Fire and the Red Huckleberries

By Sarah Norton

A thousand years ago in the forested hills of Oregon lived two red huckleberry shrubs separated by a clear rippling creek. On one side of the creek was a large red huckleberry surrounded by other large shrubs and ferns. Its berries had fed several generations of birds, bears, and humans. Its leaves and branches provided shelter for birds and rabbits. On the other side of the creek was a young sprouting red huckleberry. It had bright green new growth with leaves sprouting and new flowers that would become berries.

As the young huckleberry grew, the two huckleberry shrubs became good friends with the older shrub sharing tales of its life and what it has seen, and the younger shrub sharing its hopes and dreams. Through the seasons the shrubs remained friends until the young shrub was now providing shelter and food for all the animals of the forest as well. Feeling proud of its growth and the berries it provided, the young shrub spoke to its elder, "Look how strong I have become. I can now provide enough berries for humans

and bears to share. I have a family of rabbits that have made a home under my branches. The birds sing praises of my delicious berries."

The elder huckleberry looked across the creek at the younger one and shook its leaves in agreement, "Indeed, you have become a strong provider for the forest. Alas, I have not fared as well. I no longer produce as many berries. My leaves are feeble, and I grow more tired each day."

The young huckleberry was saddened by this, and its berry laden branches drooped, "Surely, there must be something you can do to become stronger. How can I help?"

The elder huckleberry shook its branches, losing a few leaves, "No, no young one. I must now wait for a fire."

The young huckleberry became alarmed, "A fire!? But a fire could burn you, kill you."

"Yes, but that is what I wait for now." The elder huckleberry gave a tired sigh. Over the next few months, the young huckleberry tried to cheer up the elder, and listened closer to its stories until there was a calm fall morning. The Kalapuyan people had set fire to an area nearby that began to spread closer and closer towards the creek. Nearby grasses and plants began to set on fire. The animals and birds scattered as the fire spread. The young huckleberry watched helplessly as the fire began to burn the elder huckleberry. The elder huckleberry let out a sigh of relief, "At last a fire. Farewell, young huckleberry, and may you be a strong provider."

The young huckleberry said farewell and over the coming months mourned its elder. It focused on growing thick beautiful berries and creating shelter under its branches for the family of rabbits. Over time, the grasses and flowers returned to the other side of the creek. Butterflies and bees danced around the field, pollinating flowers as they went. Ferns began to grow back, and on a beautiful spring day, a new huckleberry sprout emerged where the elder had grown. Excitedly, the huckleberry greeted the new sprout and shared its tales of the forest. Over the years, the sprout grew and the huckleberries became friends. However, as the sprout grew the

huckleberry had begun to feel more tired. More and more shrubs and plants were crowding the bank of the creek. The huckleberry's roots could not draw up as many nutrients as it used to. Its side of the creek had become darker from all of the taller plants. The huckleberry's leaves became feeble, and humans and bears could no longer rely on its berries.

Across the creek, the sprout had become beautiful, strong, and draped with berries. It called over to the tired huckleberry to share how strong it was now, and how everyone feasted on its berries. The tired huckleberry was proud of the sprout and shook its leaves in agreement. As a few of its leaves fell to the ground, the huckleberry finally understood the elder's wish for fire. Fire would bring fresh nutrients to the soil and new life to the forest. The day that the Kalapuyans lit the side of its creek, the huckleberry welcomed it with open branches.