

Facing the Monster

From the *Out of the Fire* Anthology by Manzanita Writers Press

By Rebecca Fischer

The billow of smoke towered over the horizon. Even miles away at Camanche, the plume was impressive, swirling, and ominous. Destructive.

“It looks like a monster,” I told my uncle, who was sitting beside me in his old white Ford.

“It is a monster,” was his simple reply.

A few days prior to this conversation, my uncle and I, with the help of one of our cowhands, had been working our cattle down by Camanche. We had stopped at El Torero in Burson for lunch. Sitting there looking out the window, I thought about the fire, the smoke. Despite our work, the fire was the main topic of conversation.

Then the call came from my dad. He had gotten word that the fire had spread to Jesus Maria, and could get to Hawver Road. He had cattle out there. We better go get them, as a precautionary measure.

Since my dad was still on his way, we finished our lunch, but ate quickly. My uncle called a couple of his friends. “Looks like we’re headed out there,” he said to a machine. Would they get the message in time?

Hawver Road got its name from my grandmother’s family; they had a ranch out there. It was never my favorite road. The break at the top of the hill—where it drops down into that narrow, steep, jagged section of road, rock to the left and air to the right—terrified me when I was a child. It was more terrifying that day, not because of the fire, oddly enough, but because of the traffic. Evacuees were racing out of there, since Hawver Road is one of the few safe exits from Jesus Maria. Meeting all these cars head on with a gooseneck, a livestock trailer pulled by a truck hampered our trek down. We were in their way, and they were in ours. Congested.

There was a log in the road, poorly cut out of the way in a turn. We took the turn extra wide and managed to inch past it.

Finally I made it down to the corral, the smoke billowing above me on the ridge. I was entranced by it as I swung up into my saddle. For a moment, I felt my insignificance in comparison. This thing could swallow me whole and spit me out, horse and all, charred and ruined. Yet the other cowhand and I chatted about the fire somewhat amiably, as we stared into the eyes of the smoke. He believed the smoke was misleading, that the fire was further away than it looked. I prayed the cattle weren’t going to be difficult

to get in the trailer. They like to run away wildly from the corral. I never look forward to working with them.

That day, though, my dad's cattle were cooperative. They were gathered together on one side of the hilly field, and they trotted right along fence. One of our friends arrived, and on foot walked out into the field to turn the cattle into the pen, and for once they obliged. We had them in within minutes of arriving, something that had never happened before.

There were about fifty head of cattle altogether, plus the horses; two trips worth with only three trailers. My uncle hadn't heard from his friends, and we weren't sure if they were coming. Hauling them out was a good half-hour drive one way, especially with the traffic. A plane roared over us, close enough I felt like I could reach out and touch it. I looked at the remaining cattle in the pen. I wondered if we had the time to come back.

We loaded what we could and headed out. Unfortunately, the best place to turn around to drive back to San Andreas is up the road, toward Jesus Maria. My uncle and dad went up, but our friend, who was hauling the horses in his smaller trailer, figured out a way to turn around inside the corral.

As we drove up that narrow part in the road I don't like, we almost collided with our other two friends, both pulling trailers. They had gotten my uncle's message. We took advantage of what little space the side of the road offers and pulled off to let them by. I jumped out and ran to the first truck, to help them load and tell them how to turn around in the corral. And with that, I descended back into the burning pit.

As we reached that tight turn with the log, an old van came blazing up, and barely avoided a collision with us. This was good and bad; good, because we didn't have an accident; bad, because now he was in the space we needed to take the turn wide and miss the log. Inching by didn't work this time. The log caught the fender of the trailer and bent it. We could hear the tire rub it as we continued down Hawver Road. Miraculously, it didn't pop the tire.

We met another vehicle shortly thereafter, a smaller red car that refused to back up and scooch to the side. Our friend managed to maneuver around the stubborn driver, his agitation growing from his annoyance.

At last, we made it back to the hot corral. The two trailers were just enough, and we loaded the remaining cattle. The trailer got caught on something again, this time on the corral, and broke one of the boards.

On our way out, I rode with our other friend, since he was the last out of the corral, and I had to close the gate for him. He lifted a small cooler bag from the back seat and offered me a cold drink. I hadn't noticed how parched I was until I was guzzling it. The mirror temperature gauge read 107 degrees Fahrenheit. I was sweating, and became aware of how badly I stunk with body odor and smoke. As a bit

of embarrassment rose in me, I scolded myself. *Now is not the time to be self-conscious, Becca.* I didn't envy the firefighters.

As we drove up Hawver Road away from the corral, my eyes finally settled on a ragged old house, tucked up on the hillside. Tin roof, aged wood, chipping red paint. My great-grandparents had lived there; my grandmother and her sister grew up there. I felt my heart twist. A piece of my history. That house had survived so many long years. Would it survive the night? Another plane swooped over the ridge, this time depositing the bright red retardant right there, over the pine treetops. The fire had been closer than I thought. We opened a wire gate by the cattle guard, so that animals that had been turned loose could escape, if needed.

Back at the top of the hill, some evacuees had congregated to smoke pot and watch the hills burn, parking on both sides of the narrow road. It was difficult to squeeze our way between them with a trailer full of cattle. I posted about it later on Facebook. There is a time and place for everything, but I don't think that was one of them.

My uncle slept in his truck that night, out where we took the cattle. Even though we were quite a distance away, he got worried the fire would jump Highway 49 and spread toward us again. We no longer questioned the spread of the fire. Even miles away, the flames lit up the night sky with an orange glow.

A few days later, when the fire was finally out and the roads opened, my family went out there to assess the damage. Aside from a couple of fences and some boards on the corral, the fire had moved around the property, the barn, the house. Everything stood intact. We questioned why that was and finally decided it was because the cattle had eaten the grass down. The retardant helped. But still, no ember floated in, alighted on the aged wood, and set it ablaze. Not one, and it could have, easily. The place had been surrounded by fire. Out of all the houses, why not this house? We had a cousin stop by our main house, to tell us with tears in his eyes that he had lost his home. There are many stories like his. To this day, people are in tents. Others are selling their scorched property. Only some have rebuilt. And then there's this house. Tired, but unscathed.

It feels greedy to be thankful.