

# Ann Pancake

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an excerpt of

## *Arsonists*

... Somebody started burning houses within a year after they blew up the first mountain. More than a decade ago, Jason still a boy, Carol still with them. In the worst of the blasting, dust stormed the hollow so thick Dell couldn't see Sam Sears's house across the road, and everybody'd had to burn their headlights, their house lights, right through the middle of the day. A few people'd even videotaped it—Lorenzo Mast had, and Sibyl Miller—back when some believed bearing witness could make a difference. That year there was no summer green, no autumn red. Everything ever-gray and velvet.

Sam got him and his wife gas masks from an army surplus store, but Dell made do with a scarf. Standing on his front porch, a winter muffler wound round his face, watching the horizon dissolve in linked eruptions like the fire-cracker strings him and Kenny'd a couple times got hold of as kids. Blasts thunder-clapped the wishbone of his chest, and the rock dust taste was familiar in his mouth. Dell looked on at first in disbelief and even awe—it was nothing fancy they used, ammonium nitrate and fuel oil, exactly how Tim McVeigh bombed Oklahoma City at about the same time—but quick that turned to outrage and frustration and, finally, helplessness and grief. Which was at last, Dell understood now, a different kind of awe. *Brimstone*—the word would come to Dell, he couldn't help it. It came on its own in the taste of the rocks. And through it all, the hole opening in him. The hole small at its mouth, but boring deeper, deeper. Craving always to be filled.

Six months into that gray blizzard, the company started offering the buy-outs. By then, a lot of the properties were good and blast-busted, with walls cracked, ceilings dropping, foundations split. Wells knocked dry. By the time the offers came, the homeowners had been told by the Department of Environmental Protection that they couldn't prove the damage hadn't been there

before the blasting started, and no one had the lawyer money to argue with them, so many people sold, even at the pathetic prices offered them. If their houses weren't shot, their nerves were, and those who could start over, did.

Dell and Carol talked about it, too. Discussed it, argued it, full-on fought. Lying in bed of a night in the silver glitter of the lights on the mine, Carol crumpling Dell's hand under her chin. Pressing her lips there. Shouting at each other once while they were power-washing the dirt crust off their house—that comes back to Dell too often now, the splatty roar of the spray, the expense of the rental, and still the dust sticking like paint. How hard it was when you got nowhere else to put it not to take it out on who you loved. Sometimes Dell'd take the leave side and Carol'd take the stay, then by next time, they'd have traded places on it. Bottom line was, Dell was pushing sixty, had taken early retirement, and where were their life savings? Right there in the house. Like a big pile of money blowing away littler and littler with every explosion, every dust cloud, every coal truck crashing through town.

They reached the final decision one afternoon while they were reframing family photos and Carol's needlepoint, fixing them sturdier to the walls. They simply couldn't begin again on what the house would fetch now. Dell remembers how they weren't even sitting when they decided it, they were standing in the living room, finished with rehangings the last picture. He remembers the gray cast to Carol's face, the afternoon having just reached that moment when it's time to turn on the lights. The minute they made it definite, there came in Dell a peculiar painful rightness that he recalled from when he was a kid, back when he used to bang his head against his bed frame, against walls, usually out of anger, occasionally to salve a shame. And for a day or two, the little hole hushed its yearning.

In the meantime, the other houses were bought up; the families packed; the homes darkened. And then, when the machines finally began to retreat, still blowing up ridges but farther away, and just when Dell and Carol thought the dust might lay . . . the smoke came.