richards said. Without waiting for anyone else to start, he began hopping up and down like a kid on a pogo stick. His feet slapped the ground with each jump. Greg and the reporters stared at him as if he'd just lost his mind, but when the bush burst forth with another shower of sparks a few seconds later, they all began leaping and hopping like maniacs.

They were still hopping, and the bush was still crackling wildly, when the news helicopter came to rescue them a few minutes later.

"It's the piezoelectric effect," Dr. Richards said. He was standing before one of the student workbenches in his teaching lab, reporters and camera crews from dozens of papers and TV stations surrounding him. On the table stood a screw vise with a finger-size crystal in its jaws, and a wire running from the top of the crystal up to a heavy iron ring stand. An insulated clamp held the wire so its tip was a half inch or so from the metal.

"When you squeeze a quartz crystal," Dr. Richards said, turning the handle of the vise, "it generates electricity." Sure enough, a spark leaped from the wire to the iron stand. "And if you vibrate it, you get a pulse of current each time the crystal flexes." Dr. Richards wiggled the handle back and forth, and the spark popped each time.

"How does that account for what we saw on the hilltop today?" the woman reporter who had been there asked.

Dr. Richards said, "Quartz is one of the most common elements in rock. It occurs

naturally in large crystals, sometimes huge crystals inside cooling volcanos, which is what all these hills around here once were. It's very likely there's a big quartz deposit inside Pilan Hill, one which resonates to the vibrations of people jogging or even just milling around on the surface."

Another reporter asked, "But why now? That hill's been there for millions of years, and nobody has ever seen it do this before."

"Thousands," Dr. Richards said with a grin. "Volcanos are relatively young, geologically speaking. But even so, that's a fair question, and the only answer I can give would have to be pure speculation, at least until we investigate further. What I expect happened, though, was that the minor earthquake we had a few days ago rearranged things inside the hill. Greg's footsteps as he jogged up the trail set up a resonant vibration that started the display, as did the footsteps of all the people coming and going later on. That would explain why it became so much stronger when the crowd became more, ah, agitated."

A different reporter, a man wearing a powder-blue suit, Greg noticed, asked, "Don't you think that explaining it in such cold, hard terms destroys the beauty of it? If what you say is true and it is just a pizza-whatever effect, that ruins the mystery of it for all those thousands of people who gained spiritual enlightenment from it, don't you think?"

"Wait a minute," Dr. Richards said. "You're saying people can gain enlightenment from ignorance. Are you sure you want to go on record saying that? You'd rather have people worshipping a static spark than understanding what caused it?"

"That's not what I--" the reporter said, but the laughter from everyone else drowned him out.

"The beauty lies in understandings" Dr. Richards said when the room quieted down. He wiggled the crank on the vise a few more times, and tiny sparks shot out of the wire.

That became the sound bite on the evening news all over the country. It made Dr. Richards a celebrity for a few days, but then an airplane crashed into Dodgers' Stadium and that put an end to his time in the spotlight. Locally the hill stayed in the news a bit longer while the park service and various citizens' groups argued over what to do with it, but then election season came along and the press turned back to muckraking. Eventually the park service installed a wooden barricade around the hilltop and warning signs along the trail, then reopened it to the public. Fraternities took to holding parties on the hill at night, drumming and dancing until the aurora lit the entire hilltop. A few religious people and Flat-Earthers stubbornly came to worship the burning bush, but they seldom stayed long.

Greg avoided the hill completely for months, but he never found another jogging trail he liked as well, so one afternoon he finally decided to try Pilan Hill again. It wasn't as bad as he'd expected. He had to dodge a few people on the trail, but not so many that he had to break stride. And when he neared the top,

he caught himself straining to see if his footsteps had charged up the bush yet. Experimentation had proven that only the top few hundred feet had any effect, but the exact boundaries changed constantly with humidity and air pressure and a dozen other variables.

A man stood before the barricade, holding a small child in his arms. The man had evidently tired of stamping his feet. He smiled when he saw Greg coming, then he turned with the child and pointed at the bush. "Watch," he said. "Watch the sparks fly."