Young Men and Fire
(Norman Maclean)
January 11, 2022

Not long ago, as I wrote, I was listening to a playlist on Spotify (I listen to music when I write, but never when I read). It was Spotify's weekly list of suggested songs based on listening history—for me, a mix of genres, heavy on thumping EDM (electronic dance music), my preferred writing music, but also indie folk. One song caught my attention—"Cold Missouri Waters," a haunting song about thirteen smokejumpers dying while fighting a forest fire. I was interested enough to look up the song, and found it relates a true story, equally haunting—the Mann Gulch Fire, in 1949. And from there I found this classic work, now thirty years old.

Norman Maclean, who died in 1990 before he finished this book, was a famous professor of Shakespeare at the University of Chicago (back when Shakespeare was still honored and taught). He wasn't famous for teaching, though; he was famous for his book, and later movie starring Brad Pitt, *A River Runs Through It*, a fictionalized account of his family in 1920s and 1930s Montana. Maclean vacationed every summer back West, and he had fought wildfires himself, in the 1920s. For no very apparent reason, he became keenly interested in the events at Mann Gulch, ultimately visiting the difficult-to-reach site several times during the 1970s, and locating the two still-living survivors, convincing them to return to the site with him.

His aim, or his surface aim, in this project was to understand a fire that had been largely forgotten and he thought never received the attention it deserved. Much of what we know about the fire seems to come from his research, painstakingly collected and detailed in this book. The short version of the story is that lightning started a fire on the south side of Mann Gulch, which empties into the Missouri River, some ways north from Helena. Sixteen young men, the youngest seventeen (Robert Sallee, who survived), the oldest, other than the foreman, twenty-eight (David Navon, who had fought at Bastogne) were dropped by parachute to deal with it, before it could get larger, and in particular before it threatened an adjoining area that was a popular tourist destination. Most of them were dead an hour after they touched the earth.

Parachute firefighting was a relatively new activity; it had begun before the war, gone largely dormant as the fit young men necessary to the activity went to war, and then been reborn as those same young men returned. Smokejumping, like many physically grueling and dangerous jobs, from timbering to commercial fishing, is a seasonal business. Many of those who signed up had fought in the Army and were going to college; this was a summer job to raise money. Others just wanted the pay and then to go to warmer climes, such as Hawaii, for the winter, to raise hell and spend their money. Training was minimal and no attempt was made to weld the men into a cohesive military-type force. Equipment was limited to handsaws, shovels, and the Pulaski, a still-used tool similar to a mattock, with an axe on one side and a hoe on the other. The basic aim of wildfire fighting at this time, before air-dropped fire retardants and the like, was for the men to quickly use these tools to channel a fire to an area of little fuel, where it would burn itself out.

The sixteen were led by their foreman, Wagner Dodge, thirty-three, a very experienced woodsman who was known for saying little, even to his wife. The men barely knew Dodge, because he was a mechanical genius who had been assigned that summer to work with fixing Forest Service machines, rather than waiting each day with the other men for a fire call. The men assembled their gear and prepared to fight the fire. Dodge sensed the fire was turning and changing; as Maclean later determined, this was because the pattern of winds created a "blowup," an explosive expansion of the fire. The fire, driven by wind, cut off retreat downgulch, toward the river. Dodge therefore ordered his men to cross over to the north slope, which was covered with tall grass, not trees. Almost immediately, he then ordered them to drop their tools and head as fast as possible for the top of the slope, where it was rocky and, if they reached the other side, the fire would not chase them with the same ferocity and speed.

It was only a few hundred yards up the slope; Mann Gulch is not large. But it was a 76-percent slope (meaning not the angle, but the ratio of rise to run—here, for every ten feet forward, they had to climb 7.6 feet; the angle was about 38 degrees). Maclean calculates that the men were running an average of six miles an hour; some a bit more, some a bit less, so as they ran, they became strung out. Dodge, leading, decided they could not outrun the fire. He was a decisive man.

Apparently acting purely on instinct, for this technique was not then known or taught, he took out a book of matches, lit a fire in the grass, and lay down in the freshly burned area, what is now called an "escape fire." He urged the men to enter this fire—but as the song, narrated by Dodge as he lies dying of cancer five years later, says: "But they cursed me, ran for the rocks above instead / I lay face down and prayed above the cold Missouri waters."

Those who ran mostly didn't make it. Three did. Sallee and Walter Rumsey, two of the fittest, made it to the top—which was barred by a jutting-out rock formation just below the ridge, impossible to climb over. But they found, and made the snap decision to enter, a blind crevice—and emerged alive on the other side. The third, Eldon Diettert, on this his nineteenth birthday, made a different decision, tried to find another crevice, and died. As Maclean, the professor, says, "Diettert, the studious one, had seen something in the opening he did not like, had rejected it, and had gone looking for something he did not find. It is sometimes hard to understand fine students. Be sure, though, he had a theory, as fine students nearly always have." As to the thirteen who died, men came and took away their bodies, and white stone crosses were erected where each fell.

There was a kerfuffle. The Forest Service tried to avoid blame. Some argued that Dodge's escape fire itself blocked the other men from reaching the top (Maclean , after much analysis, rejects this theory.) *Life* magazine took pictures. Hearings were held, then a report quickly issued and the matter closed. Unsurprisingly, in the masculine, durable America of 1949, with the memory still fresh of hundreds of thousands of other young men dead, the fire was not an occasion for sustained national reflection, just another sad consequence of man's finitude relative to nature, and the price sometimes paid for doing what was needed.

The title of this book is a reminder hidden in plain sight of what we have lost—by that more virtuous society, all those in Mann Gulch were considered men, not boys, and expected to act as men. Nobody asked why they were there and bemoan that they had been put in harm's way; they were there because they were men doing men's work (nor did anyone call them heroes, among the most abused words in the English language today). We can contrast the reaction in 1949 to the decayed and unnatural reaction today, even on the Right, to the seventeen-year-old

Kyle Rittenhouse heroically defending his town and people, where almost everyone falsely and foolishly recites that "he had no business being there." In fact he most certainly did, and the only tragedy is that we didn't have a few score similar young men raining lead down on the evil goblins destroying Kenosha, and then moving on to help other towns under attack. Maybe next time.

Maclean never finished the book (it was completed by others recruited by the University of Chicago Press), which is perhaps why the tone and style vary—sometimes dry and analytical, sometimes excessively melodramatic. But I think it is more that he never decided for himself what this book was meant to be. It is about the young men, but although it only comes out occasionally, in his own mind he closely tied the deaths of these young men to the death, from strangling esophageal cancer in 1968, of his own beloved wife. He was reaching for something, some consummation, some understanding of death, he could not find, so he could not complete the book. The very last words of the book show this. "I, an old man, have written this fire report. . . . Perhaps it is not odd, at the end of this tragedy where nothing much was left of the elite who came from the sky but courage struggling for oxygen, that I have often found myself thinking of my wife on her brave and lonely way to death."

It also occurred to me, musing on the freight of death, that *Young Men and Fire* has much in common with another, more recent book—*The 21*, about the 2015 martyrdom of twenty-one young Egyptian Copts at the hands of Sunni Muslims. Those young men had also traveled to a dangerous place to make money for themselves and their families, and they were also straightforward, unwavering men focused on what men had to do. Competent masculinity, like Tolstoy's happy families, is always essentially the same, whatever seething complaints the soyboys and harpies of today may make about it.

Related to this, one of the more surprising things about Mann Gulch is the reaction of the smokejumpers to looming catastrophe. As outlined in Amanda Ripley's *The Unthinkable*, and also in Laurence Gonzales's *Deep Survival*, in all disasters, and in fact in all life-threatening situations in which freedom of action is possible, most people take no action at all. They either make excuses for why they should wait to decide, or they freeze (and some panic, though fewer than one might expect). None of those things happened here, even for a second. The survivors reported

that they were enveloped by a singleness of purpose; most likely so were the others, but they simply lacked the physical ability to outrun the fire. (Similarly, the Copts did not panic; their singleness of purpose was to witness to Christ, not escape, but they did it, to a man, on video no less.) Again, this is largely, though not exclusively, a function of masculinity (as Ripley details explicitly), but I doubt if any randomly-selected group of young men in America today, feminized since kindergarten, would exhibit even a fraction of the fortitude of these exemplars.

Much of the latter portion of the book is taken up with Maclean's rambling attempts to quantify the uphill speed of those who sought and failed to reach the top, combined with probing into the increasingly scientific approach taken to the spread of forest fires, in particular mathematical modeling. I can't say how much scientific progress has been made; the impression the reader gets is that at least in part, forest fires are so complex that their behavior is an emergent property—like weather, theoretically possible to accurately model, but practically difficult, if not impossible. Maclean makes much of that since 1949, no smokejumper had died fighting a fire, but several have died since 1990, so perhaps he was too optimistic about science obviating fate. Maybe forest fires are, or should be, treated as a phenomenon known to exist, but not really understood, and therefore the best we can do is reduce, not eliminate, risk.

No women appear at all in the action of this book. They appear as bereaved wives and mothers after the fire, shouldering the burden of raising fatherless children or suffering the grief of a son's life cut short. Back in 1949, everyone realized that having women wilderness firefighters is nearly as insane as allowing women anywhere near the military. It is obvious to anyone with two brain cells to rub together that no woman can competently fight wildfires—among many reasons, it is extremely physically grueling, even in normal conditions, as Maclean makes clear. And when the physical requirements escalate to racing a fast-moving fire uphill, the insanity becomes even more obvious. Naturally, therefore, although much propaganda today is pushed about women wilderness firefighters, they remain rare—around ten percent of the total, it appears, and that's probably padded with administrative positions. We can be certain the previously-required high physical standards have been relaxed or are nonexistent for them, just as in our

military, or otherwise it would be zero percent. We can also be certain that they make the overall performance of firefighting worse, by hindering the men in their work.

This is not academic. The ideological forced admission of women to firefighting crews, dangerous to themselves and others, is yet another way feminism kills. Two fires since Mann Gulch have claimed more firefighter lives—the Storm King Fire, in Colorado in 1994, which killed fourteen, and the Yarnell Hill Fire, in Arizona in 2013, which killed nineteen. In the Storm King Fire, twenty Hotshots (non-parachute Forest Service firefighters) were sent in to fight the fire. Nine of the dead were from among them. Of the twenty, four were women; they all died. Only a quarter of the men died, however—because they could run uphill. The women could not. Not that this is detailed as a separate topic, or even mentioned, anywhere I can find—you have to deduce it from watching videos and examining the statistics. What those can't tell us, of course, is if any of the men died trying to save the women who should not have been there at all, or were fatally slowed by their indecision—such a fact, if known, would never see the light of day. (No women died at Yarnell Hill; there were no women in the crew, which was trapped by fire with nowhere to run, and their modern emergency shelters could not protect them, so they died to the last man.)

They are all dead now, everyone who is featured in this book. The last, Rumsey, died in 2014; Sallee died in 1981, in a plane crash. When, only a few years after the fire, Dodge went to the hospital for what he knew was the last time, he did not speak of the end to his wife. He merely left his pocketknife, which never left his side, on his bedroom table, signaling to them both he knew death had arrived. Idiosyncratically and against interest, perhaps, I have always said that I do not want to die without seeing my doom approaching, though I would prefer it not be drawn out. It seems to me that this is the proper way to die, without a blindfold, facing the bullet, metaphorically speaking (or not, perhaps). It does not ultimately matter for the one dying, of course; your Particular Judgment will be conducted the same, no matter how you arrive before the judgment seat. But it matters as an example to those left behind. And that example is, most of all, what those who died at Mann Gulch left us—they took risks, the dice fell against them, yet they never stopped until the fire overran them.