

Dead and Down

Mary Ellen Barnes

“*Populus tremuloides*, the quaking aspen,” Professor Roger Benton began. Lifting his water bottle to his lips, he silently cursed the heat. Instead of lecturing on plant biology in Kino College’s summer session, tomorrow he’d be cooling off under Mount Lemmon’s aspen trees.

“When conifers grow tall and cut off sunlight to them, aspens usually fail. In the normal successional pattern their roots lie dormant until a fire clears the forest and sunlight returns. Healthy aspen groves need periodic cleansing fires. A hundred years ago certain lame-brained fossils heading the Forest Service decided all fires must be extinguished by ten in the morning the day after their discovery.”

Hell, they really don’t care about this. Probably texting on their cell phones. Benton took another sip of water. Then a hand went up in the back row.

“Terry?”

“Didn’t the Forest Service change this policy?”

“Good question. Yes it did, but it took them a century to see the light.” Benton continued. “Most aspens are clones, connected underground in an extensive parent root system. Normally, they reproduce asexually. Due to clonal reproduction, each tree in aspen stands is the same size. Have the same number of leaves. All turn yellow on the same day. What a remarkable phenomenon. Benton stuffed his notes into his briefcase. “Test on Monday. On Chapter Seven.”

Tiffani fluttered up to his desk, followed by her sidekick, Melissa. “Professor Benton, do those poor aspen trees have to, like, reproduce without sex? Man, that’s no fun.”

“Ta-ta, ladies. See you Monday.” Tiffani must consider him an eligible bachelor and maybe wants to date him. Not with the likes of that bubblehead with the rainbow-colored hair.

In the parking lot the professor filled his pipe and lit it. A weekend on Mount Lemmon. Just what he needed. Lately, he’d been edgy. Couldn’t seem to finish his monograph on Mount Lemmon’s aspen groves. Stressing their deplorable condition.

Roger climbed the winding stone steps to the U. S. Forest Service Lemmon Rock Station to see his older brother. A high school English teacher, Mark Benton served as a summer lookout at Lemmon Rock. Mark had played sand lot baseball with him, helped him build model airplanes, and protected him from school bullies.

Mark opened the door of the one-room cabin and slapped his brother on the back. “Hi Rog, come on in. You’re just in time to meet my friends. Stay inside and watch through the window so you don’t spook them.”

At the top of the steps Mark raised his arm and whistled. Soon a squirrel and her three babies scampered up to him. He took peanuts from his pocket, laying them on a step. After the squirrels had gobbled them, he scattered a few more before he came in. “That’s Mindy and her family.”

“Clever. You trained your little friends well. How’s it going, Mark?”

“I’m OK. But the forest is really suffering from this drought. Soon as it rains, I’ll be out of here. Vegetate at the cabin with Helen and Gail for the rest of the summer.”

“Sure nice of Helen to invite me up for the weekend. Well, I better get going. Promised your daughter a game of Sorry.”

“Gail has the board all set up. She’s just waiting to lick you.”

“Oh I know her. One game won’t be enough for that little Sorry champion.”

On Sunday afternoon of that weekend Roger stowed water, an apple, his pipe, and his favorite English tobacco. He set out on the Aspen Trail, winding up through pines to a shady aspen grove. He stretched out under his beloved trees. Sheer paradise.

From the lookout station Mark Benton saw a wisp of smoke drifting up two days later. He swiveled the fire finder—a device with a ring and a pair of sights—in its direction. Calculating its position, he reported the new start to the U. S. Forest Service, Southwest Zone: “July 17, 2:45 p. m. W. side Marshall Mtn—Aspen trail, 1/10 acre—no flame.” A few minutes later he radioed in a second report: the smoke came from a flame-engulfed dead tree on the Aspen Trail. Mark signed off. He figured the crew at Palisade Ranger Station would easily snuff it out.

Mark soon learned how wrong he’d been. Despite the unified attack of 200 firefighters that U.S. interagency resources provided, in the next two days, the fire crept toward Summerhaven, only three miles away. Tuesday afternoon Mount Lemmon residents were evacuated, and on Thursday the USFS pulled out all personnel moments before a wall of fire swept over the mountain, leaving Summerhaven in cinders and ashes.

Roger heard his cell phone chime. “Hello, Mark. Been trying to reach you. . . . Oh no, Mark, your cabin burned? Hell! You must be devastated. . . .” Roger’s voice broke. “Sorry. I’m so sorry. Want to stay here? . . . That’s good. Helen’s folks will be a comfort to her. Tell her how sorry I am. Tell little Gail too. . . . Let me know how I can help.” Roger lit his pipe and went out to the balcony. Ominous clouds of smoke spiraled up from the Catalina Mountains.

For the next two weeks Roger watched the fire's progress. Clouds of smoke obscured the mountains by day, a band of bright orange flame crawled across them each night. One evening he drove to the foothills northwest of Tucson and parked to watch the flames. Hell, his aspens wouldn't survive this firestorm. He sank his face in his hands and cried. He lifted up wet fingers. They quaked like aspen leaves in a breeze.

The next day, his jaws clamped on the stem of his pipe, Roger inhaled deeply as he punched in digits on his cell phone. "Happy July Fourth! Scratch that, Hank. This terrible fire. I'm sure it's miserable trying to contain it. . . . Hank, have you got a minute? . . . Thanks. I'm gathering data for my lectures. What caused the fire? A lightning strike? . . . I thought that was the most likely."

He breathed out a long stream of smoke and set his pipe in the ash tray. . . . Come on, Roger, gather your wits. As the incident commander, what was your first task? . . . Slow down, Hank, I'm taking notes."

Roger listened and wrote in his own shorthand. "Yep, got it. Thanks a lot, Hank. Keep the faith, my friend."

He read over his notes. "Hank dispatched two engines. Phoned in initial resource order. Radioed for air support. Drove to Aspen trailhead. ML Fire in initial attack. Hank & ML Fire chief led in 22 firefighters. Lugged backpacks, tools, chain saws. Laid-down fire. Fuels light to moderate. Easy to control at 1st. 5 p.m. wind rose. Flames roared uphill. Crown fire. Burned over escape route. Hank ordered retreat. Hated that."

He reread them. Good. That's tomorrow's lecture. His pipe had gone out. He whacked it against the ashtray to empty it and broke the stem. His best cherry wood pipe. "Shit!"

. . . .

That evening Roger watched the six o'clock newscast. It opened with an aerial view of smoke billowing above bright orange flames. Then anchor Chuck Vincent introduced Mount Lemmon Fire Chief Peter Clarke and firefighter George Kennedy.

Vincent turned to the fire chief. "Mr. Clarke, I know the forest was bone-dry. But could you tell us what other factors contributed to the rapid advance of the Aspen Fire?"

"It was manageable the first few hours. Then the wind came up and it immediately jumped to the treetops. Became a crown fire. Roared across the forest canopy."

"What was your main job when the flames moved toward Summerhaven that night?"

"Structure protection. To keep flames from reaching cabins. We thinned fuel. Pulled out everything dead and down."

"Dead and down?" Vincent raised an eyebrow.

"That's duff on the forest floor—decayed bark, branches, logs. Fuel for fire. The first night we put out spot fires that could take out cabins. Dangerous work. Heroes were made that night."

"We know how brave you and your firemen are. Can't thank you enough." The newscaster turned to his other guest. "I'll bet you're one of those heroes, Mr. Kennedy."

"Nah, I wouldn't say that. But we were in some pretty scary places."

"What's been your worst moment so far?"

"Putting out spot fires up in Carter Canyon. Embers dropping all around me—those suckers were three to four inches in size. Couldn't see flames because of the thick smoke, but I sure could hear the fire as soon as it started to come over the hill. Then I got the evacuation order on my radio. Had to get out fast."

"Bet you did."

“On the way back I stopped at my cabin to grab a few things. Then a two-hundred-foot wall of flame started down Carter Canyon. Sounded just like a freight train. It burned hundreds of structures. Sure a tragedy for so many on the mountain. My wife and I lost our cabin.”

“I’m deeply sorry, Mr. Kennedy.”

Commercials came on. Roger closed his eyes. I stand among my aspens. Pines exploding into flaming torches, catapulting downhill toward me. . . . I tremble in the wind, rooted to the ground, unable to run. My legs are wooden. Choking smoke. Flames. . . . Mindy rushing by. Where are her babies? I must escape. . . . Kitchen. *A slug of scotch. Renew the sap in my veins.*

Night after night, Roger indulged in a nightcap. Sometimes scotch didn’t help. Still awake in the wee hours one morning, he sat at his desk doodling with a pen, sketching aspen leaves and repeatedly writing: Species: *P. tremuloides bentoni*. . . . New species named for me, Roger Benton. I’ll. . . . How about a leaf on the back of my hand? Yes! A few more growing up my arm. Yes! Yes! I pump my fist. Look! My leaves flutter. . . . Oh damnation! They will burn in the flames. . . . Who the fuck started that terrible fire in my grove?

“Arghh!” His head sagged to the desk.

At dawn he awoke with a stiff neck and a throbbing headache. He showered but the aspen leaves from his left arm didn’t come off. And he was astonished to see an exact copy on his right arm. Must have been really drunk. He toweled off and trimmed his auburn beard, startled by the pale, sunken face in the bathroom mirror. Resting his head against the cold glass, he coveted his bed and the anonymity of dreamless sleep. Come on, Rodger, you’ll be late for class. Despite the hot day he put on a long-sleeved shirt.

. . . .

Melissa and Tiffani sat eating pizza at a campus hangout.

“Those boring lectures. Aspens, aspens, and more aspens,” Melissa griped. “How can such a good-looking dude be a total nerd?”

Tiffani sipped her Coke. “Yeah, Melissa, he’s kinda fucked up. Just close your ears when he starts that aspen shit. That’s what I do.”

“He’s sure jumpy lately.”

“I think maybe that awful fire burning up his precious aspens is getting to him,” Tiffani said.

“Ya’ think? Well, who cares? Just so we pass his boring course.”

By mid-August the Aspen Fire had destroyed more than 84,000 acres and 344 structures. When the last embers were doused, the forest service allowed property owners to return to the mountain.

Mark Benton asked his brother to drive up with his family. No one spoke as they wound through hills where fire had consumed the forest on both sides of the highway. A few green swaths untouched by fire highlighted a cemetery of blackened trees and shrubs.

He drove slowly through Summerhaven, overwhelmed by the charred rubble on either side of the highway. In the hushed tones of a requiem Gail named each place of business and cabin owner. But she was silent when her father turned right at Carter Canyon and drove up the hill. Instead of tall ponderosa pine trees, blackened poles surrounded their cabin site. They sat mute for a moment before piling out of the car. The crumbling stone chimney rose like a gravestone amid the debris—molten metal, broken dishes, the bent hulk of the kitchen range. On a dented propane tank a red circle enclosed a minus sign. Mark kicked it, and a hollow sound echoed.

“That symbol indicates the tank safely vented. What difference did it make in a fire tsunami?”

Leaning against the car, Roger scuffed ashes with the toe of his shoe. He felt sick. How had this destructive fire happened? Who had started it?

Near the stone chimney Gail picked up a piece of metal and walked through the ashes to him. “Look, Uncle Roger. It’s the angel you gave me last Christmas. I always kept it on the mantel.”

He stared at it in silence. Twisted into an eerie shape, it was barely recognizable. She collapsed against him, sobbing.

Still in his robe Roger went downstairs to the foyer to check his mailbox. Thank God, only three more days of the summer session. Turning his key, he scooped out the *Arizona Daily Star*. The headline in large black letters stunned him. “FIRE PROVES TO BE HUMAN CAUSED.”

In his apartment he slumped down on the sofa. After he read the article he phoned Kino College. “Last night I had a bout of food poisoning. Can’t make it in today, but I’m sure I’ll be OK by tomorrow.”

Professor Benton mopped his forehead with his handkerchief. What the hell is wrong with the air conditioning? He sipped water from a paper cup on the lectern and cleared his throat. “Final exam tomorrow. To recap this course: aspens are a sun-loving species. Historically, fire triggers the regeneration of aspens. On Mount Lemmon fires were suppressed for decades or not allowed to burn with the intensity aspens need. Conifers grew tall and cut out sunshine. They soon took over aspen groves. Our roots await the next fire—uh, aspens await the next fire.”

In the front row Melissa glanced up at him. “He looks really stressed out. He’s not making sense,” she whispered to Melissa.

“The Aspen Fire should have been a cleansing tool to allow aspen regeneration, but unfortunately, five factors turned this fire into a catastrophe. One, drought. Two, bark beetle infestation. Three, high tree density. Four, adverse wind conditions. And five, extremely rough bark—I mean, terrain.” Benton glanced down at his notes, continuing in a hoarse voice. “The rough terrain in which the firefighters had to battle the blaze.”

Sweat beaded Benton’s forehead, and he wiped his brow again. “We must manage forests better. Eliminate ladder fuels that cause crown fires. Forests need a low cover of ground squirrels—uh, of ground fuels.”

A titter rippled through the class. Tiffani elbowed Melissa. “Something is really wrong with him. Poor guy.”

Benton took another sip of water. “Mindy and her babies are running. . . . I can’t run. My legs are rooted, my blood is sap. My eyes are misting over.” He shuffled through his notes, a few sheets fluttered to the floor.

Tears welling up in her eyes, Tiffani scooped them up and placed them on the lectern.

“Historically, aspens are a sun-loving species.” His voice dropped to a raspy whisper. “Historically, aspens . . . ”

The wind blew open the classroom door. Leaning against the lectern, he waved his trembling arms over his head. “My leaves are on fire. . . . Do you all see the flames? The smoke? God, I can’t see any more. I can’t breathe. . . . My time has come. . . . I await my regeneration.”

He swayed and slipped to the floor.