

The Inner Fire

By Pete Planisek

The urgent knocking at the door summoned her back to reality. Grace's mind was slower to react than her body. Not strange given the nature of her job, but still it was a surprise when she realized that she was already almost to the front door as the prescient knocking resumed. Grace breathed deeply as she paused before turning the lock. What time was it?

Her eyes drifted to a nearby clock – 3:23 A.M. More alert, she tried to look through the peephole, only to retract instantly as the hasty banging repeated itself.

“Sheriff's department,” a gruff sounding voice declared from the other side of the door.

Something in the tone stifled her inclination to verify the speaker's identity before opening the door. Heart racing, Grace beheld two uniformed men dutifully waiting before her. A strong smell filled the night air as a host of shapes moved hurriedly behind them.

“Miss, you need to evacuate everyone in this residence now,” the taller of the two deputies stated without perfunctory.

Grace opened her mouth but her question was answered before she could give it voice.

“Wildfire. Spreading in quick from the west,” the shorter officer rapidly explained.

“How long do I have?” Grace asked.

Suddenly both of the men's radio speakers erupted with an overlapping cacophony of orders and numbers that they were somehow able to distinguish.

“Unit 7, acknowledged. We’re done here,” the taller man reported to the dispatcher.

“Not long. Leave your belongings and drive east – hurry.” the shorter officer instructed Grace a moment before both men sprinted to their idling cruiser and vanished into the darkness.

As they left, Grace noticed the unnatural glow ebbing and rising to the west. Even in the dark she could tell that a significant number of the court’s residents had already left. Those that remained were racing between their vehicles and homes, cursing and honking at each other as they tried to leave, or helping other neighbors pack. Her skin felt clammy. She shifted uncertainly as a man ran in her direction.

“Do you have a car? There’s room with us,” he alerted Grace.

Her eyes tracked back to the unwelcome glow just beyond the western ridge of mountains.

“I have to call an ambulance,” she began, “Mrs. Newbrandt can’t ...”

She stopped as the man nodded and fled back across the lawn to his own family.

Grace turned from the door just as the power to the house flickered into nothing. She fumbled awkwardly to the spot on the ancient end table where she’d left her phone. Should she call 911 or the service first? It didn’t matter. Grace punched numbers in but nothing happened. She studied the screen only to discover the phone reporting it was unable to connect. The towers must be damaged or gone and the landline had been disconnected the past five days.

The house was becoming rich with the scent of smoke. Grace ran to the door in time to see the man who'd come to check on her driving away with his family. The court looked deserted and the ominous glow now threatened to explode on top of the ridge.

Grace shut the door and began to grope her way towards Mrs. Newbrandt's master bedroom. She hated this job. They always stuck her with the terminal patients or those suffering from any number of dementias. Why? She was too nice, too pure. The older home healthcare assistants said she was just paying her dues, which is all Grace ever seemed to be doing. Four years ago she'd moved from Hawaii intent on launching her acting career here. Her current job was meant to be a temporary means to an end but slowly it was becoming all she had.

The pursuit of her dreams now rested on her ability to tolerate the long, lonely hours of caring for other people's elderly relations. Of bathing them, feeding them, issuing medicine, even ensuring they kept breathing. Essentially she spent more time living in service of the dying than she did living her own life. It was cheaper to live with her patients and more convenient. But it left little time to go to auditions, hang out with the few friends she'd been able to meet, or even date. She rarely managed to get away from the house and her invalid patient. The house smelled of disinfectant and decay; of stale, re-circulated air too long trapped by closed windows.

She lived in service to people who could afford not to be burdened by caring for the older members of their family. In most cases the relatives of her patients never visited. Grace spent hour after hour either alone or listening to her charges' incoherent babbling about people and places she would never know, if they'd ever even existed.

Grace stopped in the doorway, suddenly aware that the normal hiss of the oxygen tank and regular pulses from the other monitoring machinery were idle. But the shallow, rattling breath of her patient remained constant. Mrs. Newbrandt's mysterious family refused to pay for a generator since they were selling the house and had disconnected the landline and cable, afraid the home healthcare worker might financially abuse such privileges. If not for paperwork delays, the old woman was to have been in a hospice center two days ago and Grace far from here. But they remained.

The young woman darkly pondered her options. She couldn't move Mrs. Newbrandt alone. The older woman was too physically fragile and the medical bed she rested in was too wide to fit through the doorway. Grace coughed as she tied a wet bandana over her mouth before doing likewise to her patient. Resentment flashed through her as she beheld the wizened figure on the bed.

Why was this her problem? She didn't know this woman or her family. Mrs. Newbrandt, among a host of other lethal ailments, suffered from dementia. She was completely incapable of remembering or conversing with Grace despite the fact that the young woman had been her sole companion for nearly eleven months. Caring for this woman all that time only kept Grace further and further away from achieving her dreams, of living.

What would happen if she died tonight? She was already terminal. Did it matter? No one else seemed to care. Grace could still escape in her car. All she needed to do was walk into the other room, retrieve the keys, and shut the door behind her. The family would probably be relieved the whole affair was over. The fire wasn't her fault. They couldn't really expect her to stay. Grace began to back away from the bed. But what if she lost her job? What if they sued

her? She couldn't even afford to fly home right now. Maybe she should stay here, hope the house was spared.

The momentary flicker of a flashlight from the main room attracted her attention. Her pulse quickened. Maybe the officers had returned. Perhaps the neighbor who'd fled was back. Grace froze as she stepped out of the bedroom to find a gun pointed at her.

"On the ground," a man's authoritative voice commanded.

"Please don't shoot," she cried as she swiftly sank to the floor.

It was easier to breath down here.

"I'm a home healthcare worker. My patient, Mrs. Newbrandt, is in the other room. I need help moving her."

"Stay down," the man responded. "The money, the valuables, where are they?"

"What?"

"I don't have time for this. Tell me before I count to three. One," the voice began.

"There aren't any valuables," Grace asserted.

Were there?

"Two."

"I swear!"

"Three."

Her words tumbled out rapidly in a trembling plea.

“She’s dying. She’s supposed to be at hospice. The family’s left nothing here. I swear. Please!”

Each precious, silent moment that followed was punctuated by the thundering pulse of her heartbeat. She could feel the floor vibrating beneath her with each pulse. The light was shown down directly into her face. She wanted to vomit.

“You’re crazy,” the man’s voice said. “Leave her and go.”

Grace’s fingers stretched out.

“I can’t just leave ...”

The light was taken away from her eyes.

“If she’s dying already just leave her,” the looter intoned. “Or stay here and die.”

The weight of the suggestion echoed in her soul as she looked up to the masked face of the looter. He lowered his gun and flashlight and held out a gloved hand to help her up. He was strong. The smoke was thicker now as she stood; the glow from the fire more intense.

“You could help me. Help me move her,” Grace said hopefully.

The man immediately turned and began to walk toward the door. She must make her choice now.

“I’ll help you. I’ll help you!” she cried running after him.

He raised the gun. She stopped.

“I’ve been in this neighborhood for months. I know the houses you should loot. I’ll help you,” she desperately asserted.

“I’ve lived here for years. I don’t need your help,” the masked figure coolly replied.

“I’m nearly broke,” Grace confessed. “All this is about to be ash. I’ll help.”

The looter studied her a moment.

“Okay,” he said, waving the gun toward the door.

“We keep what we find,” she declared as he joined her outside.

The stranger nodded.

“We keep what we find,” he repeated.

Both noted the flames now visible on the mountain side. Grace pointed to four houses. The other indicated which ones he was taking and headed off to search them. How did he intend to escape? There didn’t appear to be some type of vehicle ready to outrun the steadily approaching fire. She dismissed the issue. Time was short.

Grace entered the first of her two houses to search. She stopped only a moment to remoisten the bandana over her mouth. Smoke was stinging her eyes, which were watering constantly now. She wished she had a pair of work goggles like her obscure criminal counterpart. His earlier remark made it clear that he must be a local. Would she recognize him?

Her eyes involuntarily tracked to the open door. Maybe he intended to abandon her while she searched or rob her after. What if they survived, would one turn the other one in? Desperate

for money she'd pocketed a few items from patients homes before and never been caught. She was clever enough to deal with him. Grace could claim he'd forced her to do it. Or she could deal with him now. Maybe she could scare him off or get away in her car before he was done with his own crimes.

Grace managed to find some cash but left most of the heavier valuables untouched. The second home, however, yielded a small fortune in silverware and jewelry, which she shoved unceremoniously into a bag. Her search also yielded one other noteworthy find – a handgun. A kitchen knife would have been sufficient but now she was on equal footing with the looter. As she descended to the first floor, she paused only a moment to study the family pictures in the stairwell. They would have lost all of this anyway, Grace decided. It didn't matter who they were. Why should it matter if she took it? If her job paid a fair wage she wouldn't even have to resort to this.

Upon exiting the second home, Grace discovered the fire was much closer. One of the homes at the opening to the court was now smoking as flames began to eat into it. Smoke hung dense over the area and she was compelled to remain low to the ground in order to breathe.

Grace slunk toward Mrs. Newbrandt's house but paused. A human form was moving out there, as if it were searching for her. She checked her weapon. It held two rounds. If she was going to reach her car she'd either have to confront the man or trust him. The smoke would hide her. Maybe she could fire in his direction and scare the looter off.

She raised the weapon as her mother had taught her. It was hard to aim. Grace coughed and blinked involuntarily as she shot into the smoke. She couldn't see the figure. Better to save

the last shot in case he was still lurking. Fixing the safety in place, Grace began moving forward again. She could feel the heat from the fire behind her, greedy to consume her life.

A moan attracted her attention before she reached it. She sought out the noise expecting to find the looter. Instead, to her great surprise, the moan turned out to be from a partially conscious wildfire fireman. His eyes widened visibly at the sight of her. If he was here there must be others Grace decided.

“Help! Help!!!!” she screamed, choking on soot.

The fireman tried to speak but only a sick gasp escaped before he collapsed into unconsciousness.

“No, I wasn’t aiming,” she couldn’t even finish the thought as she noticed the red stain on the side of his shirt.

“No,” Grace said numbly as her fingers pressed into the warm blood on the pavement.

She cast her eyes about for some means of salvation. They found one in the radio he’d dropped. She inched toward it. She could feel the flames from the towering wave of fire as it steadily engulfed more of the court’s homes. Her fingers gripped their prize.

“Hello. Hello,” she yelled into the radio over the noise of the inferno. She covered her eyes as the buried gas line to a house ignited. The roar was deafening. Had she heard a reply on the radio?

“Three persons. Firefighter. Ten Acre Road and Canyon Court. 471 Canyon Court. Three persons! Help us!” she yelled before breaking down into a crippling coughing fit. A

hailstorm of smoke and debris shot past her overhead. She tried to find Mrs. Newbrandt's house but was unable to see much of anything in the shifting maelstrom. The searing winds stole her breath and her senses succumbed.

"Good morning, hero," a voice said to her.

Grace's mouth tasted like ash.

"What? What happened?" she asked as she fought to resolve the stinging sensation when she attempted to open her eyes.

"You made it. You're a hero," the voice repeated. "Nurse will be here in a moment."

She could make out the sound of a button being clicked. Memories returned.

"I'm not a hero," Grace whispered.

"Well, the media says otherwise. You stay behind in a wildfire to try and save an old woman, end up saving a firefighter who'd been attacked by a looter. Yes, Grace, you're a true hero. In fact, you're famous. The media can't wait to come in here and talk to you."

Grace tried again to open her stinging eyes.

"The others are alive?"

"Unfortunately the fireman is in a coma but Mrs. Newbrandt is resting comfortably at a hospice center right now. Thank goodness you were able to drive them down the mountain in time," the man observed.

“I never drove them down the mountain,” Grace said as her vision began to clear.

The uniformed officer rose and began to head for the door but paused to fix her with familiar eyes. She could not remember ever seeing his face before but she knew this man. An unwelcome certainty gripped her seconds before the man spoke.

“I’ve taken care of the evidence. I’m sure we’ll be speaking again, Grace. Fame is sure to have its financial benefits and after all, we keep what we find.”



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