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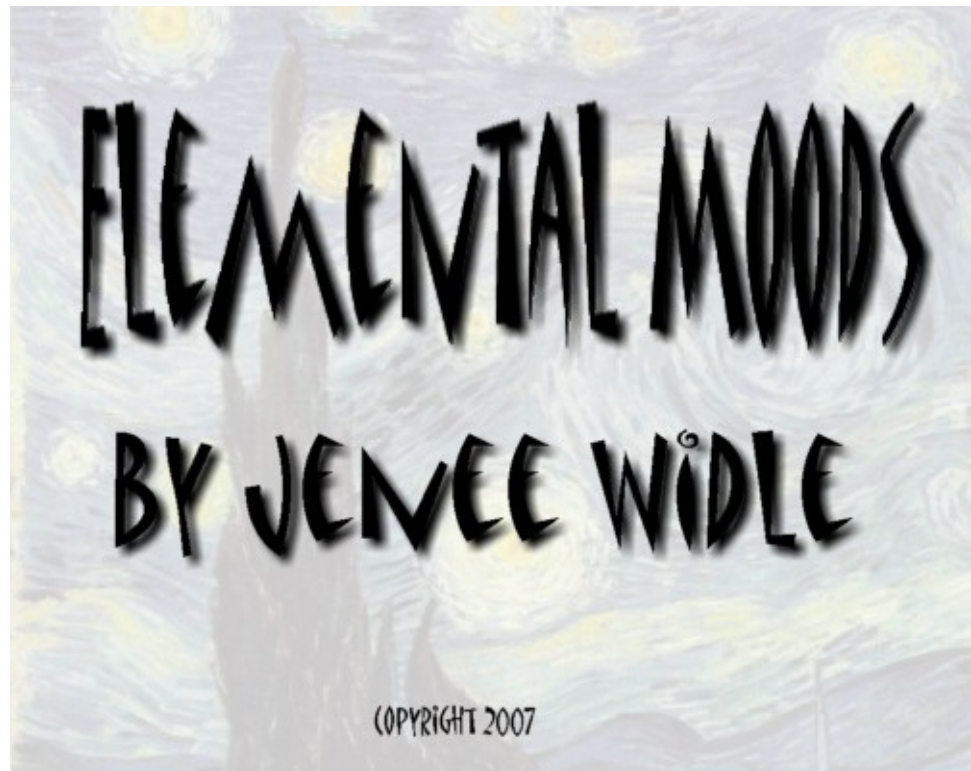
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Long Valley mornings tend to be moody—either bright and charming as sunlight spills over the ridge of Jughandle Mountain or cast over with roiling clouds that spit lightning and roll thunder through the valley from end to end like gods throwing dice. Since moving here from Boise in the spring, I have made it my habit to rise just before dawn, brew coffee, and watch this pageant unfold—that is, until the midsummer fires began in central Idaho's Payette National Forest. For a month I have seen no mornings—only a gradual, featureless change from soot black to charcoal gray to ash white. Thick layers of smoke smother the valley in a heavy, dawnless gloom.

On this morning, my spirits rise with the sun that climbs over Jughandle in a proper, blushing daybreak. The night's blowing, flashing storm at last drove the smoke from my valley. Though clouds still lower, choirs of birds sing in for the return of morning. Sunlight streams over me as I warm my hands around a steaming mug at the kitchen table. The patio door is open to admit the cool air and remove the taint of smoke from the house. The rich fragrance of Kona coffee mingles with the dewy sparkle on the morning breeze. I feel cozy in my white terry cloth robe and relish the sensations of warm light and clean air on my skin.

A brief pelting of rain drops brings out bugs and enlivens the birds. A flock of starlings combs the pasture east of my property. A bluebird flits from the barbed wire fence to ground and back, picking up insects. Robins make their hop-hop-stop way through grass in search of worms. Around the outbuildings, swallows whirl through the air. My cat Tuck crouches in the vegetable garden, watching for an unsuspecting robin to hop by.

Heavy clouds remain over the valley, and soon the sun climbs into their shrouding layers. My skin cools without its warmth, but the birds still sing. An occasional breeze through the screen door lifts the fine hair around my face, a bare echo of last night's gale that shoved open my front door and tossed an arm load of pine needles into my living room. But I don't care; the storm has swept the foul air from my valley.

As I finish my coffee, the storm clouds mutter, the birds quiet, and Tuck gives up on the robins. He picks his way back to the patio, his long black fur fluffed up. I let him in, and he rolls on the carpet, stretching his legs and exposing his white, downy underside. He squints up at me. I smile and get down on the floor to stroke his tummy. The sharp scent of spice and musk rise up from his fur, and I know where his soft-footed steps have taken him. He smells of sage and weed and pollen, and of the cold, dank earth under the outbuildings, with just a hint of the smoke that lay thick and still for weeks over the valley floor.

A new sound invades the morning, an unnatural growl that grows steadily louder. The growl

climbs into a roar as a huge World War II bomber swings over my country home for another day of fire fighting. Since the McCall smoke jumping season began in early July, the old Army planes have grown familiar to me. My heart sinks knowing the clear, fresh air will not last.

Almost every day for the last month, the smoke from at least three major forest fires has settled into Long Valley before dawn, cloaking the river bottoms in a gray, dirty mist. If I forget to close the windows at night, I wake up near dawn coughing as the fine particles of ash catch in my throat. By sunrise the whole valley is wrapped in thick, smothering layers. Sometimes the smoke is so dense that visibility is counted in hundreds of yards and the eastern Payette Range is blotted out. When the air is thick, the sun comes up unannounced. A blood red ball, half-eclipsed by the hidden ridge of Jughandle, appears as if by magic and levitates into the featureless gray air. In that impenetrable atmosphere, I can watch the crimson orb climb into the sky without an after image dazzling my eyes. By three o'clock in the afternoon a hot, dry wind kicks up and blows the smoke from the valley floor, clearing the air enough for deep breaths and outdoor activity. The wind is a mixed blessing, however, for the south-westerly breezes fan the flames to the north, creating great billows of smoke so thick and voluminous over the mountain ridges that they make their own clouds.

Every day when the visibility improves, the old bombers take off from the tiny McCall airport to dump their cargo of red borate on the flanks of the fires to stop their raging, consuming progress over the mountains. The planes are so massive, they can barely climb over the rising land near the end of the runway. Sometimes they roar low over the house, baring their red-stained bellies and rattling my windows with their noisy propeller engines. They fly past my property, four miles from town, heading down Long Valley until they get enough speed and altitude to make the wide, sweeping turn back to the north.

Aptly named, my long and narrow valley stretches about thirty miles between two mountain ranges in south-central Idaho. At the upper end of Long Valley, where the two ranges swing together, McCall wraps itself around the southern shores of Payette Lake. Because the picturesque setting attracts many outdoorsy types, destination summer cabins stretch up each side of the lake, right up to the steep, pine-wooded slopes of the national forest.

The day remains overcast and threatening, but the much-needed rain does not fall. I decide to take advantage of the smoke-free afternoon and visit my friend John at his family's summer cabin on Payette Lake. We sit on the dock, talking, while I throw a tennis ball into the water for John's round Labrador to retrieve. Even fat dogs love chasing balls, and I tire before he does.

Later, as we clean up the remains of dinner, I hear the first low rumble of thunder and glance outside. Sheet lightning ripples under the bellies of heavy clouds that swirl and shift their chameleon shapes. A great, deep boom and crack of thunder shakes the window frames. My neck prickles; the lights die.

After lighting a few candles, John and I walk to the shore. In the fading dusk, we watch the wild elements toss light and air back and forth over the lake. The erratic wind flings my long hair around while booming thunder quakes the ground under my feet. Lightning strobes around us like flashbulbs. The hairs on my arms stand erect.

Across the lake, I see a white-hot bolt streak down from the sky, and with a sharp crack a tall pine flares up like a struck match. My heart flips wildly. Tree after tree flares up in great, towering candles as the flames dance through their tops. An invisible wall of wind blasts through the lake basin, shoving the smoke and flames over sideways on the ridge. John returns to the cabin to call in the fire, but I stay by the lake, enthralled by the elemental fury of the storm.

Much later on my way home, in the deep dark of midnight, I stop where the valley floor rises above McCall and walk into a grassy meadow to view the fire. The red gash above the lake bleeds into the dark water. Two more wild fires glow like angry eyes in the mountains behind the crimson, smoking blaze close at hand.

The powerful storm has left the valley, concentrating in a pocket of mountains to the north. Strobes of lightning eerily back-light the red and orange fire burning only three miles from town.

Strike after strike, sheet after sheet, the lightning flashes from that one concentrated cloud in the north.

Around me the night is still, save for the crickets and the distant boom of thunder. I look around, and above my head stars dust the moonless sky with more sparkling specks than I have ever seen. A thrill shivers through me when I turn my back on the storm's drama and stand alone in the true darkness of night.

I had forgotten how silky the night feels on a new moon, the slick feeling of black air on my skin and the velvety texture of the heavens studded with brilliant, living jewels. With a sudden, sharp clarity, I see that even a raging wild fire is no match for true night. A city may combat darkness with light beams and braces, holding the full force of it back with this insubstantial infrastructure, but the night is fluid and seeps through the seems to rest in pools under trees and beside houses. My back to the red fire light, I swim through the slick darkness surrounding me, feel it slide by my skin. I breath in its full richness, for there is no fragrance like night. It is my drink, my breath, my clothing. It drapes its loose, sleek folds on my limbs and feels like seduction.

As I stand in this living darkness, surrounded by the power of storm and fire, dark and light, elemental feelings rush through my body. I am the wind that bends the resilient meadow grass in which I stand and the clouds that churn over the mountains. I am the electricity that streaks through the heavens and the darkness caressing my limbs. I am the first rain drops that dampen my skin and the thunder rolling over the valley. I am the dark earth stretched long and wide beneath my feet and the thrusting mountains that cradle me in their protective arms.

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Jenée Wilde is an award-winning journalist with numerous articles published in newspapers and magazines in the Northwest and South. A 1994 graduate of Boise State University, she earned an MFA in creative nonfiction writing in 2003 from Goddard College. She teaches English at Gainesville State College. Her current projects include a novel set in Portland's sexual subcultures and a memoir of her Idaho-cattle-rancher-turned-psycho-healer father. She can be contacted at jjwilde@alltel.net.