

Grass Fires

by Susan Starr Richards

It was small, like cats and dogs are small, down at Jimmie's knees. It moved in a ragged line, and in back of it was black, and in front of it was grey dry grass. It moved without much noise or smoke, its little red flames walking up the ridge no faster than he could walk, but no slower either. And it was long, like a long red snake stretching itself sideways. It moved on its own; it went where it liked. Wherever the dry grass was it went, and there was a world of dry grass, now. It didn't hurt the grass to burn. The grass couldn't feel it.

Then the big red fire engine came bellowing up the road, jumping the potholes, its ladders and hoses leaning, and the hoses pulled free and the beautiful red truck roared right into the field, and everybody who came by stopped their cars and trucks and got out to pound on the fire with jackets or shovels or whatever they could find, trying to stay ahead of the line of red, that kept growing another loop, so they had to run over and push it back again. The fire engine went in front of them, shooting rainbows of spray into the air, hissing the fire out. And Jimmie was up there fighting it with them, scratching it out with his rake, fast as he could go.

Everybody stood around afterwards and talked.

"Lots of these fires now, on the TV," Mr. Johnson, from down the road, said. "In Canada."

Mr. Baxter, from across the fence, said, "The Australians have some serious grass fires going."

Mr. Johnson nodded. "That's right, the Australians. In Canada."

The Fire Chief said they were not supposed to be burning. "We got the alert on, you know, Mr. Crawley," he told Jimmie's daddy, pointing out their smoky trash burner. "We might ought to cite you."

"I burn every Saturday," Jimmie's daddy said. "Wasn't that much trash, anyway?"

The Fire Chief shook his head. "Just a spark is all it takes, in this kind of weather. The whole world is ready to burn."

The next day there was another fire, on Mr. Crump's place, across the road. Mr. Crump was Jimmie's daddy's enemy. The little piece of ground where the fire started was what they were enemies over. The fire jumped up in the trees this time and burned a ways into Johnson's woods. Laney Johnson was scared it might follow the woods down the ridge to her Uncle Luke's house, and him blind, and couldn't see it. But the fire engine came back again, and they stopped it at the pond.

After that, there was a fire almost every day. Just little ones. Early in the mornings,

when nobody was looking, the shadows slipped out of the cedars, down where the ridges cracked together. He watched out for them, he knew who they were, moving like his own shadow—stooping, setting little heaps of grass on fire, one here, one there. The burning grass crumbled and twisted and glared.

And the fires were moving away now, further away—down the road, through the fence lines. The wind was blowing, the whole world was ready to burn, the Australians had some serious grass fires going, in Canada, all over. A bunch of people had got killed, on the TV.

But these little fires hadn't hurt anybody except trees. The beautiful red fire engine always came out in the fields and sprayed its rainbows, everybody came, and they all fought the fires together. Saving the long-necked horses on Mr. Baxter's farm, that used to be their blackberry patch, till he bought it and bush-hogged all the brambles. Saving the hay rolls for the Sims' cattle. Lonnie Sims and him had had the accident, their trucks banged together in the road like two bulls butting heads. Saving Mrs. Thayer's house. It was her grandson Bart had let his rabbits loose, so maybe she didn't deserve to be saved. But they saved her anyway.

Then one day, even the fire engine couldn't get to the fire. It was in the woods, and the cedar trees kept going up with big whooshes, it was jumping from tree to tree. Too much fire for the truck, they said. He didn't understand why the truck couldn't go up there, but they said it couldn't. The fire had got away from them.

The day after the fire got loose in the woods, burning a black swath of trees and grass all the way down to the next road, Sydney Crump phoned Frank Baxter. "We need to get the law in on this," he said, in his high jumpy voice. Sydney had been in the service, and he had a great respect for the law. "I called the sheriff. Told him who's doing it."

"We don't *know* who's doing it," Frank said.

"We sure as hell do," Sydney said. "Everybody knows."

They were all used to seeing Jimmie Crawley marching up and down Sorter Ridge Road—a big stout man carrying a tobacco stick, digging it into the dirt at the edge of the road. He'd grin and wave that stick at everybody who drove by.

And everybody did drive by. They knew if they felt sorry for him and stopped to speak, he'd just say something like, "Seen any flying cars lately?" Then he'd laugh and laugh, a high wild laugh that went on way too long for anybody to be comfortable with.

But when there was a fire, they all stopped. And Jimmie was always there, with his red excited face and gleaming eyes—first to every fire, and fighting it like a demon. All the people who'd had a fire could remember some recent history they'd had with him or his family. And old Edna Fite, who had the longest memory of anybody, hinted at a history of fires past. "Always knew *he'd* start *that* again," she growled.

So the sheriff came out and talked to everybody, and then he told them there was nothing he could do. "We got no evidence, no witnesses," he said, apologetically. "Just circumstantial and hearsay."

Sydney Crump lost some of his respect for the law: "Well, that boy better be real careful," he said. "I got a whole lot of brothers here, and some of them are hostile."

That was no lie. One of Sydney's brothers had shot and killed a strip-mine bulldozer operator up in the mountains, protecting the Crump family graveyard. And that brother was free and living with Sydney, his crime having been judged murder in a good cause.

The fires were out of control, and it felt like everything and everybody else was about to be. Smoke hung over Sorter Ridge like a stain in the sky, the air smelled scorched, even at night, and the figure of Jimmie Crawley, grinning and waving his tobacco stick, moved in the background of all their nightmares.

“Why doesn’t someone talk to Mase and Aline?” Frank Baxter’s wife asked him. “They’re his parents.”

But of course everybody was trying real hard *not* to talk to Jimmie’s parents. It was one of those things people don’t want to mention—“we think your son’s the firebug.”

“Why don’t we call Virginia Dougherty?” Frank’s wife went on. “They’re old friends of the Crawleys. And she’s a neutral party—they don’t live out here any more.”

But Virginia Dougherty maintained, in her fresh, gentle, well-spoken way, that they all were wrong about Jimmie. “People misunderstand him, because he’s—the way he is. But you know, his mother calls me every day about those fires—she’s scared to death of them,” Virginia told Frank. “I just can’t believe he’s the one doing it.”

“I don’t *want* to believe it,” Frank said, “but everybody else sure does. The truth is, if he could prove he was at a basketball game in town every time a fire started, they’d all still think it’s him, just because he is a little retarded.”

There was a silence, like he’d said something he shouldn’t have. Then Virginia said she’d see what she could do.

“But there’s been nothing like that, not for years and years,” Virginia said to herself, as she drove up to Sorter Ridge. “And he was so much younger then.”

There at the top of the hill were the steps to the old school. It had been “the old school” even when Virginia was growing up—unused for years, just part of the landscape, but still square and upright. Then one afternoon it had burned flat to the ground, only the steps left standing. Walking up now to an empty field, to empty sky.

An old outbuilding burned down, shortly after that, on Edna Fite’s place. Edna’s grandkids had told on Jimmie, said he’d been playing with matches. Aline had come running down to Virginia’s house in tears: “He’s just a poor little innocent child.”

“When *I* was about his age,” Virginia had told her, “Sue Ellen Cartwright and I hid out in the stripping room every day after school—taking turns, lighting one, letting it burn down almost to our fingers, then lighting another, till we went through a whole box of kitchen matches. It’s a wonder we didn’t burn the barn down.” She’d suggested that Aline keep Jimmie home, till the talk died out. It did, and there’d been no more fires.

Till now. Here were the steep, shining pastures of Sorter Ridge, their thick silver thatch upturned to the winter sun, and all of them slashed by the dark jagged scars of grass fires.

“He gets the blame for everything,” Aline had told her bitterly, back when those old buildings burned. That was when Aline gave up and took him out of school. If it was now, Virginia said to herself, there’d be some special class for a kid like Jimmie. But there was nothing like that, back then. He just kept failing.

Plus, Aline was afraid to let him go. She was always afraid. It was like having Jimmie had made her afraid. She never knew what was going to happen next. She expected things to go wrong. He’d failed so many grades, he was a whole lot bigger than the other kids in his class, still trying to play with them, getting into fights. “The kids pick on him, and the teachers do too. And I know what they say—they say it’s all my fault,” Aline had told Virginia, crying again.

They'd both cried when Virginia moved to town, but Virginia was crying mostly for Aline. Virginia's kids were in junior high then, running her crazy driving them to games and dances, and it was just easier to live in town. And now that her kids were grown up and out on their own, she and Sam had bought the little iris nursery, and she ran it. Her life had gone on, and Aline's had stopped, because of Jimmie.

They'd been together in the pride of their first pregnancies, shy and vain of their swelling new bodies, full of life. They'd consulted about heat rash and teething, watched each other's kids. Jimmie had been a beautiful toddler, those bright blue eyes and that fine fair hair, then a pink-faced little boy who called her Aunt Birdie, and loved her Rice Krispie cookies. He still did.

But her kids had grown up, and he hadn't. It was such a sorrow to Aline, she knew, but Aline never talked about it any more. Her eyes just always looked a little more holed-up, her lips pressed tighter together, from not saying.

And after all these years, Virginia had to bring up the subject—had to tell Aline what they were blaming her son for now! She prayed Jesus to let her say the right thing.

Here was the Crawley's small frame house, their little yard clean and neat, the way Mase always kept it. His car was gone. He'd be at the Square D, where all the farmers worked overtime on the line, trying to make a living; they did their farming in the evenings, raising "moon tobacco."

"Thank God you come," Aline said, as they hugged, and Virginia felt a little sink of guilt, knowing Aline thought she'd come just to comfort her about the fires. There was something hopeless even in Aline's hug, sagging away, like she wasn't quite there. She looked beat-down, dark patches under her eyes, her round, pretty face gone crooked with worry. "I don't understand why they can't catch him," she said sharply. Then she drifted back to her perfectly clean kitchen, turning from one window to another in a slow, dreamy dance, staring out at the fields. "It's like they start all by themselves," she sang, in a high, little-girl voice. "One minute there ain't one, then there one is."

Virginia went and looked out with her. There was Mase's barn, his farm machinery, and his hay rolls, all lined up one behind the other out their ridge top, like a train on a track. The old heaped-up hills stretched beyond.

"Oh looky there." Virginia pointed at Mase's pick-up, to distract Aline from the black burn marks snaking up the hills. "Mase still has his sign." For Mase's birthday one year, Virginia got a special sign printed up, because he and Jimmie were always going around together in that beat-up truck, with a broom stuck up in the back of it, like in the old TV program about the junkman: "SANFORD AND SON," the sign read. Even Aline had to giggle about that sign. Mase had hung it proudly on his tailgate, and he and Jimmie drove for years like that.

"Must be hard on Jimmie, now he can't drive any more," Virginia went on, trying to find some way toward her subject. "I bet he feels cooped up." Jimmie'd never had a license, but he was always crazy about trucks, and he'd learned to drive early, the way country kids do—first on the farm, then on the little roads around home.

Aline gave a helpless shrug. "You know Mase always wanted him to be . . . and he went *with* him, every time, in the beginning. And then we figured, well, out *here* . . . but of course them Simses claimed the accident was all his fault—said he was driving in the middle of the road."

"Well? I bet they *both* were. These old roads only *have* middles," Virginia said, shrugging and laughing.

Aline didn't even smile. "The sheriff said he'd have to put him in jail, if we ever let him drive again. He'd go out there and start the truck, sit in it for hours, the engine running. I had to scare him so bad—tell him the sheriff would come take him away

from us, lock him up in a cage. . . .” She stared out the window, her voice dropped down. “I’d die if he had to go to jail.”

Virginia took a deep breath. *Now*, she told herself. “What time of day do the fires usually start?” she asked Aline.

“Always of a morning. I wake up every day smelling smoke. But Jimmie’s outside before light, and never seen a soul. I reckon they’re sneaking in from the back country, through the woods.” She was shifting past the windows again, her eyes wide. “They know when to do it, too—when we ain’t watching. They’re waiting to get us. Laughing at us. I can feel them out there, right now. Awaiting.”

“But it *will* rain, you know,” Virginia said, falling back on the weather for hope or blame, out of old country habit. “It always does.”

“That’s what Mase keeps saying. ‘Ain’t nothing but little grass fires.’ But if they reach that barn,” Aline waved a finger at the old tobacco barn that stood twenty feet from the house, “dry as tinder, with the wind blowing through the siding—”

“We often have a spell like this, between the winter snows and the spring rains. Things *get* dry. You’ve just got to be careful.”

“But—they’re *setting* these fires,” Aline said, squeezing her eyes shut, like she was trying to imagine it, or not imagine it.

Virginia sighed and nodded. “It’s not just somebody flipping their cigarette out the car window. They’re doing it on purpose.” She couldn’t save Aline, or herself, from that truth.

“Them Crump boys,” Aline muttered, shaking her head. “Sydney’s brothers. Wander all over this place, say they’re looking for their hounds. Looking to burn us out, more like.”

“But Jimmie watches over me,” she went on, with a pinched smile. “Says he ain’t gonna let them get me. My poor little boy. And me here alone with him, all day. We cain’t get away from them.” Aline had never learned to drive, had been afraid of that too, though Virginia had tried to teach her.

“It does you no good to think like that.”

Aline drew near the window, her gaze fixed suddenly. The frightened eyes. “Here he comes. He’s out there all the time, now. But he’ll come in to see *you*.”

Jimmie came over the hill with his fast heavy-rolling walk, too much motion in it, like somebody walking hard with no place to go, nothing to do but walk. Walking to no purpose. Or was he? He stared around him, his head screwed this way and that, like he expected to see someone or something. Virginia found herself scanning the air above the hills, wondering if the fire would show itself again. “Do you remember,” she murmured, seeing his quick approach, “back when the old school burned down?”

Aline nodded, her eyes tearing over. “Now that was the sign from God. I knew it then, I got to keep him home, take care of him myself—always, always,” she crooned. “And now he’s taking care of me,” she added, her voice shooting way up high, both her hands waving at him as he came in.

He gave Virginia a loving hug, clinging to her an extra minute, still just like a kid. “Seen about them fires, Aunt Birdie?” he asked her, happily. “On the TV?”

“Them ones on the TV ain’t *here*, honey,” Aline corrected him.

He nodded way up and down, like he knew better. “Fire engine come up here.”

“He loves that fire engine,” Aline said, patting his shoulder. “Don’t you, honey?”

“We got the alert on,” he told Virginia, nodding importantly.

Aline dropped down in a chair. “They been all around us now, every place but ours. We’re next, I know it.”

He put his arm around her, grinned into her face. “We got the alert on.”

She stared off, talking in that little-girl voice. “You never know which way the wind’ll be blowing. They’ll come up here and take the house and us in it, some morning, and we’ll never even know they’re coming. These things move so quiet. We’ll wake up burning in our beds.”

“We got the alert on.” He took up Aline’s dance, watching out the windows. He did look more alert than Virginia had ever seen him—stamping back and forth, frowning at the world, with his head jerked forward and his lips pushed out. His movements were too big and loud for the small room, his color too high for Aline’s pale pink tea-roses wallpaper.

“What do you do, on alert?” Virginia asked him, offhand. “I hear you get out there before daylight.”

Aline jumped up. “Look at your hair,” she said to Jimmie. “Out there in that wind, with no hat on.” She whipped a comb out of her shirt pocket and went to combing his hair, which was down in his eyes, and he did look rough. He stopped in his tracks, leaning down to her automatically when she reached up on tiptoes to make the part. He had to bend way over. She did it slowly and carefully, brushing his hair softly off his forehead with her hand. He shut his eyes, like he was almost lulled to sleep.

Virginia stared out the window at the fire-tracks on the hills, feeling like she wasn’t here, or shouldn’t be. *They know just how to do this*, she said to herself, half-angry, half-sad. *Aline’s been combing his hair like that for thirty-two years.*

But Jimmie sat down with them then, groomed and docile, and ate a dozen of Virginia’s Rice Krispie cookies. He thanked her politely, the way he always did, and stood up again, big and proud. “We got the alert on.”

Aline pointed a finger. “Where’s your hat?” she asked him. He turned and wandered obediently toward his room. From the back, Virginia thought, he looked exactly like his father, like a middle-aged man—that slight stoop showing early in his round shoulders, the way it did in Mase’s shoulders, once he began to see his strapping first-born son was never growing up.

“How’s Buddy?” Virginia asked Aline. Buddy was Jimmie’s younger brother, who was smart and lively, and used to work with him on the farm. But as soon as Buddy finished school, he’d gone off into the Army. “I bet Jimmie misses him,” Virginia added, looking once more for an opening.

“Buddy comes, and he goes,” Aline said, faraway. She watched in silence as Jimmie disappeared into his room. Then she turned and looked Virginia in the eye. “*He’ll never leave us,*” she said hoarsely, with a fierce, proud, terrified glare.

Virginia felt that look. *She’d* left them, of course. As Buddy had done. As everyone else had done. And even Mase went off to his job, five days a week. They’d all left Aline alone with Jimmie, all these years. What right did Virginia have to question her about what he might have done? She couldn’t believe it herself, anyway. And Aline must have made that choice, too, at some moment, whether she’d known it or not. He was her life, in a way.

He came back, making for the front door, with that jolting, hasty walk. Still no hat.

Aline started up. “You wait right there. It’s cold out.” She went straight off to get his hat. Jimmie looked at the door longingly, grinning his loose grin at Virginia, swinging his shoulders and knees, like he was already on his way.

But where was he headed? Virginia remembered Frank Baxter’s voice on the phone this morning: “You don’t believe he’s doing it, and I’m *trying* not to believe it. But what if we’re both wrong, and they catch him at it? They’ll lock him up someplace for the rest of his life.”

She stared into Jimmie's eyes, trying to divine the truth. His bright light gaze was steady and open as a child's. And it came to her that she'd been talking to the wrong person.

"I know," she began, matter-of-fact. "About the fires."

He stopped his restless movement, his eyes on her face.

"You know who's starting them?" she asked, in an easy, curious tone.

He turned and looked outside, nodding, grinning.

"Who is it, Jimmie?"

He glanced back at her, a little red spark in each eye. "The Australians," he said, in a soft secret voice. He put his head back and laughed, that same old long loud high silly laugh that used to make her kids laugh with him so, when they were all little. It sounded awful, coming out of him now.

She saw him, for a second, the way his neighbors would see him—this grown man wandering around loose, laughing and talking crazy, while fires broke out all around him.

Then she raised her eyebrows encouragingly. "That's right," she went on. "The Australians. And you know who those Australians are, don't you?"

He reared back and opened his mouth, set to laugh again. But he clamped his lips shut and switched his head back and forth, staring at the ceiling.

"You don't know? Well, the sheriff does," she said.

He picked one shoulder up and tucked his head in it, like he was hiding. She stepped closer to him. "The sheriff says—," she spoke quietly, holding his eyes—"he knows who the Australians are. And if they do it again, they're going to jail."

He folded up small, like something hit him in the middle. "Going to jail?" he whispered, sucking in his breath.

"If they ever do it again," she repeated slowly, nodding with the words.

Aline came back in the room just then, waving his hat. "Got it," she called out, almost cheerful.

He scrunched his hat on and was out the door. She and Aline stood together at the front window and watched him start up the road—still walking hard, still carrying his tobacco stick, but with his head cranked down sideways now, his eyes on the ground.

"I'm so scared for him," Aline moaned, hunching forward, her arms clutching her belly. "All the time."

Virginia saw another little line of chin under Aline's chin quivering. She saw her friend, already beginning to be old, struggling for her great big child, like he was still inside of her, and she'd never get him out.

She couldn't say, "That's just Aline," either. Didn't she herself sometimes feel that same helpless clench of love and fear for her own smart, grown-up, out-there-on-their-own children? Wasn't part of her still laboring with her babies? All the time?

A car went by on the road. Jimmie poked his head up. He waved his tobacco stick.

Virginia laughed, leaning her shoulder against Aline's. "He's a good little old kid," she said. Aline swung to her, tears springing in her eyes, and they hugged, a strong hard bona fide hug this time.

Everybody kept waiting on the next fire. After a while, the sheriff began telling folks he'd solved the crime—got it all taken care of, nice and quiet, nobody hurt. He

never said how he'd done that, or who it was, but they were so grateful not to have the fires any more, they didn't care a darn.

Then it misted a little rain. And all along the burnt ridges, out from under the blackened fields and trees, bright green shoots of new grass appeared, startling, deliberate-looking, like they'd been sown there, and so alive, and so quick, like the fires had invited them.