

The fire within

Frankie Addams was probably my first variant role model, a message from sexually confused Carson McCullers that I was not the only one.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

Forest fires so large, so hungry, so devastating they are named. Deadwood Summit Fire, Burnt Peak, Angel, Savage Creek, Cowboy. Firefighters, many of them women, some of them dykes from the local community, trying to "control," to "contain," to "line," the blazes. "Hot spots" flaring up. Flames "jumping" lines, creeks, the freeway. Two weeks of this havoc, so far, in Southern Oregon, and the air finally clear enough to see the

T H E



AMAZON
TRAIL

ring of mountains around our little valley. My headaches are receding, smoke-induced irritability is disappearing. Crazy thinking and behavior lessening as the fumes of burning marijuana patches hidden deep in remote woods thin, blow away.

Eleven days into this natural siege, girlfriend

and I both dared to leave home with no one on watch. We drove south for an hour and a quarter, never once leaving the smoke, to see a performance of *The Member of the Wedding*. I'd read Carson McCullers' original novel in early adolescence, when the fires in me had been raging. Now the work's meaning for me as a lesbian rekindles and smolders toward memory and comprehension of how it is to grow up gay in this society.

I saw the start of the fire known as the Longwood Complex which eventually consumed 9916 acres. Girlfriend and I were traveling back from an afternoon jaunt at a California beach. We were ten miles south of the Oregon border. Across the sky flashed violent, stark, merciless jagged white electrical lines. We hoped aloud that the lightning storm would pass quickly and without event. Then we crested a hill and saw, to the east, in a split second, a tall green conifer became a column of red and yellow and orange brilliance. This quick and brutal autumn frightened us. We stopped at the bug station (California still guards its borders against Medflies and their ilk). The inspector was already out on the road, watching the tinder-dry forest burst, tree by tree, into flame. Yes, she knew, she told us with waves and nods when we stopped.

And we stopped again, in O'Brien, Oregon, at a honky-tonk restaurant called Twin Pines Cafe (said with a twang). The place had been remodeled since my last visit. Now it looked like a down-home Denny's. Watching the people during our quick dinner, though, we saw that they were still all country. We left them: waitresses, cook, the owner, standing in the



purple night outside the cafe, lit by their neon, staring up at the mountain now crowned with plumes of smoke. "That's Takilma!" one said. "I live just past the Takilma Store," said another. We sped home through the lukewarm summer night. Lightning escorted us all the way.

I remember how odd I felt in that cafe. If there were not the distraction of the fire, would they have noticed my dykey clothes, watched me walk in my dykey way? I felt as out of place as Frankie Addams did in *The Member of the Wedding*.

"I have never been so puzzled."

"But puzzled about what?"

"The whole thing," Frankie said.

No matter what she did, Frankie could not belong. I identified with her totally: a tomboy, a creative little girl with leadership characteristics which were squelched, a child who was, well, queer. Frankie, macho, pried splinters from her callused feet with a carving knife. Frankie, lonely, deviate, who played with littler kids to escape the rites of puberty, yet felt a restless burning inside to clearly belong somewhere, to enter a world which simply seemed not to exist. Now we know, from McCullers' biography, that the author was gay. Frankie's burning was inside McCullers, too.

The fires drove people out of where they belonged, threatened their belongings, their belonging. Evacuations began the second day of burning, and rose to well over 3000 people before the first week was out. One fire near us was left unattended, to burn at will. The area was without roads and there were no structures close enough to cause concern. They said. We were (still are) surrounded on three sides by fire. I filled a box with unfinished manuscripts and stacked the cat carriers outside, ready to go. We had head-counts, the cats and I, twice daily. Like everyone else in the area, Girlfriend and I resigned ourselves to loss, took stock of what we could live without. The important thing was to escape alive if it came to that.

It came to that for Frankie Addams, as it comes to that for every gay child. Attracted by palpable love, Frankie fell in love, said black housekeeper Bernice, with "the wedding." Frankie's brother and his new wife were obviously happy. They would leave town and travel to far-off places. Odd-girl-out Frankie, who

knew nothing but how hard she wanted something, fell in love with the romance of them. McCullers made clear that Frankie had no idea what a marriage entailed. What sex was. The girl wanted the feeling exuded by this couple. They belonged to each other and, by the act of marriage, to the world. Frankie knew no other way of coming to belong. She flung herself after them, pleaded to be a part of them. Her exclusion was beyond her comprehension.

I felt bewildered like Frankie at nature's cruelty as more and more acreage was burned. I pondered explanations, for reasons behind these apparently senseless conflagrations. Was nature declaring war on humans, beating back our slow, insidious encroachment, self-immolating before the loggers could steal more of her growth? I agree completely that we had no place in her deepest lairs, that humankind is destructive, mindless, uncaring of her delicate secrets.

But all the little animals? Where would they go? How could they escape? Why force this awful end on them? It's like sending little children into the world gay — and defenseless against the hatred and denial we find.

Bit by bit I got my answers. For three years running we've had drought conditions in this area. The living creatures, from rattlesnakes to deer, have been feeding ever closer to settlements because they've been running out of food. A forest fire, by felling what it does, creates new growth. There will be grazing green on the mountainsides like these animals have not seen in years. Their numbers will increase and they will flourish — until the next cycle begins. Local officials reported that no animal carcasses had been found in the fires' wake. Nature takes care of her own.

By the end of *The Member of the Wedding* Frankie tries another way to belong. She pushes and squeezes herself into the box she believes she must fit. To prove that she possesses heterosexual inclinations, she makes much of a schlep little boy from the neighborhood named Barney. She's wearing a dress instead of a B.V.D. undervest. She's got a girl friend. One watches this frail stick of a human child. She's tense with the effort of convincing herself and proving to others that she belongs by making inappropriate speeches. The audience laughs. I don't think McCullers meant this as comedy. I cry for my own perplexed little girl, thirty years ago, who postured like Frankie, trying on the straight world. But oh, Frankie, your telltale dreams! She and her new girlfriend will travel to Europe, she says, will journey to romantic places together, just like the married couple.

Gay children flare up everywhere, stronger than religion and law and violence. Frankie Addams was probably my first variant role model, a message from sexually confused McCullers that I was not the only one. I had no name for the society to which Frankie wanted to belong, but I saw her approach it, want it just like me, saw it hidden by the straight adults, saw it elude her. Her yearning, though, assured me it was there. And I found it. Nature takes care of her own.

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