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*Henry David*

*They shall say I ought to have known better.* This is what occurs to Henry David as he squats on the bank of Fair Haven Bay, a third of the distance from Mount Misery to the center of Concord. *The gossips and fibbertigibbets, with little else to occupy their minds, shall call me "wastrel" and "rascal."* Henry has heard these insults before, dismissive whispers trailing just within earshot, but the words surprise him now, coming as they do seemingly from the ether, mute and without cause. He wants only to light a small fire, enough to cook a simple meal, nothing more, hardly an undertaking momentous enough to give rise to premonitions such as these. He tells himself he will record them later in his journal, along with the other indiscriminate thoughts that flit through his head like so much pollen. He is certain that one day he will make something of them, or will, at least, belatedly reckon their import.

The wind sweeps a chattering funnel of dead leaves between his knees and teases the brim of his straw hat and Henry tries to concentrate on what he is doing. Without standing, he lifts his left foot and drags a brittle friction match across the sole of his boot, then watches the red tip flare and expire in the chill wind before he can transfer the flame. It is not unusually cold for the last day of April in Massachusetts, but the wind is strong and there has been no rain for weeks. The trees surrounding Concord and covering the sloped terrain of nearby Walden appear stunned

by the drought, reluctant to reveal the swollen green buds still waiting for spring to arrive. Henry recalls the screechings of their little boat as its keel scraped along the riverbed earlier that morning, and he wonders, briefly, if he was meant to heed these sounds as a warning.

He is not alone. Standing above him, Edward Sherman Hoar, his sole companion, holds aloft a string of fish and examines the oily glistening of inanimate scales. A trickle of water drops from the string and lands on Henry's shoulder. Edward grins in apology. Henry had hoped for solitude today—an occasion to explore the uncertainties he has had little time to consider while helping his father make pencils in the long sheds behind their home—but he needed a boat for the excursion, and he prefers not to row alone, lest the loneliness remind him that his brother John will never again take a turn at the oars. Edward Sherman Hoar is several years Henry's junior, the younger brother of one of Henry's former classmates, the son of Squire Hoar (one of Concord's most esteemed patriarchs), and Edward admires Henry, looks to him for guidance. Edward calls himself a disciple of nature and he is an earnest student, eager to benefit from Henry's experience.

In all likelihood, Henry thinks, Edward will never need to learn self-reliance with ax and rope, since the inheritance that awaits him is one to be coveted. But Edward is not entirely without burdens. He has recently returned from California trailing clouds of disgrace, and Henry understands that Edward wishes to put his indiscretions behind him, wants only to resume his life in New England, to finish his final year at Harvard and savor the long, promising foreshadow of days yet unspent. Anxious for Henry's approval, Edward says he will not become a banker like his father, says he will refuse the political legacy that is his due, says he will leave that to his older brothers and will, instead, pursue a life of solemn contemplation. Edward is un-

certain of his career, but he at least knows the sort of man he will become.

Henry longs for the assuredness he sometimes sees in the eyes of younger men. His mother, Cynthia, has recently taken another lodger into their crowded home: a young man named Isaac Hecker who, like Henry, appears unsettled as to what manner of life he will lead. Isaac has told Henry how he lived for a time among the philosophers at Brook Farm and then at Fruitlands, but now he says he cannot be driven from the certainty of his books. Isaac is not easily distracted by bright skies or promising winds, and Henry envies the singular attention he devotes to his study of classical languages and the spiritual writings of Orestes Brownson.

Plagued by indecision, Henry still defines his life by what it is not. He is *not* a poet, though he has written poetry. He is *not* a philosopher, though he has spent many quiet nights examining his soul until its clumsy scaffolding seemed but a transparent nuisance. He is *not* an explorer, though he feels more at home beneath a canopy of trees than in the shadows of rooftops and steeples. He has surveyed fields, framed houses, and assembled odd machines for obscure ends, but he does *not* count himself a master of any of these trades. Henry still has no idea how he will employ the life that stretches before him, and today he has come to the edge of the woods to seek respite from his indifferent labors.

Henry and Edward have only three matches, and now two lie black and twisted like question marks in the dirt. Edward forgot to bring the oilcloth-wrapped matches that he purchased for the trip, but they met a shoemaker on the river with enough to spare. Edward watches with interest; fish dangling from one hand, he opens his coat and tries to provide shelter. They agree that it is too windy to start a fire. It seems very likely that they will have to

settle for a cold meal after all. Henry frowns and scratches the wild line of beard that faintly circles his chin from ear to ear. Crouching, he is an assortment of sharp angles: elbows, knees, shoulders, nose. Thick lips exaggerate his frown and make it seem as though he were communicating some intuited foreknowledge of the mistake he is about to make. Edward returns to the boat to retrieve a board that might serve as a windbreak, but Henry does not wait. He is a proven outdoorsman; he knows what he is doing. Blocking the wind with his torso, Henry strikes the third match and leans forward over the bowl of a hollow pine stump, half hugging the crude hearth in which he intends to boil their string of fish into a chowder. He whispers to the kindling a sweet and urgent seduction, and the handfuls of dry grass and twigs piled in the stump suddenly ignite and the young fire nips at his fingertips. The wind lifts the straw hat from his head and tosses it playfully into the flames. He understands already that it is too late.

Henry stands and watches helplessly as the small fire he has birthed flows like brilliant liquid over the tree stump's ragged edges and into the dead grass and pine needles that carpet the barren slope from the water's edge to the lip of the woods. It is such a diversion from his intentions that he cannot believe it is happening. For the first few seconds he can only stare at the impossibility blooming before him, and it is at this moment that he recalls one of his earliest lessons, a lesson learned in the pre-history of his youth, when he was still called David Henry, when he still bore his given names so ordered to honor the paternal uncle he would never meet. The lesson was a simple one: *for every cause, an effect*. The edification conveyed from old name to new: *His older brother, John, standing on a chair, holding aloft a dented tin cup brimful with water. John taking unsteady aim—a twist of the wrist and the quivering meniscus breaks. The shimmering water spills*

*earthward, splashes into the bottom of the waiting glass pitcher on the tabletop. For a moment, pitcher and cup are connected by a shivering, silver rope, making and unmaking itself in a sequence of tiny, sparkling miracles. The cup empties, the pitcher fills, the transfer follows itself to its own end, bubbles rise in the churning water and subside. He learns that all things are connected in this way; every result bears within itself the trace of its source, an endless chain linking infinite past to infinite future. Later, young David Henry repeats the experiment on his own—a repetition unsupervised—the objects reversed, glass pitcher held high. The glistening arc of water overruns the waiting cup, misses its mark, splashes over table and chair—the pitcher slipping from defeated fingers, striking the stone floor, shattering into jagged shards. Between cause and effect, intention is but an onlooker. His brother John understands, commiserates. Their mother disapproves. Punishment is duly meted out.*

Henry's recollection returns in fragments, the detritus of experience, a patchwork of truths a priori—that is the graceless name by which his friend Waldo refers to such things. A priori knowledge cannot be learned, only awakened. Such is the essence of the world, the nameless thing-in-itself, a mélange of a priori truths that reside dormant within each man from the moment he is born.

Henry acknowledges the truth of his childhood lesson as he runs frantically along the margin of the knee-high fire in the yellow-brown grass, flapping his arms to no real effect. It seems the right thing to do, that he might shoo the migrating flames back toward the tree stump like so many bright-winged sparrows. He is silent as he does so, as if he thought he might keep the fire a secret and extinguish it by himself before anyone can learn of his foolishness. The fire crackles like a straw broom on cobblestones, but the only sound from Henry is the muffled slap of his coat sleeves. He wants to call Edward back from the boat but is too

ashamed of his carelessness. The fire spreads rapidly, a bright wave rolling toward the trees, and Henry pursues the fleeing consequences of his actions with the dogged tenacity of regret itself. He runs and flaps his arms at the flames, breathes in smoke and heat. The fire grows louder, popping and snorting as it gallops up the slope. Henry races around its perimeter, stomping at the edges of the calamity, marking its increasing size with each pass, and he begins to feel the exertion in his chest, feels the sinews tightening like bootlaces woven through his ribs.

Henry knows he cannot contain the growing blaze on his own. At last he cries out for help, but Edward is already there, half hidden by the swirls of dirt he raises with the board he has brought from the boat. Fair-haired and slight of build, Edward is not so long-limbed as Henry, less angular, and his clean-shaven cheeks are bright with the admissions of one who, despite his ambitions, has actually spent little time out of doors. The slightest effort brings his blood to the surface. Henry realizes that Edward is shouting at him, pleading for instructions, but Henry does not know how to respond.

“What should we do? What should we do?” Edward coughs from the smoke, spits at the fire. “What should we do?”

Henry searches for an answer as he kicks desperately at the flames, but the first words that come to mind are *wastrel* and *rascal*.

Edward swings at the burning grass with the board, and Henry sees that the action only fans the flames, which billow and ripple like an army of yellow flags.

“Use your feet,” Henry says. “Like this.” He demonstrates, looking a bit like a turkey scratching in the dirt.

“This way?”

“That’s it. And there, behind you.” Henry points past his companion.

Edward spins about and stomps on the flames that have darted between his legs.

“And there, too!” Edward shouts, and points behind Henry. The fire is suddenly everywhere.

They obey each other’s directions as if playing a game, two men hopping about in the dead grass, scattering glowing pine needles like sparks. Henry tries to swallow the panic seeping up into his throat like acid. If he accepts the terrible possibility of what might come to pass, he fears his feet will abandon their useless thrashing. He assumes that Edward thinks the same, and so they treat this as a competition to see which man might stomp the fastest and the longest, each pausing only to check his progress against the other. But the fire does not hesitate, does not pause to catch its breath or check its direction. It does not follow the rules of the improvised game. Encouraged by the wind, it defies gravity and flows up the gentle incline toward the trees.

“Good God!” Edward cries.

Henry looks up, traces the arc of Edward’s arm, and sees a host of elfin flames leaping into the air, one upon the other, riding the wind. The flames pitch themselves headlong toward the trees, but they fall short and cannot escape the crush of Henry’s heel. The bottom of his boots smolder from stomping on the burning grass; his white shirt is visible through new holes in his jacket, crusted wounds in the coarse fabric marking the landings of flying embers.

Henry thinks of the supplies they brought in the boat: fishing pole, net, blanket, knife, spoon, rope, a hard penny loaf and some potatoes—nothing that might intimidate a fire. Then he remembers the pail and the thought energizes him.

“The pail! Edward, fetch the pail and pass it to me as full as you can carry!”

Edward follows the orders at once. They form a two-man bucket brigade, splitting the distance to the water’s edge between

them. Fair Haven Bay is little more than a few strides away, and within a minute they have dumped three buckets of water into the blaze, but to no effect. In the time it takes them to refill the small bucket, the flames reclaim the dampened patch of earth and more. Two men with a bucket have no chance against the growing inferno. The fire scorns their efforts, forms a rude phalanx, and marches on the woods.

Henry can no longer ignore the desperation swelling in his chest. It seems they cannot possibly keep up, but he knows they must try to halt the advance before the flames reach the woods. Once the fire is among the trees, there will be no stopping it. It will spread unchecked to Well Meadow Brook on the east, and west to the Sudbury River, a hundred acres or more. And that is not the worst of it, Henry thinks. If they cannot stop it, the fire will race north to Fair Haven Hill, and beyond that Walden Pond, and beyond that . . . *Concord*. Henry David Thoreau has made no mark upon the world and has little aspiration to do so, but he does not want to be remembered as the man who reduced the town of Concord to ashes.

“Well, where will this end?” Edward calls out, as if reading Henry’s thoughts.

Henry tries to answer, wants to reassure his young friend that he is master of the fire he has created, that his experience has prepared him for this, but the fear of what may come catches in his throat. Henry throws his arms wide, and the gesture looks more like an indifferent shrug than a reply.

“It will go to town,” Henry says, barely audible above the crackling rush.

Edward shakes his head, reluctant to disagree with the man he admires, so Henry repeats his prediction, louder this time.

“If we do not stop it, this *will* go to the town!”

The fire advances in a crooked line a dozen times the length of

Henry's arm. The pine needles, though quick to ignite, are easily spent, hardly fuel enough to sustain the flames for more than a few seconds at a time. And the fire knows this; it behaves in accordance with its own set of a priori truths. It must keep moving and consuming to survive. The two men stomp in the grass like animals possessed, but already the fire senses the nearness of the woods. Like flowers turning sunward, the flames reach for the trees.

Henry sees Edward kicking at a burning bush, and he sees the shining bay in the distance, where they enjoyed the flawless morning, floating peacefully beneath guiltless clouds, past whispering bulrushes and dwarf willows, past the alders, birches, oaks, and maples that seemed to stretch and yawn in drowsy expectation of the greener months ahead: a perfect April day. Even now, Henry thinks, somewhere beyond the rising dome of smoke and flame, that day continues unaware, and their day might have continued likewise if not for Edward's insistence that they paddle ashore and prepare a fish chowder for their midday meal. And why not? Henry is a proven fisherman. Sometimes he has felt pangs of guilt over the silver bodies of pickerel and alewives flipping and gasping on the bottom of the boat in unblinking desperation, but he accepts this as an unpleasant inevitability. All things become food for other things, even in the cold expanse of the universe, where pinpoint suns spew planets and consume vast quantities of stellar stuff in their infernal engines. *Sympathy*—that most human tendency to imbue all things with attributes of the self—must bow to *necessity*. But now the fish will go uneaten, a meaningless sacrifice, an irreversible offense to nature.

Edward insisted on the fish chowder, but it was Henry who struck the match. *Cause and effect*. In his twenty-six years, Henry has begotten fires a thousand times before. With no dire consequence, he once kindled a riotous bonfire atop Wachusett Mountain merely to cook a humble breakfast. He has gathered kindling,

sparked flints, struck friction matches, but he has never witnessed any disobedience from his flickering progeny. He has no plan for quenching a blaze such as this; he can only think of ways to slow the loss. Should he go for help? It would take a man with stouter lungs than his more than half an hour to reach Concord at a full run, and at least as long for volunteers to assemble and return. How far would the fire spread, unchecked, in that time? Henry's mind wanders, but his feet continue their stomping. Edward shouts at the flames—a guttural, animal cry—and the sound brings Henry back to himself.

“There and there!” Henry calls out, pointing behind Edward. “That’s it!”

Edward attacks the colonies of flame where Henry points. His feet leave blackened prints in the dirt as he beats back the swirling disorder.

“I believe we might yet win!” Edward shouts.

Henry is not so certain. He pictures the town of Concord under siege, white clapboard homes and redbrick storefronts ablaze, and he is terrified that he and Edward will fail to halt the flames in time. The fire lurches toward the trees, hungry for the brittle kindling. Henry removes his jacket and beats the flames hissing in the brush. He stops abruptly, retrieves a small book from the inside breast pocket, shoves it into the waistband of his trousers, and resumes. Edward imitates his friend, both men swinging their jackets like clubs, and they convince themselves with nods and grunts that they are making headway. They cling to the lie to keep themselves from surrendering. The flames struggle under the assault, and Henry and Edward redouble their efforts; their backward march slows at the edge of the woods. With his shoulder blades nearly touching the buckled thigh of a towering pine, Henry lashes out at the flames, pumps his arms furiously. His chest tightens, hungry for air. His brown jacket turns gray with ash.

And then a surprise—a momentary shift in the wind and they suddenly begin taking back what the fire has recently stolen. Henry and Edward swing and kick in a pantomime of madness, and the fire staggers back over what it has already burned. Henry's eyes sting from smoke and sweat. The fire is almost at the trees, but Henry sees that it is running out of grass and he begins to take comfort in Edward's naïve hope. The entire slope, from the water's edge to the beginning of the woods, is a charred scab and now the fire has no retreat. The remaining line of flames must push past Henry and Edward and into the trees if the blaze is to survive. Edward howls, defiant, a soldier's scream of impending victory dearly bought. The flames cower under the relentless thrashing; they dissipate, suffocate, and try to outflank the two men. Henry increases his efforts. His knees feel as though they could shake loose under the vicious stomping; his shoulders ache in their orbits. He grows dizzy from the exertion, but the thought that they might succeed drives him on. A dark space opens as the fire loses momentum, and Henry steps into the breach, stands astride the gap he has created. In the scorched grass, scattered bright tongues of circumscribed chaos sputter, cough, and expire. He swings at the stranded flames and crushes them underfoot.

Within moments their job seems nearly done, and Henry allows himself to answer the exhaustion in his limbs. Around them the blackened earth hisses. Edward laughs, and Henry is embarrassed for having panicked in front of his young friend. Already, in the part of his brain where memory assembles itself, the fierce blaze is becoming little more than an amusing footnote to their day, an anecdote of tragedy narrowly averted, but he shudders when he thinks of what might have happened. Henry hears a splintered shriek behind him, a cackle of triumph. He turns and looks at Edward, but he sees that his companion is not laughing. Henry follows Edward's gaze, looks up into the naked extremities

*WOODSBURNER*

of the woods budding unbloomed, and then he knows. He knows that nature will not be rushed. He knows that each spring comes calling as coyly as the last, for rebirth is always a slow and then sudden transformation. Overhead, he sees a throng of clever flames crouching in the branches of a sleeping birch.