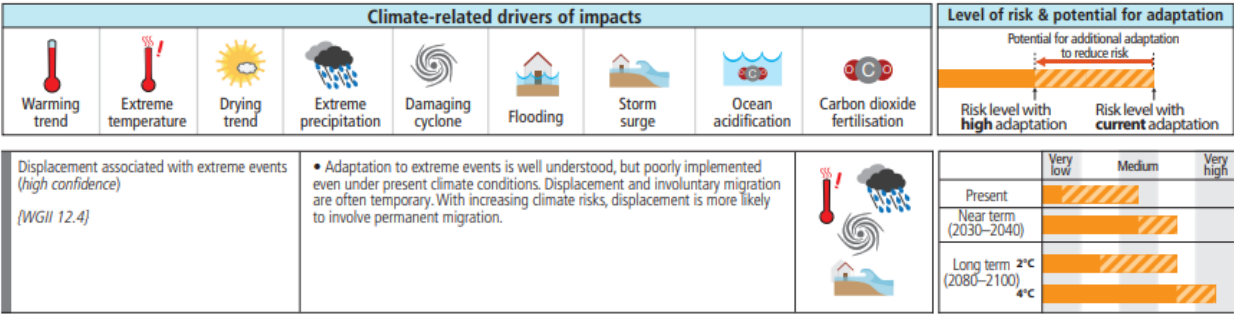


Home Away From Home
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To my partner Alyssa, for always encouraging me.



Based on projections made by the IPCC in the 2014 Climate Change Synthesis Report, there is a medium-high risk of temporary or even permanent displacement due to extreme events in the long-term (2080-2100). This projection stands even with extensive mitigation efforts if we enter a 4°C warming scenario.

If this is to be our future, those living in the year 2082 will have little reprieve from the effects of global climate change. In Northern Idaho, if it's a wildfire year, evacuations are mandatory. There has been acute seasonal drought for a generation, and there's just not enough water to stop the spread and supply the towns. Many families will leave and seek temporary shelter elsewhere. Some are lucky to have summer houses or wealthy relatives with extra rooms; others travel thousands of miles to live out of campers, boats, cars, or tents. The fires aren't a new trend -- they've been happening an average of every four or five years. But an especially bad season is due.

It's a beautiful day. The sun is shining through the kitchen window, and Fitz, our splotchy white and brown Jack Russell terrier, is sprawled out and basking in the warmth that it casts onto the tile floor. Even though I have all day to read in the car, I want to spend the last morning at home the same way that I would spend any other Saturday morning, which means quiet time with my book and a cup of black tea and lemon.

I'm the first one awake, as usual. But the serenity is short-lived. Stirring and commotion in the rest of the house soon spills over to the kitchen and threatens to break my focus. As if they planned it in advance, my family walks into the kitchen one at a time, and without saying a word opens every drawer and cabinet, shuffles their contents, and then leaves empty handed. Mom, dad, my little brother Terry. I've barely managed to read a single page in the last ten minutes.

I sigh and wave the chapter away, then check to see if any of my friends are awake. I'm in luck.

"Good morning, Anna!"

I ask her where her family is going camping this year.

"The Ozarks."

I hold my finger over the capital O and it opens wide. Suddenly, I'm a giant standing in the mountains. All around me, a lush green carpet of trees.

I turn my head to the side as a small lake catches my eye. I'm a bird soaring high, swooping down toward the water. Above me, dotting the bright blue canopy, are a few pillowy white clouds casting their small shadows over the lake and the treetops. I look skyward and I'm back in the kitchen.

"Looks peaceful," I reply.

"There are gonna be so many bugs!"

"It's okay. At least you're going somewhere new. We're just gonna stay with my aunt Tina again."

Terry comes in from the living room, bright red hiking sneakers plodding over the kitchen floor. He's already wearing his camping bag. He stops just past the doorway and struggles with the fit of it, heaving the pack up over his right shoulder and holding it tightly, grasping behind his back at a loose strap that's just out of reach.

"We're nothing if not resourceful," dad yells after him.

Terry ignores him and looks over to me. "Can you help me with this?"

In a show of great effort, I swivel the kitchen stool around and hold out both hands, motioning for him to come closer. He turns around, and I carefully feed the thin nylon strap through the side buckle, pulling hard.

"Too tight!" He says as if he cannot breathe. I shove him forward, and he turns and swats at me with his water bottle. I snatch it from him and hold it above my head, out of reach.

"Stop messing around," mom yells from behind a cabinet door on the other side of the kitchen. How long was she there?

He glares at me, then squats down and lowers his pack to rest in the middle of the floor.

"See my new sticker?" He reaches for his water bottle, pointing at a crisp white decal affixed sideways down the length of the translucent orange plastic. *Panhandler* is written in dark green over top an elongated rectangle that's drawn so that it dwarfs the lower two-thirds of our state. "They used to call us that, after the 2030 fires." He grabs the bottle, unscrews the cap and takes a big drink. I turn back to my book.

I'm two sentences in before I'm interrupted again.

"Mel, is your bag all packed?"

I can't see him, but I know that dad is shaving in front of the mirror with the bathroom door partway open.

Since before I was born, one of dad's camping rituals has been to grow his beard out from the day we leave until the day we arrive home. Two years back, the wildfires were particularly bad. It was mid-September when they finally gave the all-clear for us to move back. As the rest of the family hid from embarrassment, he would declare to anyone that would listen that 2080's camp beard was his best one yet.

This year, we're leaving almost two weeks earlier than usual. I could tell that mom was worried about the house and what this new trend might mean for us, but dad reacted to the news by remarking how majestic his beard will be and lamenting that he won't have time to finish the music playlists for the ride.

Mom says that even though he doesn't show it, he's worried too.

"Mel?"

"Yes!"

I kick the crumpled pack beside me and return to the book.

With camping trips becoming longer and many families unable to return before the start of the school year, around ten years ago the school board decided that it would hold classes remotely over the summer and start all in-person classes just before Halloween. To accommodate this new format and to appease the students that were upset by schoolwork encroaching on their summers off, every remote class that's offered is a creative elective that can be taken in whatever format you choose. I always choose Stories.

Every year there's a new story, and each grade level has a story that's unique to them. The older kids talk about how they start to get good at year seven, but year six stands out as my favorite. The story that year was told from the perspective of a 13-year old named Jamoon. His family's home was lost to the rising of the ocean, and reading about what he went through helped me understand how people deal with hardship, loss, and change when everything feels like it's out of your control. I remember when I was reading it I kept thinking about grandma's old house with its tall, narrow closets and the uneven dirt basement that would flood every year

and turn into a muddy mess. Even though I've only spent a couple summers there, it made me sad to think of losing it and all the memories it holds.

In my book, the page fades away, and a scroll of text begins:

MANDATORY EVACUATION BEGINS 6/26 FOR THE FOLLOWING COUNTIES: BONNER, BOUNDARY, SHOSHONE. CHECK ACTIVE MAP FOR UPDATED ROUTE PLANNING.

"It's too bad we have to leave before the fourth. Would have been nice to make it to the lake one more time."

I look up and see dad standing in the doorway.

"Are we ready?"

"I think so," says mom. She reaches into a cabinet beside me and pulls out five filtered masks, setting them onto the counter. "Make sure they're on tight; the smoke is pretty bad already."

Terry pulls up the blinds at the kitchen window, and the world outside is murky gray. Now that the makeshift sunlight isn't there to warm him, Fitz gets up and stretches before trotting over to lap a drink from his water bowl.

I slide my book into the front pocket of my bag and squat down, calling him back over to me. Taking his leash from the table, I clasp the latch onto his collar and hold him in place while fitting his mask. He doesn't like it, but he's learned to make the best of it. Same for all of us.

I stand up to put my own mask on, then I take one last look at the house.

I hope it's here when we get back.

As the world fades in before me, I can tell right away that something isn't right. I turn my head but nothing happens. I think I'm staring at a wall.

Where am I? Am I still in the shed?

I just need a moment to get my bearings. But everything is so hazy.

I try to move, but the most I can manage is a shudder.

I must be stuck on something, I think. Okay. Lean back. *Inhale*. Pitch forward. *Exhale*.

Out of the corner of my eye, I glimpse the window. I think I see smoke billowing up outside.

Come on.

A few seconds of frantic thrashing against the cold concrete floor gets me no closer to freeing myself. My frustration is building. I try to stay calm and brainstorm a plan, but it looks like I'm running out of time.

I'm sure of it now. That's smoke seeping in -- a steady plume through each tiny crack in the window molding. I try to regulate my breathing, to make deliberate movements and conserve my energy, but my struggle to free myself seems like it's getting nowhere. I need to get out of here. I need to check the house.

I tense up from my head to my toes, and in one spectacular muscle spasm I manage to shake myself free! Now that I can move, I finally get a sense of my surroundings. It looks like someone trashed the place.

A tool cabinet, which I knew I should have bolted to the wall, is toppled over. Calipers, clippers, gloves, an extension ladder. A hose which had been neatly coiled is now a nest for all of the little things that cluttered up a living space and were relegated, *rehomed*, as Emily had phrased it, to the shed. Their box had been sitting on the very top shelf behind the campfire supplies, and I hadn't thought about it since shoving it back there a few summers ago. Out of sight, out of mind.

I turn and follow the wreckage to find the roof busted open. Crushed under the weight of a fallen tree. Bunched up branches of a once-towering pine now nestle against smashed, splintered timber and contorted, light-gray siding.

Through the opening, flickering in the daylight, fire.

It's here.

I duck under the branches, free myself from the rubble, and command the door to open with a quick wave of my hand. Surprisingly, it jumps to life, the motor whirring loudly as it winds up a chain and lifts the door overhead.

Dashing outside, I turn and survey the scene, expecting the worst.

The top of the collapsed tree is ablaze, and so is much of the surrounding forest. Glowing embers of ash rain down from above. Thick gray smoke rises from all sides, but diffused beams of sunlight still light up the clearing.

It looks like the house is okay! But the overturned tree is distressingly close to it. I start toward it, knowing there's no way I can move it.

As I pass, a tiny smoke grenade drops from the burning pine, its core glowing bright orange. I follow its path as it rolls down the dirt slope, a wispy white trail left in its wake. To my relief, it stops a few feet from the cabin, rocking back and forth as it settles.

I quickly make my way to the other side of the house and then my heart sinks. I can see that it's too late; the upstairs bedroom is full of smoke.

Two days ago, I was scouting plots for a new development in downtown Philadelphia when I got the message that the fires were coming. We've had more fire years than not, as of late.

The house is no fortress, but it had its defenses: a robust sprinkler system that covers the foyer, the kitchen, and the top of the stairs; a wide path clear of brush and trees acting as a firebreak;

and the most recent addition -- a thin, low barrier fifty feet away that pulls double duty as a trip hazard and a literal fire wall. We did everything we could think of to prevent the spread from reaching the cabin, save digging a moat around the perimeter. In my mind, it should have never caught fire.

But I see where we went wrong. The mulch around the front flower beds. The large, wooden deck in the back. A small swath of brush that we didn't finish clearing. We were too cavalier. We thought it would pass us by, like every other year.

It was the deck that did us in. Hot embers from nearby trees descended on it, caught by the wind, and ignited the blaze. It spread to the awning, into the kitchen, up to the bedroom, and it's clear to me now that the sprinklers were never going to be enough to stop it. I watch helplessly as memories go up in smoke.

I don't know why, but I am compelled to get inside.

I try the front door, but the gesture to open it has no effect. Maybe it's a safety feature? The power can't be out. The windows aren't responding either. If I get close enough to them, I can just see inside. The fire is slow to spread, but the smoke is everywhere. The bedroom where we spent our first summers together. The balcony where we birdwatched and sipped our morning coffee. The rustically beautiful camp kitchen with the old wood stove. I can't stand to lose everything.

I'm getting desperate, and I have a crazy idea. I bet if I rush headlong into the kitchen window, it will break. If I get in, maybe I can salvage something. Something the fire won't be able to take from us.

I get some distance from the house. I check the angle, praying that this will work, and somewhere -- between the satellite dish, the router, and that little black box with the rigid cables that make it so it never sits flush against the wall -- a wire is severed.

Everything goes black.

I yell in frustration, but my voice sounds distant to me, as if I was watching myself from afar. I

bring a hand to my temple and hold it there, like I'm recovering from a terrible hangover. My senses slowly return to me, and I notice that my head does hurt. Through the silence, all I can hear is the sound of my heart beating, a drum pounding in each ear. I swear I can smell smoke.

"Is everything all right?"

I turn around, open my eyes, and Emily is standing at the doorway.

"The cabin," I say. "The wildfires got to it."

She walks to me, shaking her head and taking my hands in hers.

"We'll get through it. After how bad they were last year, I figured it was only a matter of time."

She eyes the little visor clipped to my glasses. "Were you there?"

I unclasp the headset and place it on my desk, sighing. "I went in with the drone but lost the connection before I could do anything. Not like there was anything I could do."

She squeezes my hand tightly and offers a comforting smile. "It's okay. We'll rebuild."

To clear my head, I resolve to spend the rest of the day outside. An afternoon of swimming, sunning, and getting some work done poolside helps tremendously. I'm thankful for the beautiful June weather, all the while glad that Connecticut doesn't catch fire very often. It's really too bad about the cabin; the winters there were so pretty and so peaceful.

As I'm headed back into the house, I notice Emily is hard at work on another project.

"Hey, dear. It's getting pretty late."

She turns and gives me a sly smile, and over her shoulder I see an array of converging thin lines and acute angles rendered into a digital modelling matrix. Reaching into her blueprint, grasping it delicately between her thumb and index finger, she casts a spell. With a delicate pull, like tugging on a threaded needle, the structure expands to fill the room. I'm amazed by

her handiwork.

She's right, I think. We will rebuild. And this time we'll dig a moat.