

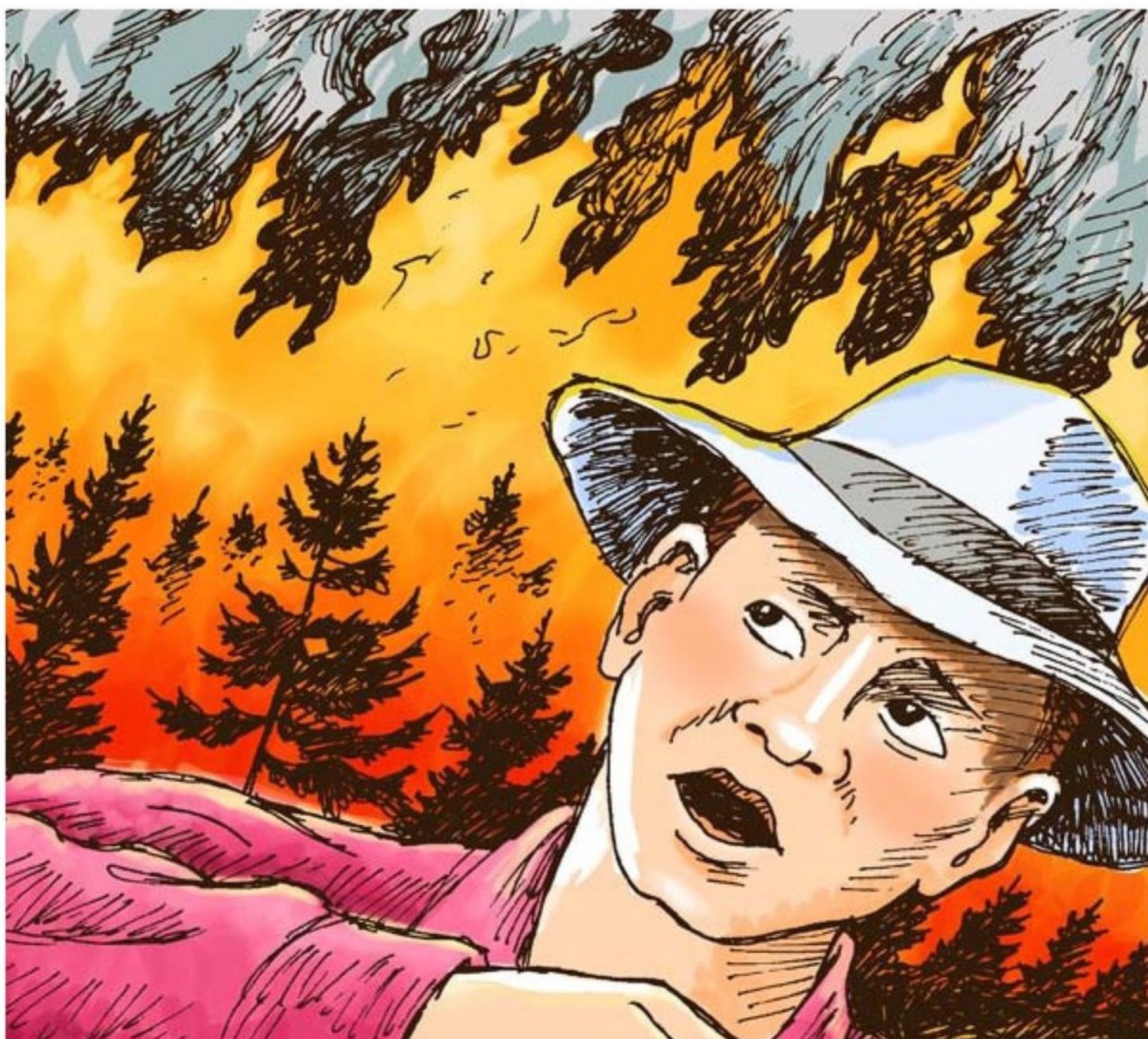
LEVELED Book • X

Grandpa Smoke Jumper



Written by N. M. Ryan • Illustrated by John Kastner

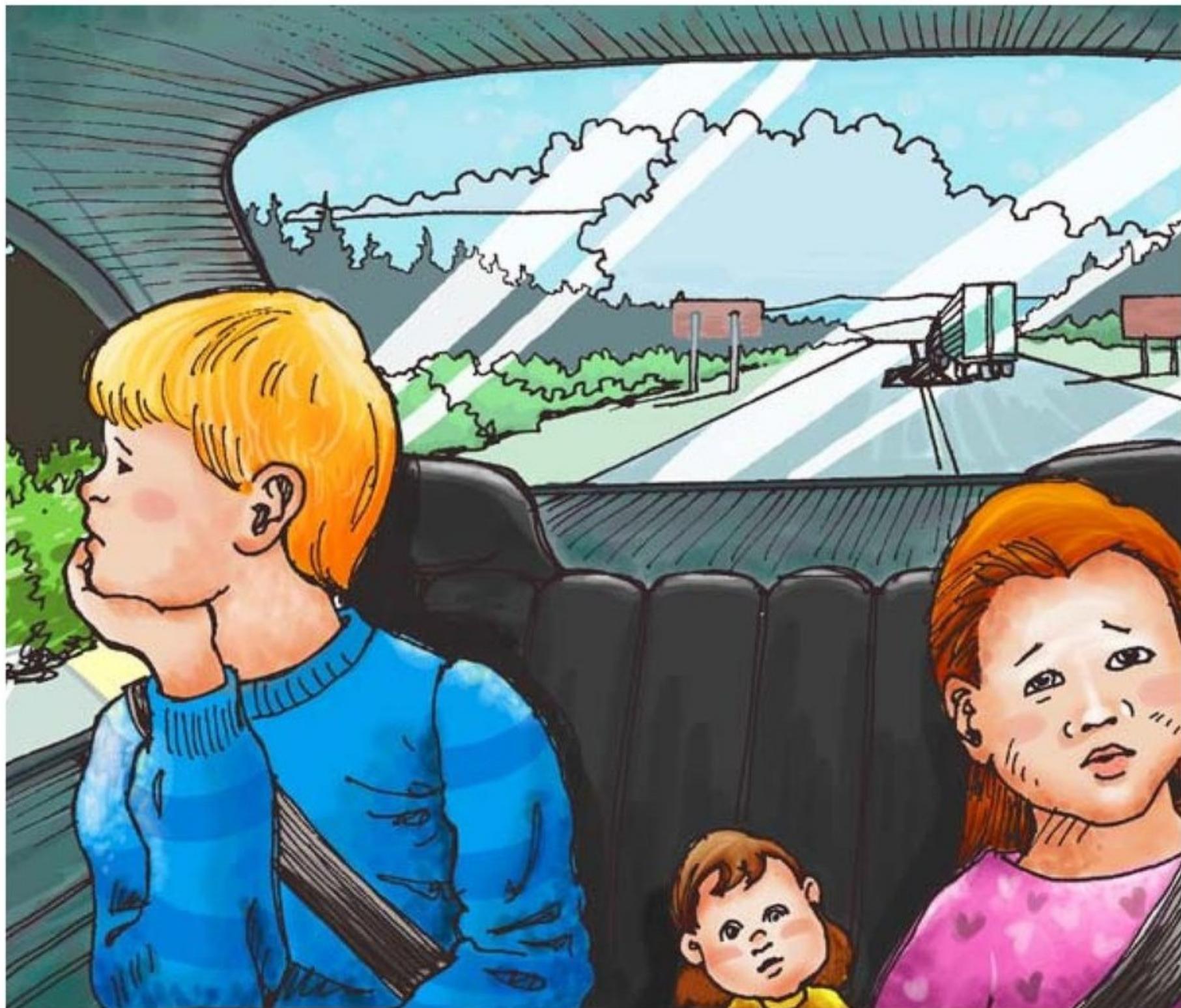
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Chapter One

“Are we there yet?” my sister asked for the seventh time in less than thirty minutes.

“Not for another twenty minutes or so,” Mom answered with more patience than I had left.

I was bored, cranky, and not exactly looking forward to a weekend at the grandparents’ in Cave Junction, Oregon. *What kind of a name for a town is that anyway?* I thought as I pursed my lips and stared blankly out the car window, thinking about the million other things I’d rather be doing at this particular moment.

“Whoa, what on earth is that?” I leaned forward in my seat, startled by the huge tower looming before us. My sister, Karen, craned her neck to see what I was pointing at, crossing our boundary and invading my space. I did not care, as I was too **preoccupied** with the massive structure that had suddenly appeared.

“I believe that’s one of the old smoke-jumper towers, Andy,” Mom answered.

“What’s a smoke jumper?” I asked as I leaned out the window to look up at the thing towering above me like some ancient wooden giant. A couple of the timbers were rotting, and it looked as if it had been abandoned for years.

“Smoke jumpers are a group of highly trained people who jump out of airplanes to fight wildfires,” Mom explained. “There used to be a smoke-jumping base here in Cave Junction.”

I twisted in my seat to look back at the tower, which was quickly **diminishing** behind us as we drove away.

“You should ask Grandpa to tell you about it; he used to be a smoke jumper,” Mom added when I settled back down.

She must be pulling my leg, I thought. I couldn't even picture Dad as a smoke jumper, much less Grandpa; the idea was just too ridiculous. But what if Mom was telling the truth? I wondered if Grandpa really was a smoke jumper.

"Are we there yet?" I asked, anxious to get some answers.





Chapter Two

As soon as Dad stopped the car, I jumped out and headed straight for the house. “Hey, hold on a minute, Andy, come back and help with the bags,” Dad said, stopping me in my tracks.

I groaned in frustration. I knew I was supposed to help Dad with the bags, but I desperately wanted to find out what Grandpa knew about the smoke jumpers. As I stood there debating what to do, Grandma rushed out the door.

“You’re finally here!” she exclaimed joyfully from the front porch. Grandpa walked by her and limped down the stairs, tightly gripping the rail for balance.

There's no way he could have jumped out of airplanes and fought fires, I thought to myself. My excitement gone, I turned around and went back to help Dad with the bags.

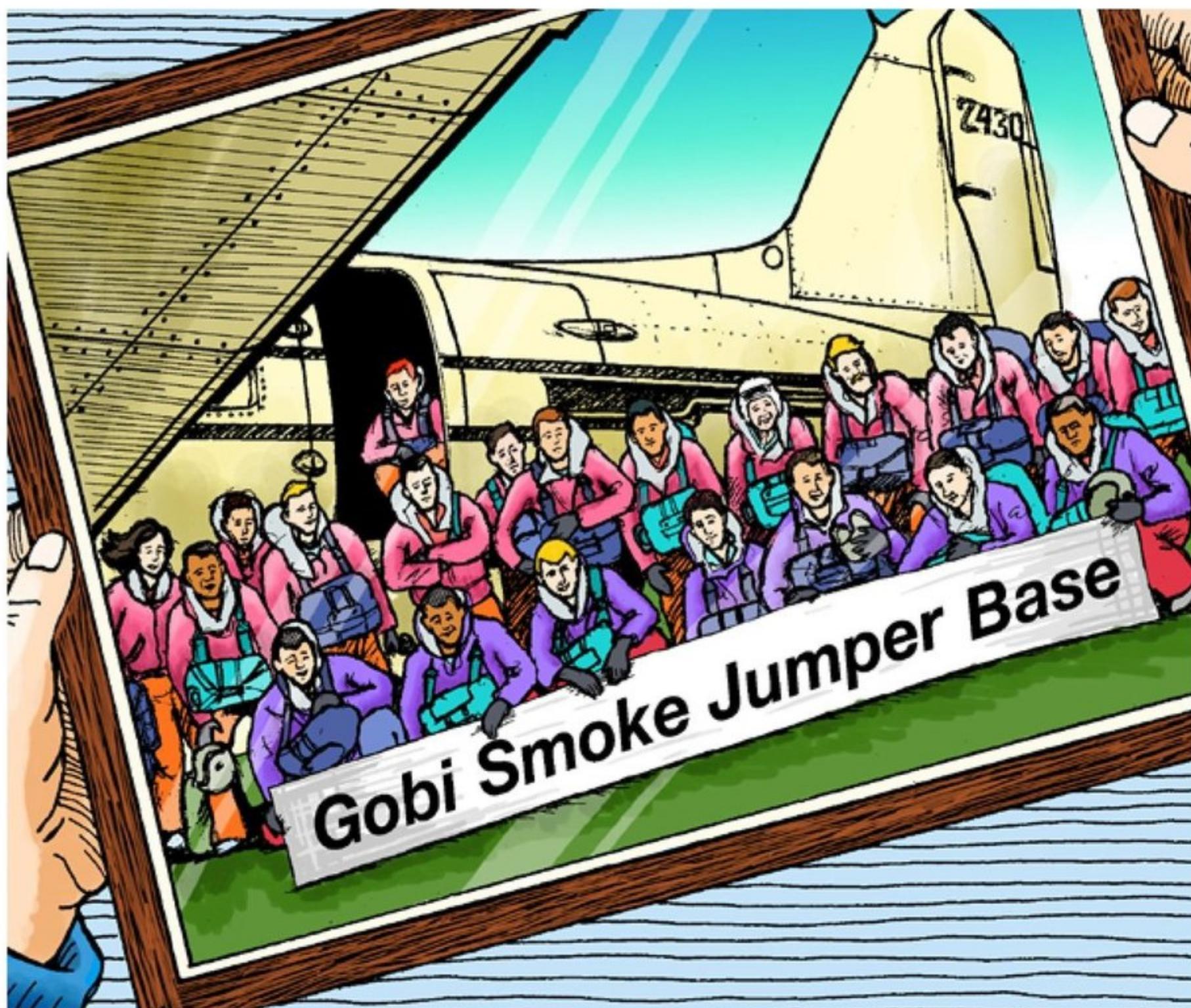
It was hotter inside the house than it was outside. The windows were all open, desperately encouraging the breezes to come in, but so far none had accepted the invitation. I paced back and forth restlessly. Mom and Grandma were busy chatting in the kitchen as they prepared dinner. Dad was in the living room discussing his latest project with Grandpa, and Karen was sitting on the porch swing reading a story to her three favorite dolls.

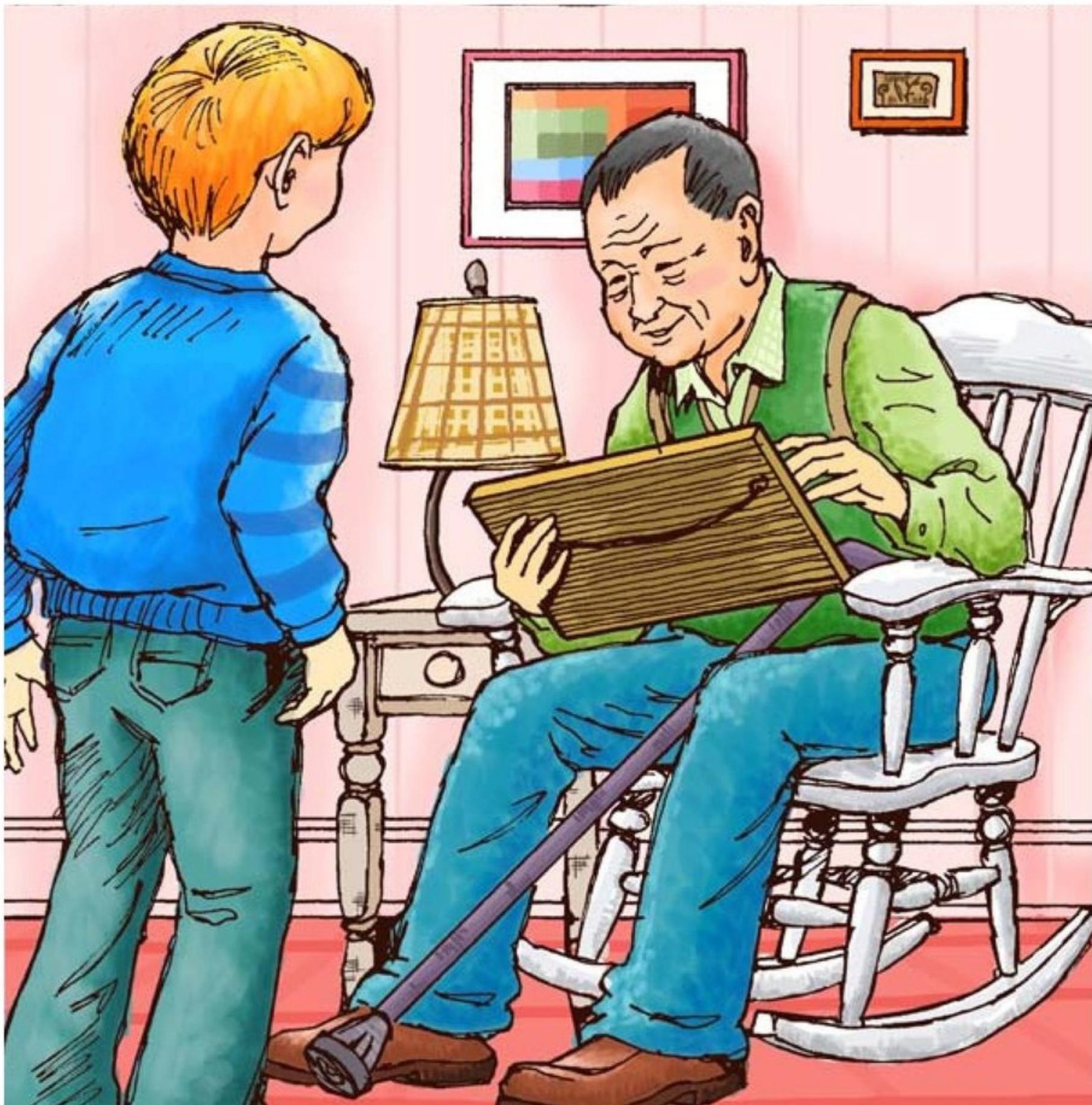
I was just bored out of my mind, wandering aimlessly through the house, stopping every now and then to inspect objects from the past that **adorned** my grandparents' home. In one room I found an old push-pedal sewing machine that Grandma apparently still used, since there was a pile of clothes in a basket next to it. In another room I discovered an old turntable with a stack of faded cardboard record jackets.

"Haven't they heard of CDs?" I muttered, absently flipping through the stack of unfamiliar musicians. I quickly got bored with them and opened the door to the library.

There was a multitude of photographs in the room. Some were black and white, and others were brown and faded, and they resided on shelves, tables, and walls. I skimmed over the photographs, not really paying much attention to their content, since they were mostly of people I did not know. One photograph, however, made me stop in my tracks. It was a group shot of about twenty men in front of an airplane and a sign that read “Gobi Smoke Jumper Base.”

“Oh my goodness, Mom wasn’t kidding.” Excited, I grabbed the photograph and ran out of the room.





Chapter Three

"Grandpa, were you a smoke jumper?" I burst into the living room and handed him the photograph. He looked down at the picture and slowly began to trace the faces with his finger, and a smile played about his mouth as he looked back up at me.

"I sure was, Andy," he said as he pointed to one of the faces in the group. "That's me right there."

I leaned closer to examine the face. The young man smiling back at me looked a lot like my dad. I looked down at Grandpa, but I didn't see much of a resemblance.

"Of course, that was quite a few years ago," Grandpa added with a chuckle.

I took the photo from him and flopped down on the floor. I could not make the connection between the young man in the photo and the old man sitting in the chair before me.

"We saw a smoke-jumper tower on the drive over," Karen announced as she made herself comfortable in Dad's lap.

"We used to practice jumping off those towers before we went up in the airplanes," Grandpa explained.

That was all it took; I could no longer contain my curiosity. "You jumped off those things?" I burst out in amazement. "They're so **HUGE**! What was it like, Grandpa? You know, jumping out of planes, fighting fires?" The **barrage** of questions literally flew out of my mouth.

Grandpa smiled and settled back into his chair. He had a captive audience and a very good story to tell.



Chapter Four

"I was just eighteen years old when I became a smoke jumper," he began. "It was the summer of 1946, and the previous year my buddies Charlie, Greg, and I signed up for smoke-jumper training. Everyone thought we were crazy for wanting to jump out of planes and fight fires."

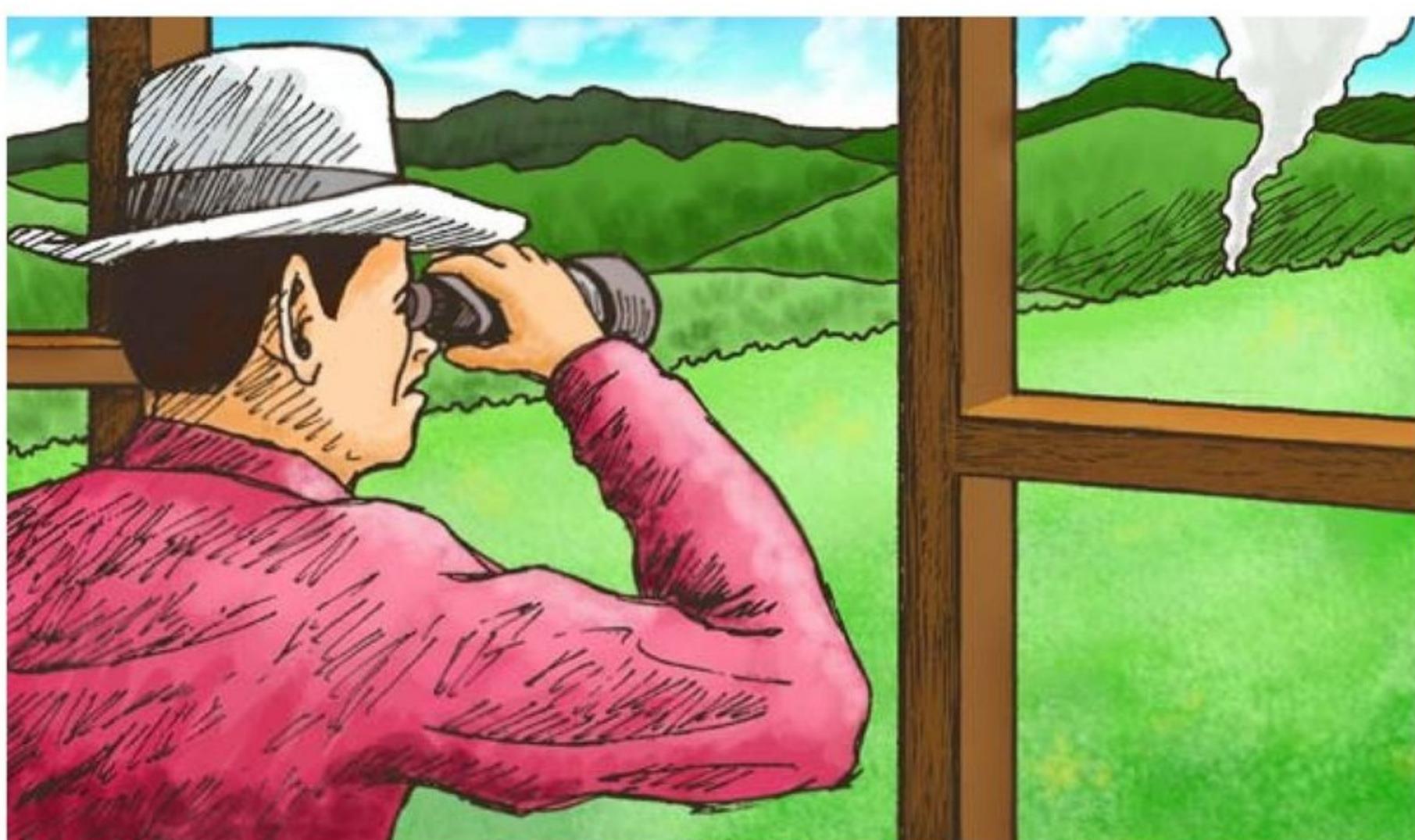
He shook his head and laughed at the memories that came back. "You had to be in top physical condition to be a smoke jumper," Grandpa continued. "The test was **grueling**. Hard to imagine now, but back then I could do twenty-five push-ups, forty-five sit-ups, and pack over a hundred pounds of gear three miles in under ninety minutes."

He chuckled again. “Oh, it was a very tough course. Charlie dropped out after the first week and trained instead to be a spotter; turned out he made the right decision, since he was the best darn spotter in the business.”

“Spotter?” I was about to ask what a spotter was when Grandpa started back in on the story.

“Charlie called it in at about 5 A.M. He’d spotted a fire from one of the towers and alerted Jack, the fire chief, and by 5:30 we were all at the base listening as Jack **briefed** us on the situation.”

He paused for a second and Dad took the opportunity to explain. “The spotter looks for fires and decides where the smoke jumpers need to go and where they are going to land.”





"I probably should explain first that it was late August, and we were smack in the middle of peak fire season," Grandpa continued. "It hadn't rained in over a month, the temperatures were averaging ninety degrees daily, and we were making jumps practically every week."

"However," he stated **emphatically**, "no one expected the fire we faced that day. By 6 A.M., Greg and I were crammed like sardines with the rest of the smoke jumpers in the belly of the DC-3 airplane. Charlie **relayed** information from the open doorway at the back to the pilots in the cockpit, and they responded immediately, banking left to head to the selected drop target."

"'FIRST STICK, UP!' Charlie shouted, and our crew of four men headed over to the open doorway. I snapped in my static line, got a fix

on the jump spot, and leapt out of the plane, **plummeting** to the ground at an alarming speed.” Grandpa’s voice rose with excitement.

“The wind whipped at my face and tugged at my mouth as I counted, ‘One, one thousand, two, one thousand, three.’ Then WHOOSH!” He flung his arms up over his head. “The parachute snapped open, **abruptly** halting my descent and sending my legs flying up over my head. I spun around and around, spiraling downward through the smoke and heading right toward the flames. **Instinctively**, I shifted my weight left and right until I regained control and **maneuvered** my chute toward the jump spot, where I hit the ground with a bone-crushing thud.”

Grandpa paused for a moment, looking a bit worn out from the excitement of the jump. I hoped he wasn’t going to stop now.

“One by one the others in my group landed around me, followed by our gear,” he continued in a softer voice. “We quickly strapped the hundred pounds of gear on our backs and **donned** our makeshift helmets. Five minutes ago we were safe in the belly of the plane that circled overhead, and now we were heading straight into the fire.”



Chapter Five

"The small fire that had started just over an hour before had grown quite rapidly in size and strength. Urged on by gusting winds and fueled by acres of crisp, dried grass, it had raced forward, jumping ditches and small streams and evolving into the raging wall of flames before us. Our job was to contain the fire perimeter, **extinguishing** all spot fires and flare-ups, which are little fires that start from the big fire and add to it, before they swept out of control. We put out a total of sixteen spot fires in three hours, succeeding in containing the fire in one area, but we were unable to put it out.

“The fire inched closer and closer to the row of trees at the base of the mountain. Fingers of flame licked at the bark, **igniting** the trees one by one like they were candles on a birthday cake.”

I wiped the sweat from my brow, imagining the heat of the fire.

“You think it’s hot in here, boy,” Grandpa looked over at me. “But nothing can prepare you for the heat of a wildfire. You don’t just see the fire; you hear it, taste it, and feel it,” he continued. “A deafening roar filled the air; it was as if a freight train were bearing down on us. The heat wrapped around us like a heavy blanket that immediately got soaked with the sweat streaming down our backs and faces. We were completely surrounded by smoke; our eyes burned and we scorched our throats every time we took a breath. We were running out of air, the fire was sucking up all the oxygen, and the clouds of black smoke began spiraling upward in search of the fresh air we so desperately needed . . . not a good sign.”

Grandpa leaned over and took the photograph from my hands. I was gripping it so hard I’d almost cracked the glass. It was a good thing he took it away from me, because the story got even more intense.



“‘CROWN FIRE!’ the line scout yelled, and I looked up in time to see flames bursting from the clouds of smoke just five feet above my head. Once the fire reaches the crowns of the trees, it leaps from tree to tree in midair, and almost nothing can stop it. The foreman issued orders rapidly as we all headed for our escape routes. There was nothing we could do but hope that the crews ahead of us were successful in creating the backfire. It was the only way to stop a crown fire, and our only hope of saving the town of Goldberg.”

"Did you save the town, Grandpa?" Karen asked anxiously.

"Shhh." I scowled at her for interrupting the story at such a critical point.

Thankfully, Grandpa continued. "The two fires, the wildfire and the backfire that had been set, approached each other like longtime enemies. They roared noisily, battling over who had the right of way. Flames rose into the air like arms as they each tried to push their way forward. Crackling and sparking, they continued the fight, gradually losing strength and slowly wearing each other down. They had both left behind a trail of destruction, and since there was nothing left to feed the fires, they both eventually burned out."

"Yippee, you saved the town, Grandpa!" Karen clapped her hands.

"Yes we did," Grandpa smiled. "The jump was a success. We had saved the town of Goldberg."

"Success?" I didn't share my sister's reaction. "What about the thousands of acres of land that were destroyed, Grandpa? Didn't anyone care about the land?" I demanded, completely

flabbergasted that no one else seemed concerned about this matter.

"Of course we cared, Andy. It would be close to impossible to find a smoke jumper who didn't care first and foremost about the land," Grandpa responded seriously. "But these were acts of Mother Nature, and Mother Nature always finds a way of taking care of herself. In fact, they're finding out that having a fire every once in a while is good for the land. Fires happen naturally, and when people keep preventing them and putting them out, more and more dead, dry material builds up. Then when a fire finally does come through, it's a tragedy."

"Believe me," he added, "I've seen my fair share of wildfires and witnessed firsthand the **resilience** of nature. I promise, fresh vegetation and new life does rise up from the ashes."

I was a little embarrassed by my outburst, but more amazed at how strongly I felt about protecting nature and its wildlife.

"Looks like there may be a bit of smoke jumper in you, Andy," Grandpa said proudly.

"Dinner's ready!" Grandma announced from the kitchen.

"Just in time," Grandpa said, rising stiffly from the chair and rubbing his belly.

Karen sprang from Dad's lap and raced down the hall, her bare feet slapping on the wood floors. The kitchen door slammed against the wall as she burst in. "Karen, don't run in the house," I heard Mom scolding. Dad and Grandpa shook their heads and laughed at the energy my sister always displayed. I picked up the photo from the floor and followed them into the kitchen. I could now see the resemblance between the young man in the photo and my Grandpa. I scanned the other faces, wondering which ones were Charlie, Jack, and Greg.

"Hey, Grandpa, who's the girl in this picture?" I asked as I slid into my seat.

"That's your grandma. Did I forget to mention that she flew the plane we jumped out of?" I stared open-mouthed at the tiny, gray-haired woman at the end of the table.

"Let's save that story for after dinner, Andy," Grandma suggested with a smile.

I smiled back. This weekend wasn't turning out to be so boring after all.

Glossary

abruptly	all of a sudden (p. 15)
adorned	covered; decorated (p. 8)
barrage	many things coming all at once (p. 11)
briefed	gave details to; informed (p. 13)
diminishing	getting smaller (p. 5)
donned	put on (p. 15)
emphatically	strongly; with great belief (p. 14)
extinguishing	putting out (p. 16)
flabbergasted	utterly astonished (p. 20)
grueling	very difficult (p. 12)
igniting	setting fire to (p. 17)
instinctively	without thinking; automatically (p. 15)
maneuvered	moved around; guided the motion of (p. 15)
plummeting	falling quickly (p. 15)
preoccupied	thinking about other things (p. 5)
pursed	wrinkled up; squeezed (p. 4)
relayed	passed along (p. 14)
resilience	toughness; ability to recover (p. 20)

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Level X Leveled Book
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