

FOREST FIRE

Larry Scott

Editor's note: This fictional piece captures the author's mood following the 2002 Big Elk Fire, part of which he witnessed from his home near Colorado's Roosevelt National Forest. The setting is in nearby Rocky Mountain National Park, not far from Estes Park, CO.

To anyone other than a park ranger, the orange sun would have been a moment of spectacular beauty as it rested on the spiny north shoulder of Mount Zebulon. Each evening from his steel fire tower he had watched with reverence as it slipped behind the far edge of the Mummy Mountain range. Those moments of golden light had always been a quiet benediction to the life that was his and the occupation he had chosen.

But not tonight.

Before him, in a death shroud of black embers and sputtering charred logs, lay what remained of his stewardship. In the mush of forest pine

needles still soaked with retardant chemicals was the edge of the fire-line where the holocaust had made its final death leap. Beyond, to the west, still venting small gasps of steam, lay the vale where, only days before, he had watched a family of deer and a single elk graze quietly across the summer meadow grass. What had been a grandmother's variegated quilt of grass and flowers now spread in a dense black carpet of destruction extending to the clogged stream that circumscribed the base of the mountain.

Fitfully, the brook attempted to regain its ancient role as sculptor of the universe as it pushed the detritus of the fire into what had been a basin

of crystal water at the far edge of the meadow. Tomorrow, from the lake's depth the Rainbows would float to the top, rimming its shores with their cadavers.

There was no joy in this sunset for the park ranger.

He stood silently trying not to draw into his lungs the stench of the last 24 hours. The sun fell behind the mountain and darkness hurried into the crevasses and shadows around him. There was a stirring, and from a short distance behind him crept a small, darkly furred animal. The marmot raised itself and with the ranger stared into the sadness that yesterday was their home.



Larry Scott has worked as a banker and an attorney. He lives in Loveland, CO.

The historic Eightmile Lookout on the San Juan National Forest, CO, was used until the 1970s. Photo: Mark Roper, USDA Forest Service, San Juan–Rio Grande National Forest, Pagosa Ranger District, Pagosa Springs, CO, 2002.