

Extract from Finding Nino... © Marc Llewellyn

Nino wants to tackle the tall dry grass around the olive trees on the way to the *casetta*. He'd like my help, but I'm not too keen at first. Hacking away with a sickle on such a hot day can't be fun, I surmise. When he tells me burning is easier, I'm even more sceptical. What with the heat and the rising winds, I would have thought it was probably the worst time to set a fire.

'Isn't it dangerous?' I ask.

'*Si, Si. È pericolosissimo!*'

'So it is dangerous.'

'*Si*. As I said. But my fireman friend is coming with us.'

He's lived here all his life, I reason, so he must know what he's doing. If he's got a fireman with him, what can go wrong?

The fireman turns out to be a charming man with orange overalls and a sporty moustache. He spends part of each summer on duty in Lipari, usually putting up at our house, but because we've taken over, he's sleeping on a couch in Nino's living room. In return for having a place to stay while on secondment from Sicily, he helps Nino around the fields whenever he can.

'Oh, and leave the dog behind, *professore*. Just in case ...' Nino says as I turn back into the house to put on my shoes.

Out in the countryside the grass beneath his olive trees is as high as our waists. Nino checks the wind with his thumb. The fireman does the same. When they're content all is well, and they see that I'm looking in the opposite direction, something happens ... I'm not blaming anyone: a cloud might have appeared out of nowhere and spat out a lightning bolt, or it might have been me who dropped a match in the grass, but however it started the result is the same — a dirty great fireball.

In a matter of moments, bushes are exploding all around us, and the flames are heading for the hills. I look at Nino, who looks at the fireman, who voices the thought we know we are all thinking.

'RUN!' the fireman suddenly screams, and he legs it back down the track with Nino hot on his heels. In my terror I overtake both of them and only slow down once to look over my shoulder. The fire is completely out of

control. Prickly pear cacti are buckling and collapsing; huge flowering fennel plants are being overwhelmed; wormwood, wild oats and dead thistles are evaporating in balls of flame.

In barely a minute, the fire has raged across the expanse of pasture and scrub almost as far as the feet of the cliffs leading up to the vineyards, and when we reach relative safety we turn to watch the flames hopping up the cliff faces like rabbits. Everything in front of us is ablaze, and all we can do is to shake our heads as the fire slams over the ridge and veers off towards the *casetta* and the caper bushes.

‘I’ve got to ring someone,’ announces the fireman, trying to catch his breath. He frantically jabs a finger at the keypad of his mobile phone, shouts down the line, and gives directions. ‘It’s out of our hands now,’ he says finally, though I find it hard to believe it was ever *in* our hands in the first place. ‘I’ve called the rest of the boys,’ he continues, referring to his colleagues in town.

‘Come on,’ says Nino to me, as he turns tail and stomps off towards home. ‘There’s nothing else we can do.’

‘But what the hell happened?’ I ask.

‘Who knows? But one thing’s for sure, if the grasses were left like they were, some fool tourist would have come along in the middle of August and left a cigarette burning, and before we knew it everything would be ablaze. I know the winds. It’s fortunate the fire came when it did. At least we know now that it’ll run away from the houses.’

Plumes of thick black smoke are bowling up into the sky now, and, bravely, the fireman has agreed to stay behind to do his bit. He’ll wait at the edge of the fields for his mates, who will arrive within the hour and stand about in the ashes, smoking their cigarettes, as the waterbombing plane from Naples busies itself dropping bucketloads of sea water over the ridge tops.

‘It’s a free service,’ Nino will tell me later, safe on his terrace. ‘It takes them just twenty minutes to get here from the time we call them. It’s amazing, isn’t it?’