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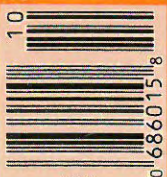
MULRONEY'S YEAR OF
LOVING DANGEROUSLY

ROBERTSON DAVIES
MURDERS HIS HERO

WOMEN WHO TALK
ABOUT LOVE,
AND MEN WHO DON'T

COWBOY JUNKIE

*Margo Timmins heats up the
"coolest band on earth"*



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photo essay by Colin King

KISSING THE FIRE



Even without the fires, it's 125 degrees in the Burgan oilfield, and there's no shade. Dozens of oil fires rim the horizon and the stench of raw crude hangs over the highway where crippled Iraqi tanks still lie in the ditch. Summer windstorms, called *shamals*, have started, blowing sand and grit in thirty-mile-per-hour gusts so hot, perspiration evaporates off the skin before its dampness is felt. At least the billowing clouds of pollution provide a screen against the sun.

In Ahmadi, twenty-five miles south of Kuwait City, Mike Miller is assigning two crews of about a dozen men each. Miller, forty-six, owns Safety Boss, of Calgary, one of four companies fighting to contain the more than 600 wells sabotaged in the last days of the war: some will continue to burn into 1992. At first, Safety Boss, an outsider in the tight fraternity of the Texas old-boy network, didn't feel welcome in Kuwait. "Now," says Miller, "they're watching closely what we're doing."

The crews drive south into the oilfield, lights on to penetrate the thick smoke. For two days, Safety Boss has been fighting one well, Burgan 57, which is spewing oil and shooting flames more than forty-five feet into the air. By now, Miller recognizes the handiwork of particular Iraqi soldiers. "You can see where the same guy would have blown up five wells, all damaged in the same way." Bomb squads have already swept Burgan 57, and for several days mechanical shovels and hoes have raked and clawed away layers of 1800-degree coke, oil sediment that has hardened into twenty-foot piles that obscure the flame. The trick to killing Burgan 57 will be ►



to smother the flame so that the well can be "stung": the crew will lower a probe by crane into the centre of the plume, then pump heavy drilling mud into the well to contain the crude gushing at hundreds of miles per hour through a three-inch pipe. Once sealed, the well can be capped with a new valve, and a Safety Boss decal slapped on.

The best way to fight a Kuwaiti blowtorch is at close quarters. Miller's men call it "kissing the

fire": creeping right up to the flame under a protective umbrella of water spray, and blasting it with hoses from fifteen feet away. Miller's crew moves in behind a monitor shed, a corrugated-tin shield that deflects the fire's radiated heat, to shoot "right into the bastard." The fire appears to be doused, but this well keeps reigniting itself.

Two days after the fire is finally out, crew chief Ken Rose tries again to sting Burgan 57. This is

the most dangerous work. The spray makes it difficult to see or to hold slippery hand tools, and the gusher's roar makes it impossible to hear. The well is still spouting with enough velocity to create a vacuum one foot wide around its plume. As Rose steps in, 57 rips his hard hat off his head and tears a three-inch-square patch of skin off his arm. Within seconds he's covered in oil, "gooped" they call it. "The oil's bad enough," he says, "but when the *shamals* kick up sand, it's like wearing liquid sandpaper." Rose retreats from the well every ▶





few minutes to receive a gulp of water and a blast from the fire hose. A "gooped" man can't perspire because his pores are sealed. In the desert heat, he'll start to bake from the inside within minutes.

It takes a few hours, but Burgan 57 is finally dead. Ken Swenson, a member of the Safety Boss crew at another well, collapses as the last hose is rolled up. Back in Ahmadi, a medic punctures his wrist and

begins an intravenous. Another crew member, Warren McLeod, is sick from too much heat and swallowed oil. A medic holds ice to the back of his neck and helps him through dry heaves. Isn't there work for these men back home where there are no sabotaged wellheads, or desert heat, or clusters of unexploded bomb canisters half buried in the sand? "Sure," says McLeod. "But not for the money working here." **57**

Is pilling killing that great fashion look?

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