SMOKED SABLE LAKE

John Muir Jones knew she was about to face her greatest challenge. She was given to exaggeration, a trait both of her ex-husbands had found infuriating, but in the tussle with Burt Sharfstein on one hand and the A.D.O.L.F. on the other, she knew she was looking at war with her own cherished beliefs.

Which were: preserve the wilderness. Pack it in, pack it out. Never do it onto an animal what you would not have an animal do onto you. These three, with some clarification, had served her well over fifteen years as an environmental activist and essayist, although the critics had been harsh on her last book. She sat on the town council in pastoral Sable Lake, named for that scalloped mirror in the high green peaks, and faced the inescapable fact that this time, taking her usual stance would ally her with the foulest people she had ever known.

On the day before the vote, Joan, who was tall, fair and angular, parked her truck in the driveway, crossed her wide porch, and walked into her house.

Where someone grabbed her from behind, one gloved hand clapping over her mouth, the other circling her waist with disturbing intimacy. "Joanie, here's your marching orders."

She sank her teeth into the glove, into one finger in particular, accomplishing a wish long treasured and thought unattainable. When her ex-husband yelped in pain, Joan broke free and wheeled to face him.

"Out out out," she chattered. "Nash you don't belong here. Get out. Out."

"Don't belong here? I was born here. I brought you here, remember?"

Nash Parkland, leaning against her bookshelves. *You'll never have to lock your doors in Sable Lake.* His mustache was yellowish-white, but the rest of his face — the snub nose, the wide clownlike mouth, the lake-blue eyes and their resolute, pioneer cast — appeared softer, sleeker, younger not older after four years, as if his pores had been airbrushed away. He wore unfamiliar clothes, a hot pink polo shirt and spotless creased khakis. He noticed her scientific roving eye.

"Out of uniform, but it's still me. We're going to blow up Sharpberger's casino." He drew a cell phone from his rear pocket, a folding phone with an antenna and a blinking red light on its screen. "I'll be at Mom's. She sends me the papers. She wonders why you don't ever give her a call. You can get some fresh preserves any time you drop by the trailer. She — "

"That's just a phone, Nash. Get out."

"Think so? Remember when we used to say, I spell relief g-e-l-i-g-n-i-t-e?"

She did. Joan, brash, Nash, reluctant, at the dawn of time. Her fists opened and closed, useless, empty.

"You gave me the handbook. So you know how. I got myself a handy HVAC jumpsuit, put big brother in the basement." He waved the phone. "This ain't no ordinary phone, pardon my French. Okay, it's tomorrow, eleven o'clock. I'm at Mom's. You're at the meeting. They're ready to vote. You state your case, one more time."

"My case?"

"Sure. Why the Sharpman thing has got to go. Tell them what you wrote back in seventy-eight." He reared back, closing his eyes, clutching the blinking phone. "'We are in a war for the trees of this country, and in a war sometimes you have to blow things up.' You want to do it, don't kid me. I know you. You keep them there — till I drive up — because I want them sitting

at the table when they hear the boom. Oh, you'll love it, Joanie. A thousand tons of concrete going splat! No more threat to Sable Lake."

In nineteen seventy-eight he had been half man, half puma, crouching in his peaked hat by a desert campfire. His face ablaze, his ranger's badge bright orange and too hot to touch.

"Nash," she said, "are you hooked up with the A.D.O.L.F?"

"'Environmental consciousness makes for strange bedfellows.'" He pulled her own book – *My Tent is the Sky,* her biggest seller — off the shelf and waved it at her. "You said that too, right here, remember? You said that in eighty-one. Besides, you know me, Joan, I went to high school with these guys. A.D.O.L.F. — hell, it's only a name. Most of them couldn't find Germany on a map." He used her book to scratch his nose, with energy and vigor. "And anyway, you have to draw the line somewhere. Don't your folks go back to Harold the Fairhaired? Didn't you used to say you were really a Druid, because they hugged the trees? It's our people, Joan. It's our religion this time. Sable Lake is our holy site, us being white people who love the woods — who belong in the woods, because our ancestors lived there — and if we let the Sharpenbergs hold their bar mitzvahs there, it'll be like trashing an Indian graveyard. Burning a church." He grinned, clasping her book in mock reverence. "Torching a synagogue. We're only acting in self-defense. It's our freedom of religion."

I'll call the police. But before she could speak, Joan with an inner groan remembered that in Sable Lake, that idyllic small town, a Parkland had been police chief since the fifties. She remembered Carl Parkland, Nash's cousin and fatter lookalike, sniggering at her in council meetings.

Joanne was taller than Nash. She reached up to the shelves and pulled books down upon his head, the Rachel Carson first edition, the *Desert Solitaire* signed by the author, the leather-

bound volumes by the pioneer ecologist John Muir, no relation. Audubon glanced off his shoulder, Matthiessen sliced into his collarbone.

“They hated *My Stove Is My Heart*, didn't they?" Nash, his arms over his head, rose in no hurry from a protective crouch. "They said you were recycling your own compost. You're in a rut, Joan, and what you just did proves it. You need to stop writing books, we need to get our lives back. No really – we bury Sharpfeld like you just buried me, only in something much — heavier – than books, and sixty miles away it’s Canada. Did you know there are Parklands up there?”

She flung herself at him, teeth bared, sensible nails clawing the air, and he fled, laughing. She continued to scream, screech, bat at phantoms, for a minute, then collapsed in a chair amid the ruins of her raped privacy.

He thinks because the critics panned my last book I want to blow up the Trailender’s Lodge. And run away to Canada, with him. Me!

There was only one person in Sable Lake who could see this as funny. There was only one person in Sable Lake who could appreciate a line of thought this preposterous and this surreal, and that would be someone new to the place. That would of course be short, sandy-haired, ebullient Bert Sharfstein, himself an embodiment of the surreal, who owned the four-story Trailender’s Lodge and was planning to expand it, at the cost of three more miles of lakefront. Joan picked up the phone, but his machine answered, and on an impulse she hung up without leaving a message. She did not want Bert to think he owned her vote.

Bert Scharfstein was smoking fish.

He used a technique that was part Athabascan, part Ashkenazic. Last year he took Evgeny Lev, the head fish man at Barry's Famous, up to Fort Yukon, Alaska in a chartered plane. In exchange for introductions to the art of pickling and to *marinierte* fish, aka Jewish sushi, the lower 48ers came away knowing how to build a drying rack, how to create durable, tasty jerky out of heads and skin and scales, and how to apologize to living creatures even as one gobbled up their pearlescent insides. There would be a Barry's Famous at the new Trailender's, to be renamed the Hotel Ath'Kenazic. "The same corned beef you eat in Encino"; Burt had his lawyers working on a trademark for that phrase.

"Guests will enjoy a bounty from the lake and from the seas, all preserved via natural means involving no refrigeration." Would that work in the brochure? He doubted it. Most people like their deli snacks ice-cold.

He lifted aromatic drying crescents one by one, flipping the carcasses on the rack. His private smokehouse, a trial model, was screened but open to the sky during the day, closed at night and in inclement weather. Smoke-drying, air-smoking: neither one sounded right. Bert wished he'd been the genius who came up with "broasted," who knows how much chicken got eaten because of that one word. "Traditional Native American lore meets Eastern Europe's heritage of kitchen wisdom." Nice, but too long.

G. Randy Hauck-that-jerk — his full name to Bert — had done the Jewish people one big favor. G. Randy was a local boy made good, until he went to jail for tax evasion and the Trailender's, his four-story palace — plus marina, RV park, tennis courts, and riding stables — went up for sale under the bankruptcy code. Bert snapped it up for chump change, along with the owner's mansion and pastures. He had never seen such country, and neither had any of his

friends down in Encino. He knew why — but he would change all that. “This isn’t Poland, for God’s sake,” he muttered. Although they had lakes and forests too.

The sun was setting on Bert’s wide horizon. Behind him, he heard his horses, Peres and Rabin, whinny and stamp their feet, nine times each.

“You two can always sense a change, can’t you. What is it this time? Earthquake? Fire?”

The horses made fainter, more hesitant sounds.

“Embarrassed. Typical. Listen, don’t be ashamed of your abilities.”

He was talking to his horses, smoking fish. Salmon, trout, whitefish, cod: at last he stood before the choicest rack, the one laden with the lake’s curled-up namesake. Thick rich fillets with the texture of cheese, smooth buttery flakes sliding over the tongue, the shudder of salt that comes one second later … sable! He used to have it flown in from New York, as a treat, three or four times a year. Now Bert had his own lake full of treasure.

Too bad the locals had never discovered that sable was edible, much less delicious. They used it for bait, or dog food.

He was planning to erect a smokehouse that would be the largest in this time zone, that would employ a least a hundred local citizens, who would prepare and produce fishy delights as removed from the usual red-stained packaged horrors as aged Stilton is from Cheez Whiz. He could put Sable Lake on the map of the fish-eating world, and this was not a small world either, he had contacts in Tokyo and Seoul. He would create, not just jobs but an *industry*, with time — and three more miles of lakefront.

He’d had engineers out here, geologists, lake specialists. You want this on the water, Bert, they all told him. Unless of course you want to pay for transport — no? You want the smokehouse as the centerpiece? Well, in that case you’ve got a problem with the tree girl.

Bert heard his phone ring, in the house. Let it go to voicemail this time. He selected a ripe specimen, tossing those that had turned black or sickly yellow. He had not become successful by ignoring conditions around him. He wiped his hands on a scented rag and gazed down his private driveway, hoping to see the first trailer arrive.

The smells of fish and wood smoke were filtering into his dreams these days. Everywhere the scuffle of hooves, the snuffling, whinnies, and snorts: so much background noise, a drone like traffic from a hundred years ago. Twigs popped like gunshots in the bushes. Unknown creatures yowled and jabbered. In the occasional pause, Bert heard the steady plashing of lake wavelets on the shore.

We could be like the Indians up here (Bert, rehearsing a speech). We in the black hats meeting here tonight, with our varied coloring and accents and long-ago countries of origin, we are the last great tribe in America. The eternal light equals the primordial campfire. If you went back far enough, didn't our ancestors dress in skins? Didn't they shed them in the winter, if they could, for a good *shvitz*? And could we not re-create that in the land of opportunity even today — today more than ever? We can have the totem, and the Torah too. We can, we will (he, Bert Scharfstein, was making it happen) live in our communities according to God's covenant for fifty weeks a year. But for two — let's dress in skins, let's ride till nightfall, let's camp in the glade by the river bend, and if some drunken bully tries to roust us out of there, roust as in *Raus!*, let's replay the Little Bighorn, to a *klezmer* beat.

Headlights shone in his eyes, and he winced.

The next morning showed two hundred armed Jews. Two hundred armed Jews, on horseback. Two hundred armed Jews, on horseback, in a small Northwest resort town. Did they

have bullets in those rifles, and were those bullets live? Why did they want to come here, what did they want with downtown Sable Lake?

"It's the H.E.R.Z.L.," said Bert Scharfstein, trotting towards her on a restless palomino with a snowy forelock. Leaning down to Joan — he was much taller than her now — Bert chattered on, as if everything were normal, "Hebrew Equestrian Rifleman's Zionist League. We have chapters in eight Western states. Have you met my horse? Peres, meet Joan. Joan, this is Peres. Do you ride?"

"When I was a kid, in Pasadena. Beautiful horse. Bert, what are you trying to do?" She stepped back, to ease her neck ache as she squinted up at Bert. "You guys look terrific. You make me homesick for the Rose Parade. But will you please evacuate before eleven, when the bomb is going off?"

"What bomb," said Bert, with scorn.

"The one my ex-husband put in there, disguised as an air-conditioning man. He went in there and he planted it, inside a phone. There, I knew that would get your attention."

Bert, as it turned out, had not even heard Joan's reply. He was studying the next block over, Main and Lake. "Hm, looks like we're getting quite a crowd.

"Ladies and gentleman!" declaimed Bert Sharfstein, from his horse. He wheeled and spurred Peres down the street, then up onto the hotel's front lawn. Together they looked like a heroic statue. "American belongs to all of us. That's what they taught me back in P.S. 45. Ladies and gentlemen, I was brought up to believe you could live anywhere in this country. Take your vacations wherever you like."

Horses moved and murmured around her. What was supposed to be a council meeting had clearly morphed into something else altogether. Joan could not make out the riders' faces,

under the high black Stetsons with the blue six-pointed star on the white band. She did prickle with a sense of something ancient and implacable. *Those stubborn Jews*. The dull sheen of their rifles glinted in the haze. To her horror, atavistic voices shrieked inside Joan.

Why did they want to come up here? What do they want with guns and horseflesh anyway? *We* invented the longbow. *They* invented psychiatry. Can they really feel the way we do, about the forest and the lake?

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Bert was saying. "When we prick you, do you not bleed? If we shoot guns, do our bullets not wound? Does not our jet ski fuel pollute the water just like everybody else's? Ladies and gentleman, this is America! *Why should we just roll over, and let the Nazis have this place?"*

There was a mutter from the crowd. Policemen flanked the other council members; Joan saw Carl Parkland's familiar mustache and smirk. Coffee-mug and T-shirt merchants, tourists from the flat farm country of the state's southern half, plaid-clad loners out of the woods, local artists (the fellow who carved his own baritone flutes, the woman who spray-painted haiku acrostics), college kids who bought Joan's book: all of them were staring, under Stetsons, floppy sun hats, caps of plastic mesh.

Joan wanted to yank at Bert's stirrup. About that jet ski fuel? Could you please clarify?

She was having a serious problem. She had not resolved her challenge; distracted by Nash, his bombs and nonsense, she had not even considered it since yesterday, but the question remained, simple as ever. Three miles of lakefront meant three miles of beaver habitat, three miles of aspen saplings whose tender shoots were moose-calf candy, three miles of rare Furtwengler's nettles (the kind whose darting prickles lodge under the skin, turning it black) bulldozed to pulp, for an outdoor fish processing plant.

“Bert,” she said, and then louder, “Bert.” She started running toward him. Over his shoulder, behind the hotel, she noticed as people do an irrelevant detail, the empty sprawl and cracking concrete of the RV park, its unused boat launch ramping down into the water. *God*, is that ugly, thought Joan. I wonder if — “Bert! Wait!”

A camo-painted van with oversized tires sped from around the one uncrowded corner. In the middle of the street, the van’s passenger door fell open and Nash Parkland scrambled out. He clutched the blinking phone, unfolded, in one hand. When the screams died down, Nash said, “Um, Joan Muir Jones — my wife? Ex-wife — that’s her. That’s her right over there. She’s in this with me. We’re doing this together.”

Bert clicked to his neighing horse, before he raised his head to look at Joan, who stood panting on the sidewalk. She could see him with great clarity under the hat, his face as hard and cold as Sable Peak in January, his blue eyes black with the flung mud of betrayal.

“And if anybody tries to stop me — ” Nash swung around in a clumsy spin, aiming his antenna this way and that, “inside this can are four members of the Aryan Defense Organization of Liberty Fighters, and their semiautomatic weapons.”

Four snub metallic snouts appeared, poking through the van’s black-painted windows.

“Who are a hundred percent behind me, and behind Joan Muir Jones over there, who’s with me — because none of us Western Americans, and I think you know what I mean by American, I was born right here in Sable Lake and so was my cousin Carl over there keeping us safe — none of us want our town turned into one of those places where *you people* go. He described a circle in the air, enclosing the H.E.R.Z.L. “Like — New York. Like — *Los Angeles*.”

Joan Muir Jones knew how to resolve her greatest challenge. For a moment, hurtling toward the white glass double doors, she thought of course the place will be locked, why would Bert leave it open. She hoped incineration would be painless.

“Joan, what are you doing," yelled Nash. "Joan, come back here!”

The doors yielded to her push. Joan took off – in Western boots, the worst possible footwear for the job ahead, slippery, noisy, and conductive as hell – down the, what, the left-hand corner of the unfinished lobby smelling of drywall. A Shoshone woman pushing a cart full of telephone equipment exclaimed “Whoosh!” but got out of Joan’s way.

“Get out of heeeeere!” She wailed. “Get out of the building! Right noooow!”

I got myself a handy HVAC jumpsuit. Put big brother in the basement.

There was the compressor roaring away, converting the sunny outside temp, seventy-something on a day like this, into the familiar clinical chill. Joan embraced wide metal shoulders, her boots skidding to a stop. *Where? If it were you, you gave him the handbook — if it were you —*

There, right there. *That little hinged panel. Watch it be locked. Goodbye, life.* But it wasn’t.

Joan held a cell phone in her hands, a phone glued to another contraption that had a digital watch taped to one side. She heard a commotion, faintly. Horses whinnied, feet stomped, a crumpling sound like hooves on metal went on for what seemed like days. Police whistles blew, then stopped. The crowd was making a high wavering sound, like several hundred people feeling seasick at the same time. Joan held the box with both hands. She charged up a different staircase, came to a closed door, shoved it open with her hip.

Joan was outside, on a deck overlooking the lake. She looked one way over the railing and saw battle in the street. Santa Cruz, 1972, the day Earth Counts! blocked the freeway; I'm flashing back, she thought, it's stress, it's understandable. She looked the other way and saw the lake, that filled footprint of a glacier.

Cradling the box inside her right elbow, Joan hurled it as far and as hard as she could into the middle of the lake. As it happened her bootheel caught on a deck railing, her foot came loose, in that sudden unconnectedness her knee went over a post instead of next to it, she lost her purchase on the rail, and she went over the side with the bomb.

A moose cow ventured onto the trail. Her two calves cast flanking shadows on the dappled alder leaves. Plant life animated, restless; animal life still as deer made of iron, except for dark-ringed nostrils heaving like a heart in surgery. One brown tail flicked, and they vanished like breath.

Joan Muir Jones approached. For too long she'd been removed from designated wilderness. Now she was back to where a permit was required and a waiver needed to be signed, agreeing to pay for all helicopter costs in the event of any rescue operation. Aspen leaves floated and sank around her like goldenrod permits torn into confetti. She shook her canteen; still half full. She liked her new, loftier perspective, being able to peer into higher branches, catch more glimpses of barred owls or nesting ravens big as dogs, see more sky ahead and above. The doctors had told her she would hike again, but not this year. As for backpacking, she would have to write about something else.

Joan was undaunted. She was back where she belonged. Her new book would be titled, *His Hooves Are My Legs*. She was riding Peres, whose name she pronounced California-style,

Per*ez*. She could recycle anything, even turn an RV park with direct access to the lake into something different altogether, and more appetizing.

Joan fished a stick of sable jerky from her pocket. Bert was fasting today, but tonight his guests would feast on the bounty of the smokehouse.