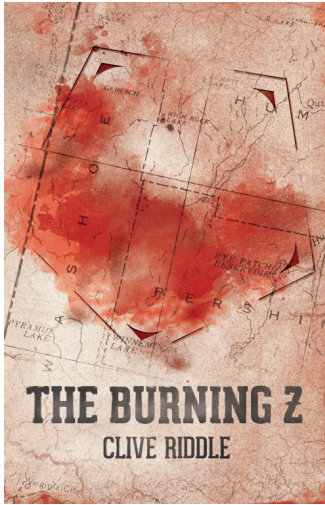


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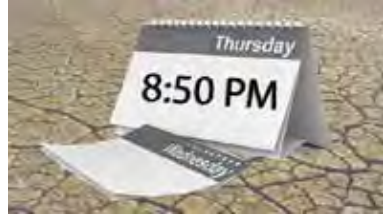
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I. Sulphur



Shooting Star

They strolled from first base, across the pitcher's mound, heading toward third under the desert's emerging night sky. The two men continued, angling past the cyclone backstop, leaving the Black Rock field of dreams behind them. They proceeded past the large, modular storage shed to the shadowy, old ranch house that lay in wait.



Bruce convinced Conner to follow him up the paint-stained aluminum ladder, onto the roof. Conner voiced concerns they would crash through the decaying structure of the weathered and abandoned two-story home, but Bruce provided assurance he had traversed this passage on numerous occasions. They found their way to the second story roof's dust-covered crest, straddling their legs on each side, settling down to take in Thursday's twilight view.

Just ahead, in the hazy foreground, Conner could make out Bruce's double-wide Fleetwood mobile home and Bruce's office trailer to the east. In the distance, across the playa to the northwest, he could distinguish the silhouette of the Black Rock range. "What's the peak of those mountains called?" he asked, pointing.

"Big Mountain," Bruce replied matter-of-factly, in his deep, radio announcer-like voice, carefully opening two bottles of Miller 64 beer he had produced from his sweatpants pocket.

Conner chuckled. "Now, that's original."

Bruce carefully handed a bottle of Miller's to Conner, first letting go of the family-size bag of Crunchy Cheetos he had been clenching in his left hand, ever since they climbed up the ladder. The unopened Cheetos bag started to slide down the eastern slope of the roof. Bruce instinctively lunged forward a few inches, before deciding the better of it, worried he might slip off the roof, or worse still, spill his beer. The Cheetos came

to a stop halfway down the roof, blocked by a shingle that had become slightly raised and out of position. The bag was soon forgotten, becoming the latest addition to the old ranch house.

Bruce returned his thoughts to Big Mountain. He went into docent-mode, as he had numerous times since the early afternoon upon Conner's arrival. "Well, its actual name is Pahute Peak. P-a-h-u-t-e. But I never hear anyone call it that. Now off to the right here, just northeast of us, across the playa, are the Jackson Mountains. That's Sugarloaf Knob out in front, and the tallest of the peaks behind that is King Lear. Reaches about eight thousand nine hundred feet in elevation. But, I suppose, there's not a lot of there, there, at King Lear Peak, or our big nearby city of Sulphur for that matter." Bruce paused mischievously. "Alas, Conner, nothing will come of nothing out here."

"Huh?" Conner replied, a bit perplexed; but then wrinkled his nose. Even mentioning the name of the once-town of Sulphur reminded Conner's nostrils of the pervasive odor that occasionally wafted by with the right breeze.

The two sipped their beer silently and took in the enveloping desert darkness as the breeze continued to whisper past them. They began gazing at the moonless night sky, both shivering slightly as the night continued to cool down.

"This kind of reminds me of Parker Creek," Bruce observed, bringing up their home town as he pointed up to the stars. "Nights were just as clear and as high-def back there, back then. But now, you can't beat this HD screen above us."

"Yeah, for reals, but after all I have been through, the past ten years, I'm just happy to be here, breathing this air, if you know what I mean," Conner responded, taking in a deep breath, partly for effect. He enjoyed occasionally using the slang of someone half his age – like *for reals* – also for effect.

Bruce took that to be close enough to a toast, giving his beer bottle a clink against Conner's. "Amen to that." He held up his bottle, chugging it in a couple of gulps, while his left leg twitched continuously. He fished around to place the empty

back in his sweatpants, exchanging it with the one remaining full bottle from his large right pocket. “Want to split this last beer while we take in the stars?”

“No thanks,” Conner chuckled nervously. “One beer is definitely my limit these days.”

Bruce grimaced, remembering their conversation on that topic from the afternoon. “Oh, yeah.” He opened the last beer, deciding to change the subject to their upcoming fantasy football draft. “I know you were making fun of me earlier, about how old school this football draft is going to be, but you’re going to get into it. You just wait and see...when you get back from your little rendezvous with your Facebook friend.”

Conner and Bruce were certainly the two best known alumni of their generation from Parker Creek. Their lives had followed similar trajectories. They had not seen each other in years, when they bumped into each other recently at the Reno Costco near the airport, catching up on what the past decade had laid in their paths.

Both men had moved on to a new chapter in their lives in Nevada. Before their Costco encounter concluded, Bruce convinced Conner to join his fantasy football league, and spend some time with him out in the desert, sandwiched around Conner’s upcoming liaison with his once and future lady friend.

“Know what I feel like now, after this beer, and after we crawl back down to the ground?” Bruce asked mischievously, loud enough for any critters in the distance to hear.

Conner chuckled again. “Something tells me I’m about to find out what that would be.”

“Lemon meringue pie,” Bruce stated matter-of-factly.

“Huh?”

“I would like a slice of lemon meringue pie,” Bruce repeated. “I just happened to buy one in Reno and it is waiting for us in the refrigerator.”

Conner tilted his head sideways. “Now doesn’t that make you stop and wonder?”

“What?”

“Well...about why some things are fine in a pie, and other things aren't? I've been thinking about this lately. I mean, like, everyone eats apple pie, but not a pear pie. Pears are sweeter than apples, why don't you find them in a pie? And I realize there are recipes for pear pie, but really, how many people out there have ever had a bite, or even seen a pear pie?”

“Conner, are these the deep thoughts you've been thinking?”

Conner gestured with his hands, even though Bruce most likely couldn't make them out in the dark haze. “So, take your lemon pie, for example. If we're talking citrus, why do we eat lemon pies, or key lime pies, but not orange pies? We eat orange marmalade, why not an orange pie? And it doesn't count that somewhere there's a recipe for that too. I'm saying you don't see pear pie or orange pie at any Marie Callender's pie shop, and I'm wondering why that is?”

Bruce laughed and was about to tell Conner he was welcome to go forth and bake an orange and pear pie, when he noticed the shooting star descending from overhead. “Would you look at that?” he exclaimed excitedly, grabbing Conner's right shoulder and pointing directly above them.

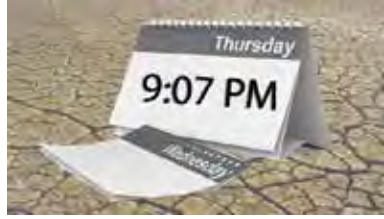
Conner immediately spied the streaking bullet of light. “Whoa,” he slowly gasped. “Doesn't it seem to be slowing down?”

A shooting star should flash by in almost literally the wink of an eye. This lasted seconds. They watched it descend until it blacked out somewhere beyond Sugarloaf Knob, perhaps at the base of King Lear Peak. Bruce thought to quote ‘time shall unfold what plighted cunning hides’ after the shooting star disappeared in the distance, but decided it was a bit much, and his audience wouldn't appreciate it anyway.



The Drone

Alan Gorman took the call on his Blackberry from a very excited fellow meteor observer.



Alan was active and respected in the meteorological associations both men belonged to—observers with the American Meteor Society, and members of the North American Meteor Network, and the International Meteor Organization. Gorman wasn't an astronomer by trade; he was a retired Air Force physician with connections, it seemed, to everyone that mattered.

The man at the other end of Gorman's call stood next to two companions under the endless desert night sky, hollering excitedly at Alan from his Verizon iPhone. Meteors had become the man's passion since his retirement from the Bureau of Land Management in Winnemucca.

Alan was away from his Palm Springs home, spending the night at a Best Western in Auburn. Before the man could explain the nature of his call, he patiently endured listening to Alan rhapsodize about the day spent with old friends, golfing at the Beale AFB Coyote Run Golf Course, followed by skeet shooting at the Beale Air Force Base Rod & Gun Club.

Alan, seated at his motel room desk, tapped his pen on the Best Western stationary while the man explained that he drove his visiting brother and adult nephew on Jungo Road in his Ford F-150, several miles east of Winnemucca to a nice, open spot clear of the town's artificial light. The man mentioned that although their timing precluded the major meteor showers — the Perseids concluded weeks before and the Kappa Cygnids were done as well — he was still optimistic they might see something special on that night.

The man detailed to Alan how, equipped with his IMO Chart and Nikon Digital Single Lens Reduction system, he set

up shop, scanning the skies with his two apprentices. The man equated to Alan that just like a river fisherman landing a trout on an opening cast, he felt an adrenaline rush, pointing out the descent of a fireball to his brother and nephew within minutes of their arrival.

The man proceeded to bombard Gorman with enthusiasm about the just-witnessed-fireball, as well as his dutifully recorded relative measurements: the field-limiting magnitude, phi (latitude), lambda (longitude), time and duration of occurrence, and the fireball magnitude, which he estimated at minus 10. The man shared with Alan that he was convinced it was not of cometary origin, and produced a meteorite fall. Above all, the man told Gorman he was stunned by the anomalies. The speed of entry seemed slower than the typical cometary showers he was used to observing, which helped support his case for a fall. But, it visibly slowed in descent while still lit.

Alan agreed with him, the expected outcome would be that somewhere around fifteen thousand to eighteen thousand meters up, the remnants would decelerate to the point where ablation (vaporization of the meteor, generating light while stripping away the outer surface of the object) ceases, thus causing the visible light to cease as well. This would mean that the object would “go dark” for the remainder of its journey to impact. Yet, the man swore to Gorman that it remained dimly lit as it continued to decelerate, virtually all the way to the ground, and more amazingly, that its rate of deceleration was quite significant.

Had Alan not known the man for years, he would have discounted this narrative to typical amateur enthusiasm, misinterpretation and exaggeration. Instead, Gorman ran him through a string of questions trying to rule in or rule out various scenarios that might have some plausibility attached to them. Gorman couldn't persuade him that it was anything but a meteorite fall, and the man was hell-bent to check it out right then and there.

Alan jotted down the man's estimated coordinates, based on observation and notes of the trajectory. Gorman found no fault with the man's logic on the potential point of impact, but Alan objected that it could wait until morning, given the difficulty of spotting the exact location – if any – at night. Alan failed to persuade his caller otherwise – the man announced they were going to set out in his Ford F-150, given his BLM career knowledge of the terrain. Gorman elicited a promise from the man to call Alan first thing in the morning and provide a rundown of what he did or did not find.

Alan plugged in his Blackberry to recharge, setting it down on the desk. He turned out the desk light, heading back to bed to read the Thursday *Sacramento Bee*.

While Alan pursued his slumber, the man and his two companions set out on their late-summer's night dirt road drive down Jungo Road, over forty miles past the Hycroft mine to the nonexistent town of Sulphur, then turning north on Jackson Creek Ranch Road for about fifteen miles, finally venturing east on a side road. The man stopped before the road veered south toward Black Canyon. A couple of hours after his call to Gorman, they were at the base of Navajo Peak, with King Lear Peak looking down at them, six kilometers to the north.

The night was unusually still. Although the evening was windless for the moment, the chill seeping through the open windows was pervasive. The man pulled out two fifteen million candlepower portable spotlights for his brother and nephew to scan the area. He inched his double cab Ford F-150 forward north, off-road, careful to stay focused on the many obstacles and elevation changes ahead.

Twenty minutes later, the man thought aloud about circling back. His nephew jumped at the opportunity to agree, having lost interest in the adventure. Five minutes afterward, the man did just that. Halfway into the slow return trip, his brother shouted excitedly that smoke or steam seemed to be rising fifty meters to the east.

The man tried not to mount any optimism, given the number of hot springs in the area, although he didn't recall one at this location. A deep gully ahead prevented any further advancement, so they stopped to walk the last twenty meters uphill, spotlights in hand. Steam or smoke indeed was rising behind the large reddish boulder concealing their quarry.

All three men broke into a trot, angling north to gain a view behind the boulder. The man gasped loudly as they beheld a fifteen-foot, shallow impact crater. He advanced a meter, his brother and nephew cautiously following a few steps behind at each side. The spotlights revealed a remarkably globular-shaped object, less than a meter in height. Its surface was blackened, which the man explained to his companions was most likely a fusion crust from the ablation during its descent, and the object itself might be another color underneath.

The man stepped up to the edge of the impact crater. He turned around to discuss with his brother and nephew the procedures and measurements they should undertake with their find. He did not see the upper half of the object rise several centimeters and initiate spinning. He only heard the soft whir behind him and witnessed his nephew drop the spotlight quite suddenly. He then heard crackling sounds reverberate, as hundreds of small projectiles shot from the object in all directions, a number scoring direct hits on the three amateur meteor observers.