



The Fire Sermon

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Excerpted from *Arroyo Circle*, the author's novel in progress.

LES SAT CROSS-LEGGED UNDER EERIE orange skies like on a distant planet, watching the pyrocumulus clouds billow from the vents of hell in the canyon, rising up over the foothills, the fire now forming its own weather. No distant planet but our own grim future, here at last. He hears mangy street dogs barking up and down Pearl, Boulder's pedestrian mall, defending the unprotectable. High noon and streetlights flickering on from smoke. A Hindu Purana falls into his brain pan: *When this era comes to an end, the world will be set ablaze by the sun, then drowned by centuries of unbearable rain.*

"Fitting end for a species fueled by fire," he announces to an ant head-butting a grape pit he'd wedged in a pavement crack. Flame on demand was a hot idea back in the Ice Age, as they—us—squatted around the first human fires. Such delicious warmth. Mmmm. Puts humans on the move, expanding their niche north, taking their own hot sun with them. Keeps the sabertooth at bay too. One day a hunk of bloody mammoth meat falls in the fire, starts the glands salivating. Cooked food! Predigested by heat, begets the fat human brain and skinny gut. Energy goes to thinking not digesting. Humans not even possible without

combustion, now combustion about to make humans impossible. What goes around comes around and around. The more it burns, the more it will burn.

In a pocket the discovery of a crumpled cigarette, ignites it with a match. Breathes it in. Blows it out. Instant dragon. Starbuck's cup out on the pavement in front of him. He is a service to the community, not a beggar, as Officer Sokos calls him. He stares into middle distance, not trying to catch eyes, third eyes or otherwise, not asking for anything. As a rule, he lets the universe happen to him, although, since he needs his nips, he has to give it a little nudge now and again. A hand-scrawled sign is neatly propped up against his knees, "I am the Lily of the Field. I am the Bird of the Air."

Passersby smile and toss pocket change, missing the small target of cup since no one wants to get too close. Dimes and quarters hit pavement and bounce, rolling off a little distance. Les does not go after them, letting coins gather round his person as if he were a golden idol. If other homeless come collect, let them. It was all one. But a dollar bill, hands off. He'll make a grab for one before it gets airborne. It would be like letting a nip blow away, especially on a day like this, the katabatic winds coming sideways on the

slope. One house near Flagstaff was smoldering, spewing billows of suppressed energy up into the troposphere. The sun cut through the smoke in slanting rays like a scene from the Old Testament, and not in a good way. It was probably never in a good way.

Judgment Weather. There was a lot to be judgmental about, but on a deeply personal level it was a good day for nips. Everyone walking past—college kids, shoppers, tourists, and god bless them, the Buddhists—all had one eye on the flame-breathing dragon creeping down the foothills and the other on their mortality. They gave Les offerings to placate the beast, knowing deep down that the dragon was sent not by the gods, but by drought, beetle kill, and human carelessness, all accelerated by global warming. Fire was not the enemy. The gods were not the enemy. We were the enemy. We were the dragon to be tamed, and an offering to Les was a shortcut to cleansing the soul. Anything rather than change our lives.

He counted his gelt. Five nips. He folded up his sign and flattened the cup, storing both in the vast inner folds of his jacket. Time for the long walk to Hazel's. It was a sin that Liquor Mart closed, an easy trek, but now a forced march to 28th. Sometimes he took the bus, the Hop the city called it, being cute as always, but walking good for the body. Kept him alive, for what it was worth. Alive and drinking. So much better than meditation. Inebriate, don't meditate. He'd used that sign to great effect. He could always find food. Soup kitchens, dumpsters. Even the cult deli if he could stomach religious predation for free food. But alcohol, like any spiritual enhancer, had to be sought. It had to be earned. Vodka transformed his sense of self

into a long luminous present, and gave him a blessed moment of immortality, a fast horse running through the hills named Nothing. He didn't get drunk, he got disembodied, just like the gods.

When he came out of Hazel's he downed a nip for a quick start out of the gate. A better view of the ridge this end of Pearl, everyone staring up at Flagstaff. He marveled at the speed with which the dragon was sprinting through dry vegetation, racing, leaping, climbing. Junipers going up in flames like fireworks, splitting and twisting, then collapsing in a spray of sparks. The house that had been smoldering in dark

veils had ignited, fully engaged, blossoming into a million scarlet petals of a single flower where a roof had been, the walls cupping the flame like hands. Incineration could be felt to the bone. No eyes could turn away. Some were crying. He could feel the synergy of fear in his gut. The vodka soothed it with numbness, feeding his inner dragon, and from his placated brain rises the words of the Buddha in his Fire Sermon. "Everything must burn, my monks," Les said out loud.

And here we were. Finally. The world a burning house.

Not for nothing, it didn't look as if the fire would make it any farther down the slope. The one house a fluke, the target of a high-flying firebrand. The home must have been a tinderbox, or it must have been cursed. The dragon itself was still moving but getting tired, breaking up into segments all over the hills, a slow procession of dying particles.

Well, weren't they all a slow progression of dying particles?

As he walked back to his spot on the mall, he passed a cluster of Naropa students and they

bowed to him. He bowed back. It was the polite thing to do. The students came to Boulder to be taught by the Buddhist monks and sometimes sat with him and other homeless on the mall like they were sacred beings from whom something could be learned. The students said nothing but sat in silence. Sometimes they took notes. They always left an offering.

Les stopped when he heard their conversation tumbling into his ear. Someone has died in the fire. Two someones? Home owners trapped by their home. How did it happen they didn't have time to evacuate, the students asked one another, thinking they would have gotten out in time, thinking that with determination and the right frame of mind they would have escaped that fate. Pity the poor charred souls. Not only did they have to forbear their hot transformation into carbon dioxide and dragged to the heavens, they had to endure the ridicule of those left behind.

The students should know by now. No one escapes. No one gets out alive.

Les reaches for another nip. He knew Shelley worked in one of those houses, but she was safe today doing her community service. He had watched her storm off early that morning, heading up to a relief station. He sipped. Above the burning house in the smoke-dark sky, turkey vultures circled, their feathers tuned to the currents of the air. They waited. Life must be stirring on the ground. The prehistoric birds sensed the dying whimpers of animal consciousness. A small creature up a tree? A raccoon? A cat? Beneath a burning bush, Les feels the pain of rattlesnakes writhing in the heat. One escapes, only to lie long and flat on the driveway, widened by wheels. The turkey

vultures move in and out of the smoke on open wings, watching seared bodies carried away, waiting for their chance.

"Les, put that bottle in your pocket or I'm going to knock it to the ground."

Officer Sokos was standing next to him. He wondered how long she'd been there. He gestured at the fire with the nip. "Whose house?"

"No one you'd know," she said.

"I might." He downed the nip and put it in his pocket.

"We've got enough on our plate today, stay out of trouble." And then she walked away to harass other panhandlers, not appreciating the soul-cleansing service they performed for the community.

"No, really," he called after her. "Whose place is it? The gal you accused of stealing a baby, she works up on the ridge. A house manager, she calls herself."

Sokos stopped, assessing him through her blue sunglasses, even though the day was too smoked-over for such things. "I don't know the names, but both homeowners died," she said at last. "An employee was there, but I don't know who it was. I just know they had to pry her off one of the bodies. I heard it was . . . she was . . . it was sad."

They were both quiet for a moment, then she walked off, and Les went back to his spot. Shelley. He was sure of it. Shelley. He pondered going back to the arroyo and checking up on her. But no. There was too much work to be done here. He set up his cup and his sign, and settled down for a busy evening. People would be feeling very emotional. They would want to give away their money. They would want to buy their way out of this dark, smoking hell. He had to be here for them. It was his job. 🍀

