

When this World is All on Fire

by William Sanders

William Sanders has published many stories in this magazine and elsewhere, as well as numerous novels of SF, fantasy, mystery, and suspense. His newest science fiction novel, J., was published this summer. In his latest tale, he takes a disturbing look at a time...

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“Squatters,” Jimmy Lonekiller said as he swung the jeep off the narrow old blacktop onto the narrower and older gravel side road. “I can’t believe we got squatters again.”

Sitting beside him, bracing himself against the bumping and bouncing, Sergeant Davis Blackbear said, “Better get used to it. We kick this bunch out, there’ll be more.”

Jimmy Lonekiller nodded. “Guess that’s right,” he said. “They’re not gonna give up, are they?”

He was a husky, dark-skinned young man, and tall for a Cherokee; among the women of the reservation, he was generally considered something of a hunk. His khaki uniform was neat and crisply pressed, despite the oppressive heat. Davis Blackbear, feeling his own shirt wilting and sticking to his skin, wondered how he did it. Maybe fullbloods didn’t sweat as much. Or maybe it was something to do with being young.

Davis said, “Would you? Give up, I mean, if you were in their shoes?”

Jimmy didn’t reply for a moment, being busy fighting the wheel as the jeep slammed over a series of potholes. They were on a really bad stretch now, the road narrowed to a single-lane dirt snaketrack; the overhanging trees on either side, heavy with dust-greyed festoons of kudzu vine, shut out the sun without doing anything much about the heat. This was an out-of-the-way part of the reservation; Davis had had to check the map at the tribal police headquarters to make sure he knew how to get here.

The road began to climb now, up the side of a steep hill. The jeep slowed to not much better than walking speed; the locally distilled alcohol might burn cooler and cleaner than gasoline but it had no power at all. Jimmy Lonekiller spoke then: “Don’t guess I would, you put it that way. Got to go somewhere, poor bastards.”

They were speaking English; Davis was Oklahoma Cherokee, having moved to the North Carolina reservation only a dozen years ago, when he married a Qualla Band woman. He could understand the Eastern dialect fairly well by now, enough for cop purposes anyway, but he still wasn’t up to a real conversation.

“Still,” Jimmy went on, “you got to admit it’s a hell of a thing. Twenty-first

century, better than five hundred years after Columbus, and here we are again with white people trying to settle on our land. What little bit we've got left," he said, glancing around at the dusty woods. "There's gotta be somewhere else they can go."

"Except," Davis said, "somebody's already there too."

"Probably so," Jimmy admitted. "Seems like they're running out of places for people to be."

He steered the jeep around a rutted hairpin bend, while Davis turned the last phrase over in his mind, enjoying the simple precision of it: running out of places for people to be, that was the exact and very well-put truth. Half of Louisiana and more than half of Florida under water now, the rest of the coastline inundated, Miami and Mobile and Savannah and most of Houston, and, despite great and expensive efforts, New Orleans too.

And lots more land, farther inland, that might as well be submerged for all the good it did anybody: all that once-rich farm country in southern Georgia and Alabama and Mississippi, too hot and dry now to grow anything, harrowed by tornadoes and dust storms, while raging fires destroyed the last remnants of the pine forests and the cypress groves of the dried-up swamplands. Not to mention the quake, last year, shattering Memphis and eastern Arkansas, demolishing the levees and turning the Mississippi loose on what was left of the Delta country. Seemed everybody either had way too much water or not enough.

He'd heard a black preacher, on the radio, declare that it was all God's judgment on the South because of slavery and racism. But that was bullshit; plenty of other parts of the country were getting it just as bad. Like Manhattan, or San Francisco—and he didn't even want to think about what it must be like in places like Arizona. And Africa, oh, Jesus. Nobody in the world wanted to think about Africa now.

The road leveled out at the top of the hill and he pointed. "Pull over there. I want to do a quick scout before we drive up."

Jimmy stopped the jeep and Davis climbed out and stood in the middle of the dirt road. "Well," Jimmy said, getting out too, "I wish somebody else would get the job of running them off now and then." He gave Davis a mocking look. "It's what I get, letting myself get partnered with an old 'breed. Everybody knows why Ridge always puts you in charge of the evictions."

Davis didn't rise to the bait; he knew what Jimmy was getting at. It was something of a standing joke among the reservation police that Davis always got any jobs that involved dealing with white people. Captain Ridge claimed it was because of his years of experience on the Tulsa PD, but Jimmy and others claimed it was really because he was quarter-blood and didn't look all that Indian and therefore might make whites less nervous.

In his own estimation, he didn't look particularly Indian or white or anything else, just an average-size man with a big bony face and too many wrinkles and dark brown hair that was now getting heavily streaked with gray. He doubted that his appearance inspired much confidence in people of any race.

The dust cloud was beginning to settle over the road behind them. A black-and-white van appeared, moving slowly, and pulled to a stop behind the jeep. Corporal Roy Smoke stuck his head out the window and said, "Here?"

"For now," Davis told him. "I'm going to go have a look, scope out the scene before we move in. You guys wait here." He turned. "Jimmy, you come with me."

* * *

The heat was brutal as they walked down the road, even in the shady patches. At the bottom of the hill, though, Davis led the way off the road and up a dry creek bed, and back in the woods it was a little cooler. Away from the road, there wasn't enough sunlight for the kudzu vines to take over, and beneath the trees the light was pleasantly soft and green. Still too damn dry, Davis thought, feeling leaves and twigs crunching under his boot soles. Another good reason to get this eviction done quickly; squatters tended to be careless with fire. The last bad woods fire on the reservation, a couple of months ago, had been started by a squatter family trying to cook a stolen hog.

They left the creek bed and walked through the woods, heading roughly eastward. "Hell," Jimmy murmured, "I know where this is now. They're on the old Birdshooter place, huh? Shit, nobody's lived there for years. Too rocky to grow anything, no water since the creek went dry."

Davis motioned for silence. Moving more slowly now, trying to step quietly though it wasn't easy in the dry underbrush, they worked their way to the crest of a low ridge. Through the trees, Davis could see a cleared area beyond. Motioning to Jimmy to wait, he moved up to the edge of the woods and paused in the shadow of a half-grown oak, and that was when he heard the singing.

At first he didn't even recognize it as singing; the sound was so high and clear and true that he took it for some sort of instrument. But after a second he realized it was a human voice, though a voice like none he'd ever heard. He couldn't make out the words, but the sound alone was enough to make the hair stand up on his arms and neck, and the air suddenly felt cooler under the trees.

It took Davis a moment to get unstuck; he blinked rapidly and took a deep breath. Then, very cautiously, he peered around the trunk of the oak.

The clearing wasn't very big; wasn't very clear, either, any more, having been taken over by brush and weeds. In the middle stood the ruins of a small frame house, its windows smashed and its roof fallen in.

Near the wrecked house sat a green pickup truck, its bed covered with a

boxy, homemade-looking camper shell—plywood, it looked like from where Davis stood, and painted a dull uneven gray. The truck’s own finish was badly faded and scabbed with rust; the near front fender was crumpled. Davis couldn’t see any license plates.

A kind of lean-to had been erected at the rear of the truck, a sagging blue plastic tarp with guy-ropes tied to trees and bushes. As Davis watched, a lean, long-faced man in bib overalls and a red baseball cap came out from under the tarp and stood looking about.

Then the red-haired girl came around the front of the truck, still singing, the words clear now:

*“Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?”*

She was, Davis guessed, maybe twelve or thirteen, though he couldn’t really tell at this distance. Not much of her, anyway; he didn’t figure she’d go over eighty pounds or so. Her light blue dress was short and sleeveless, revealing thin pale arms and legs. All in all, it didn’t seem possible for all that sound to be coming from such a wispy little girl; and yet there was no doubt about it, he could see her mouth moving:

*“Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?”*

The tune was a simple one, an old-fashioned modal-sounding melody line, slow and without a pronounced rhythm. It didn’t matter; nothing mattered but that voice. It soared through the still mountain air like a whippoorwill calling beside a running stream. Davis felt his throat go very tight.

*“Run to the mountains to hide your face
Never find no hiding place
Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?”*

The man in the baseball cap put his hands on his hips. “Eva May!” he shouted.

The girl stopped singing and turned. Her red hair hung down her back almost to her waist. “Yes, Daddy?” she called.

“Quit the damn fooling around,” the man yelled. His voice was rough, with the practiced anger of the permanently angry man. “Go help your brother with the fire.”

Fire? Davis spotted it then, a thin trace of bluish-white smoke rising from somewhere on the far side of the parked truck. “Shit!” he said soundlessly, and turned and began picking his way back down the brushy slope.

“What’s happening?” Jimmy Lonekiller said as Davis reappeared. “What was

that music? Sounded like—”

“Quiet,” Davis said. “Come on. We need to hurry.”

* * *

“Go,” Davis said to Jimmy as they turned off the road and up the brush-choked track through the trees. “No use trying to sneak up. They’ve heard us coming by now.”

Sure enough, the squatters were already standing in the middle of the clearing, watching, as the jeep bumped to a stop in front of them. The man in the red baseball cap stood in the middle, his face dark with anger. Beside him stood a washed-out-looking blond woman in a faded flower-print dress, and, next to her, a tall teenage boy wearing ragged jeans and no shirt. The boy’s hair had been cropped down almost flush with his scalp.

The woman was holding a small baby to her chest. Great, Davis thought with a flash of anger, just what a bunch of homeless drifters needed. Running out of places for people to be, but not out of people, hell, no....

The red-haired girl was standing off to one side, arms folded. Close up, Davis revised his estimate of her age; she had to be in her middle to late teens at least. There didn’t appear to be much of a body under that thin blue dress, but it was definitely not that of a child. Her face, as she watched the two men get out of the jeep, was calm and without expression.

The van came rocking and swaying up the trail and stopped behind the jeep. Davis waited while Roy Smoke and the other four men got out—quite a force to evict one raggedy-ass family, but Captain Ridge believed in being careful—and then he walked over to the waiting squatters and said, “Morning. Where you folks from?”

The man in the red baseball cap spat on the ground, not taking his eyes off Davis. “Go to hell, Indian.”

Oh oh. Going to be like that, was it? Davis said formally, “Sir, you’re on Cherokee reservation land. Camping isn’t allowed except by permit and in designated areas. I’ll have to ask you to move out.”

The woman said, “Oh, why can’t you leave us alone? We’re not hurting anybody. You people have all this land, why won’t you share it?”

We tried that, lady, Davis thought, and look where it got us. Aloud he said, “Ma’am, the laws are made by the government of the Cherokee nation. I just enforce them.”

“Nation!” The man snorted. “Bunch of woods niggers, hogging good land while white people starve. You got no right.”

“I’m not here to argue about it,” Davis said. “I’m just here to tell you you’ve got to move on.”

The boy spoke up suddenly. “You planning to make us?”

Davis looked at him. Seventeen or eighteen, he guessed, punk-mean around the eyes and that Johnny Pissoff stance that they seemed to develop at that age; ropy muscles showing under bare white skin, forearms rippling visibly as he clenched both fists.

“Yes,” Davis told him. “If necessary, we’ll move you.”

To the father—he assumed—he added, “I’m hoping you won’t make it necessary. If you like, we’ll give you a hand—”

He didn’t get to finish. That was when the boy came at him, fists up, head hunched down between his shoulders, screaming as he charged: “*Redskin motherfu*—”

Davis shifted his weight, caught the wild swing in a cross-arm block, grasped the kid’s wrist and elbow and pivoted, all in one smooth motion. The boy yelped in pain as he hit the ground, and then grunted as Jimmy Lonekiller landed on top of him, handcuffs ready.

The man in the red cap had taken a step forward, but he stopped as Roy Smoke moved in front of him and tapped him gently on the chest with his nightstick. “No,” Roy said, “you don’t want to do that. Stand still, now.”

Davis said, “Wait up, Jimmy,” and then to the man in the red cap, “All right, there’s two ways we can do this. We can take this boy to Cherokee town and charge him with assaulting an officer, and he can spend the next couple of months helping us fix the roads. Probably do him a world of good.”

“No,” the woman cried. The baby in her arms was wailing now, a thin weak piping against her chest, but she made no move to quiet it. “Please, no.”

“Or,” Davis went on, “you can move out of here, right now, without any more trouble, and I’ll let you take him with you.”

The girl, he noticed, hadn’t moved the whole time, just stood there watching with no particular expression on her face, except that there might be a tiny trace of a smile on her lips as she looked at the boy on the ground.

“No,” the woman said again. “Vernon, no, you can’t let them take Ricky—”

“All right,” the man said. “We’ll go, Indian. Let him up. He won’t give you no more trouble. Ricky, behave yourself or I’ll whup your ass.”

Davis nodded to Jimmy Lonekiller, who released the kid. “Understand this,” Davis said, “we don’t give second warnings. If you’re found on Cherokee land

again, you'll be arrested, your vehicle will be impounded, and you might do a little time."

The boy was getting to his feet, rubbing his arm. The woman started to move toward him but the man said, "He's all right, damn it. Get busy packing up." He turned his head and scowled at the girl. "You too, Eva May."

Davis watched as the squatters began taking down the tarp. The girl's long red hair fairly glowed in the midday sun; he felt a crazy impulse to go over and touch it. He wished she'd sing some more, but he didn't imagine she felt like singing now.

He said, "Roy, have somebody kill that fire. Make sure it's dead and buried. This place is a woods fire waiting to happen."

* * *

Davis lived in a not very big trailer on the outskirts of Cherokee town. Once he had had a regular house, but after his wife had taken off, a few years ago, with that white lawyer from Gatlinburg, he'd moved out and let a young married couple have the place.

The trailer's air conditioning was just about shot, worn out from the constant unequal battle with the heat, but after the sun went down it wasn't too bad except on the hottest summer nights. Davis took off his uniform and hung it up and stretched out on the bed while darkness fell outside and the owls began calling in the trees. Sweating, waiting for the temperature to drop, he closed his eyes and heard again in his mind, over the rattle of the laboring air conditioner:

*"Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?
Where you gonna go?"*

It was the following week when he saw the girl again.

He was driving through Waynesville, taking one of the force's antique computers for repairs, when he saw her crossing the street up ahead. Even at half a block's distance, he was sure it was the same girl; there couldn't be another head of hair like that in these mountains. She was even wearing what looked like the same blue dress.

But he was caught in slow traffic, and she disappeared around the corner before he could get any closer. Sighing, making a face at himself for acting like a fool, he drove on. By the time he got to the computer shop, he had convinced himself it had all been his imagination.

He dropped off the computer and headed back through town, taking it easy and keeping a wary eye on the traffic, wondering as always how so many people still managed to drive, despite fuel shortages and sky-high prices; and all the new restrictions, not that anybody paid them any mind, the government having all it could do just keeping the country more or less together.

An ancient minivan, a mattress roped to its roof, made a sudden left turn from the opposite lane. Davis hit the brakes, cursing—a fenderbender in a tribal patrol car, that would really make the day—and that was when he saw the red-haired girl coming up the sidewalk on the other side of the street.

Some asshole behind him was honking; Davis put the car in motion again, going slow, looking for a parking place. There was a spot up near the next corner and he turned into it and got out and locked up the cruiser, all without stopping to think what he thought he was doing or why he was doing it.

He crossed the street and looked along the sidewalk, but he couldn't see the girl anywhere. He began walking back the way she'd been going, looking this way and that. The street was mostly lined with an assortment of small stores—leftovers, probably, from the days when Waynesville had been a busy tourist resort, before tourism became a meaningless concept—and he peered in through a few shop windows, without any luck.

He walked a couple of blocks that way and then decided she couldn't have gotten any farther in that little time. He turned and went back, and stopped at the corner and looked up and down the cross street, wondering if she could have gone that way. Fine Indian you are, he thought, one skinny little white girl with hair like a brush fire and you keep losing her.

Standing there, he became aware of a growing small commotion across the street, noises coming from the open door of the shop on the corner: voices raised, a sound of scuffling. A woman shouted, “No you don't—”

He ran across the street, dodging an oncoming BMW, and into the shop. It was an automatic cop reaction, unconnected to his search; but then immediately he saw the girl, struggling in the grip of a large steely-haired woman in a long black dress. “Stop fighting me,” the woman was saying in a high strident voice. “Give me that, young lady. I'm calling the police—”

Davis said, “What's going on here?”

The woman looked around. “Oh,” she said, looking pleased, not letting go the girl's arm. “I'm glad to see you, officer. I've got a little shoplifter for you.”

The girl was looking at Davis too. If she recognized him she gave no sign. Her face was flushed, no doubt from the struggle, but still as expressionless as ever.

“What did she take?” Davis asked.

“This.” The woman reached up and pried the girl's right hand open, revealing something shiny. “See, she's still holding it!”

Davis stepped forward and took the object from the girl's hand: a cheap-looking little pendant, silver or more likely silver-plated, in the shape of a running dog, with a flimsy neck chain attached.

“I want her arrested,” the woman said. “I’ll be glad to press charges. I’m tired of these people, coming around here ruining this town, stealing everyone blind.”

Davis said, “I’m sorry, ma’am, I don’t have any jurisdiction here. You’ll need to call the local police.”

She blinked, doing a kind of ladylike double-take, looking at Davis’s uniform. “Oh. Excuse me, I thought—” She managed to stop before actually saying, “I thought you were a real policeman.” It was there on her face, though.

Davis looked again at the pendant, turning it over in his hand, finding the little white price tag stuck on the back of the running dog: \$34.95. A ripoff even in the present wildly inflated money; but after a moment he reached for his wallet and said, “Ma’am, how about if I just pay you for it?”

The woman started to speak and then stopped, her eyes locking on the wallet in his hand. Not doing much business these days, he guessed; who had money to waste on junk like this?

While she hesitated, Davis pulled out two twenties and laid them on the nearby counter top. “With a little extra to pay for your trouble,” he added.

That did it. She let go the girl’s arm and scooped up the money with the speed of a professional gambler. “All right,” she said, “but get her out of here!”

The girl stood still, staring at Davis. The woman said, “I mean it! Right now!”

Davis tilted his head in the direction of the door. The girl nodded and started to move, not particularly fast. Davis followed her, hearing the woman’s voice behind him: “And if you ever come back—”

Out on the sidewalk, Davis said, “I’m parked down this way.”

She looked at him. “You arresting me?”

Her speaking voice—he realized suddenly that this was the first time he’d heard it—was surprisingly ordinary; soft and high, rather pleasant, but nothing to suggest what it could do in song. There was no fear in it, or in her face; she might have been asking what time it was.

Davis shook his head. “Like I told that woman, I don’t have any authority here.”

“So you can’t make me go with you.”

“No.” he said. “But I’d say you need to get clear of this area pretty fast. She’s liable to change her mind and call the law after all.”

“Guess that’s right. Okay.” She fell in beside him, sticking her hands in the pockets of the blue dress. He noticed her feet were barely covered by a pair of old

tennis shoes, so ragged they were practically sandals. “Never rode in a police car before.”

As they came up to the parked cruiser he stopped and held out his hand. “Here. You might as well have this.”

She took the pendant and held it up in front of her face, looking at it, swinging it from side to side. After a moment she slipped the chain over her head and tucked the pendant down the front of her dress. “Better hide it,” she said. “Ricky sees it, he’ll steal it for sure.”

He said, “Not much of a thing to get arrested for.”

She shrugged. “I like dogs. We had a dog, back home in Georgia, before we had to move. Daddy wouldn’t let me take him along.”

“Still,” he said, “you could have gone to jail.”

She shrugged, a slight movement of her small shoulders. “So? Wouldn’t be no worse than how I got to live now.”

“Yes it would,” he told her. “You’ve got no idea what it’s like in those forced-labor camps. How old are you?”

“Seventeen,” she said. “Well, next month.”

“Then you’re an adult, as far’s the law’s concerned. Better watch it from now on.” He opened the right door. “Get in.”

She climbed into the car and he closed the door and went around. As he slid in under the wheel, she said, “Okay, I know what comes next. Where do you want to go?”

“What?” Davis looked at her, momentarily baffled. “Well, I was just going to take you home. Wherever your family—”

“Oh, come on.” Her voice held an edge of scorn now. “You didn’t get me out of there for nothing. You want something, just like everybody always does, and I know what it is because there ain’t nothing else I got. Well, all right,” she said. “I don’t guess I mind. So where do you want to go to do it?”

For a moment, Davis was literally speechless. The idea simply hadn’t occurred to him; he hadn’t thought of her in that way at all. It surprised him, now he considered it. After all, she was a pretty young girl—you could have said beautiful, in a way—and he had been living alone for a long time. Yet so it was; he felt no stirrings of that kind toward this girl, not even now with her close up and practically offering herself.

When he could speak he said, “No, no. Not that. Believe me.”

“Really?” She looked very skeptical. “Then what *do* you want?”

“Right now,” he said, “I want to buy you a pair of shoes.”

* * *

An hour or so later, coming out of the discount shoe store out by the highway, she said, “I know what this is all about. You feel bad because you run us off, back last week.”

“No.” Davis’s voice held maybe a little bit more certainty than he felt, but he added, “Just doing my job. Anyway, you couldn’t have stayed there. No water, nothing to eat, how would you live?”

“You still didn’t have no right to run us off.”

“Sure I did. It’s our land,” he said. “All we’ve got left.”

She opened her mouth and he said, “Look, we’re not going to talk about it, all right?”

They walked in silence the rest of the way across the parking lot. She kept looking down at her feet, admiring the new shoes. They weren’t much, really, just basic white no-name sport shoes, but he supposed they looked pretty fine to her. At that they hadn’t been all that cheap. In fact between the shoes and the pendant he’d managed to go through a couple days’ pay. Not that he was likely to get paid any time soon; the tribe had been broke for a long time.

As he started the car, she said, “You sure you don’t want to, you know, do it?”

He looked at her and she turned sidewise in the seat, moving her thin pale legs slightly apart, shifting her narrow hips. “Hey,” she said, “somebody’s gotta be the first. Might as well be you.”

Her mouth quirked. “If it ain’t you it’ll prob’ly be Ricky. He sure keeps trying.”

With some difficulty Davis said, “Turn around, please, and do up your safety belt.”

“All right.” She giggled softly. “Just don’t know what it is you want from me, that’s all.”

He didn’t respond until they were out of the parking lot and rolling down the road, back into Waynesville. Then he said, “Would you sing for me?”

“What?” Her voice registered real surprise. “Sing? You mean right now, right here in the car?”

“Yes,” Davis said. “Please.”

“Well, I be damn.” She brushed back her hair and studied him for a minute. “You mean it, don’t you? All right ... what you want me to sing? If I know it.”

“That song you were singing that morning up on the reservation,” he said. “Just before we arrived.”

She thought about it. “Oh,” she said. “You mean—”

She tilted her head back and out it came, like a flood of clear spring water:

*“Oh, when this world is all on fire
Where you gonna go?”*

“Yes,” Davis said very softly. “That’s it. Sing it. Please.”

* * *

Her family was staying in a refugee camp on the other side of town; a great hideous sprawl of cars and trucks and buses and campers and trailers of all makes and ages and states of repair, bright nylon tents and crude plastic-tarp shelters and pathetic, soggy arrangements of cardboard boxes, spread out over a once-beautiful valley.

“You better just drop me off here,” the girl said as he turned off the road.

“That’s okay,” Davis said. “Which way do I go?”

At her reluctant direction, he steered slowly down a narrow muddy lane between parked vehicles and outlandish shelters, stopping now and then as children darted across in front of the car. People came out and stared as the big police cruiser rolled past. Somebody threw something unidentifiable, that bounced off the windshield leaving a yellowish smear. By now Davis was pretty sure this hadn’t been a good idea.

But the girl said, “Up there,” and there it was, the old truck with the homemade camper bed and the blue plastic awning rigged out behind, just like before. He stopped the car and got out and went around to open the passenger door.

The air was thick with wood smoke and the exhausts of worn-out engines, and the pervasive reek of human waste. The ground underfoot was soggy with mud and spilled motor oil and God knew what else. Davis looked around at the squalid scene, remembering what this area used to look like, only a few years ago. Now, it looked like the sort of thing they used to show on the news, in countries you’d never heard of. The refugee camps in Kosovo, during his long-ago army days, hadn’t been this bad.

Beyond, up on the mountainsides, sunlight glinted on the windows of expensive houses. A lot of locals had thought it was wonderful, back when the rich people first started buying up land and building homes up in the mountain country, getting away from the heat and the flooding. They hadn’t been as happy about the

second invasion, a year or so later, by people bringing nothing but their desperation....

Davis shook his head and opened the door. Even the depressing scene couldn't really get him down, right now. It had been an amazing experience, almost religious, driving along with that voice filling the dusty interior of the old cruiser; he felt light and loose, as if coming off a marijuana high. He found himself smiling—

A voice behind him said, "What the hell?" and then, "Eva May!"

He turned and saw the man standing there beside the truck, still wearing the red cap and the angry face. "Hello," he said, trying to look friendly or at least inoffensive. "Just giving your daughter a lift from town. Don't worry, she's not in any trouble—"

"Hell she's not," the man said, looking past Davis. "Eva May, git your ass out of that thing! What you doing riding around with this God-damn woods nigger?"

The girl swung her feet out of the car. Davis started to give her a hand but decided that might be a bad move right now. She got out and stepped past Davis. "It's all right, Daddy," she said. "He didn't do nothing bad. Look, he bought me some new shoes!"

"No shit." The man looked down at her feet, at the new shoes standing out white and clean against the muddy ground. "New shoes, huh? Git 'em off."

She stopped. "But Daddy—"

His hand came up fast; it made an audible crack against the side of her face. As she stumbled backward against the side of the truck he said, "God damn it, I *said* take them shoes off."

He spun about to face Davis. "You don't like that, Indian? Maybe you wanta do something about it?"

Davis did, in fact, want very much to beat this worthless *yoneg* within half an inch of his life. But he forced himself to stand still and keep his hands down at his sides. Start a punch-out in here, and almost certainly he'd wind up taking on half the men in the camp. Or using the gun on his belt, which would bring down a whole new kind of disaster.

Even then he might have gone for it, but he knew that anything he did to the man would later be taken out on Eva May. It was a pattern all too familiar to any cop.

She had one shoe off now and was jerking at the other, standing on one foot, leaning against the trailer, sobbing. She got it off and the man jerked it out of her hand. "Here." He half-turned and threw the shoe, hard, off somewhere beyond the old school bus that was parked across the lane. He bent down and picked up the

other shoe and hurled it in the opposite direction.

“Ain’t no damn Indian buying *nothing* for my kid,” he said. “Or going anywhere *near* her. You understand that, Chief?”

From inside the camper came the sound of a baby crying. A woman’s voice said, “Vernon? What’s going on, Vernon?”

“Now,” the man said, “you git out of here, woods nigger.”

The blood was singing in Davis’s ears and there was a taste in his mouth like old pennies. Still he managed to check himself, and to keep his voice steady as he said, “Sir, whatever you think of me, your daughter has a great gift. She should have the opportunity—”

“Listen close, Indian.” The man’s voice was low, now, and very intense. “You shut your mouth and you git back in that car and you drive outta here, right damn *now*, or else I’m gon’ find out if you got the guts to use that gun. Plenty white men around here, be glad to help stomp your dirty red ass.”

Davis glanced at Eva May, who was still leaning against the truck, weeping and holding the side of her face. Her bare white feet were already spotted with mud.

And then, because there was nothing else to do, he got back in the car and drove away. He didn’t look back. There was nothing there he wanted to see; nothing he wouldn’t already be seeing for a long time to come.

* * *

“Blackbear,” Captain Ridge said, next morning. “I don’t believe this.”

He was seated at his desk in his office, looking up at Davis. His big dark face was not that of a happy man.

“I got a call just now,” he said, “from the sheriff’s office over in Waynesville. Seems a reservation officer, man about your size and wearing sergeant’s stripes, picked up a teenage girl on the street. Made her get into a patrol car, tried to get her to have sex, even bought her presents to entice her. When she refused he took her back to the refugee camp and made threats against her family.”

Davis said, “Captain—”

“No,” Captain Ridge said, and slapped a hand down on his desk top. “No, Blackbear, I don’t want to hear it. See, you’re about to tell me it’s a lot of bullshit, and I *know* it’s a lot of bullshit, and it doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. You listen to me, Blackbear. Whoever those people are, you stay away from them. You stay out of Waynesville, till I tell you different. On duty or off, I don’t care.”

He leaned back in his chair. “Because if you show up there again, you’re going to be arrested—the sheriff just warned me—and there won’t be a thing I can

do about it. And you know what kind of chance you'll have in court over there. They like us even less than they do the squatters."

Davis said, "All right. I wasn't planning on it anyway."

* * *

But of course he went back. Later, he thought that the only surprising thing was that he waited as long as he did.

He went on Sunday morning. It was an off-duty day and he drove his own car; that, plus the nondescript civilian clothes he wore, ought to cut down the chances of his being recognized. He stopped at an all-hours one-stop in Maggie Valley and bought a pair of cheap sunglasses and a butt-ugly blue mesh-back cap with an emblem of a jumping fish on the front. Pulling the cap down low, checking himself out in the old Dodge's mirror, he decided he looked like a damn fool, but as camouflage it ought to help.

But when he got to the refugee camp he found it had all been for nothing. The truck was gone and so was Eva May's family; an elderly couple in a Buick were already setting up camp in the spot. No, they said, they didn't know anything; the place had been empty when they got here, just a little while ago.

Davis made a few cautious inquiries, without finding out much more. The woman in the school bus across the lane said she'd heard them leaving a little before daylight. She had no idea where they'd gone and doubted if anyone else did.

"People come and go," she said. "There's no keeping track. And they weren't what you'd call friendly neighbors."

Well, Davis thought as he drove back to the reservation, so much for that. He felt sad and empty inside, and disgusted with himself for feeling that way. Good thing the bars and liquor stores weren't open on Sunday; he could easily go on a serious drunk right now.

He was coming over the mountains east of Cherokee when he saw the smoke.

* * *

It was the worst fire of the decade. And could have been much worse; if the wind had shifted just right, it might have taken out the whole reservation. As it was, it was three days before the fire front crossed the reservation border and became somebody else's problem.

For Davis Blackbear it was a very long three days. Afterward, he estimated that he might have gotten three or four hours of sleep the whole time. None of the tribal police got any real time off, the whole time; it was one job after another, evacuating people from the fire's path, setting up roadblocks, keeping traffic unsnarled, and, in the rare times there was nothing else to do, joining the brutally overworked firefighting crews. By now almost every able-bodied man in the tribe

was helping fight the blaze; or else already out of action, being treated for burns or smoke inhalation or heat stroke.

At last the fire ate its way over the reservation boundary and into the national parkland beyond; and a few hours later, as Wednesday's sun slid down over the mountains, Davis Blackbear returned to his trailer and fell across the bed, without bothering to remove his sweaty uniform or even to kick off his ruined shoes. And lay like a dead man through the rest of the day and all through the night, until the next morning's light came in the trailer's windows; and then he got up and undressed and went back to bed and slept some more.

A little before noon he woke again, and knew before he opened his eyes what he was going to do.

* * *

Captain Ridge had told him to take the day off and rest up; but Ridge wasn't around when Davis came by the station, and nobody paid any attention when Davis left his car and drove off in one of the jeeps. Or stopped him when he drove past the roadblocks that were still in place around the fire zone; everybody was too exhausted to ask unnecessary questions.

It was a little disorienting, driving across the still-smoking land; the destruction had been so complete that nothing was recognizable. He almost missed a couple of turns before he found the place he was looking for.

A big green pickup truck was parked beside the road, bearing the insignia of the U.S. Forest Service. A big stocky white man in a green uniform stood beside it, watching as Davis drove up and parked the jeep and got out. "Afternoon," he said.

He stuck out a hand as Davis walked across the road. "Bob Lindblad," he said as Davis shook his hand. "Fire inspector. They sent me down to have a look, seeing as it's on federal land now."

He looked around and shook his head. "Hell of a thing," he said, and wiped his forehead with the back of his hand.

It certainly was a strange-looking scene. On the northeast side of the road, there was nothing but ruin, an ash-covered desolation studded with charred tree stumps, stretching up the hillside and over the ridge and out of sight. The other side of the road, however, appeared untouched; except for a thin coating of powdery ash on the bushes and the kudzu vines, it looked exactly as it had when Davis had come this way a couple of weeks ago.

The Forest Service man said, "Anybody live around here?"

"Not close, no. Used to be a family named Birdshooter, lived up that way, but they moved out a long time ago."

Lindblad nodded. "I saw some house foundations."

Davis said, "This was where it started?"

"Where it *was* started," Lindblad said. "Yes."

"Somebody set it?"

"No question about it." Lindblad waved a big hand. "Signs all over the place. They set it at half a dozen points along this road. The wind was at their backs, out of the southwest—that's why the other side of the road didn't take—so they weren't in any danger. Bastards," he added.

Davis said, "Find anything to show who did it?"

Lindblad shook his head. "Been too much traffic up and down this road, last few days, to make any sense of the tracks. I'm still looking, though."

"All right if I look around too?" Davis asked.

"Sure. Just holler," Lindblad said, "if you find anything. I'll be somewhere close by."

He walked off up the hill, his shoes kicking up little white puffs of ash. Davis watched him a minute and then started to walk along the road, looking at the chewed-up surface. The Forest Service guy was right, he thought, no way in hell could anybody sort out all these tracks and ruts. Over on the unburned downhill side, somebody had almost gone into the ditch—

Davis almost missed it. A single step left or right, or the sun at a different angle, and he'd never have seen the tiny shininess at the bottom of the brush-choked ditch. He bent down and groped, pushing aside a clod of roadway dirt, and felt something tangle around his fingers. He tugged gently and it came free. He straightened up and held up his hand in front of his face.

The sun glinted off the little silver dog as it swung from side to side at the end of the broken chain.

Up on the hillside, Lindblad called, "Find anything?"

Davis turned and looked. Lindblad was poking around near the ruins of the old house, nearly hidden by a couple of black tree stubs. His back was to the road.

"No," Davis yelled back, walking across the road. "Not a thing."

He drew back his arm and hurled the pendant high out over the black-and-gray waste. It flashed for an instant against the sky before vanishing, falling somewhere on the burned earth.

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