

The Fire Within

Oh God, the pain! It was excruciating, praying for it to end while drifting in and out of sleep. When I awoke, I wanted to sleep to avoid the sensation which racked my body, escape to nothingness. Only then could I relieve the torment I experienced. My waking hours filled with agonizing, unrelenting grief. The meds helped but never fully satisfied my need for more relief. I kept pushing the button on the morphine drip pump demanding more, more relief from the pain. I wanted to die, pleading with the nurses and doctors to put me out of my misery. Nothing more than a mercy killing and benevolent act. They always refused, saying I would get better, recover as they put it, with the pain eventually receding into a distant memory. Sure, but what about now?

In my lucid moments, I knew what happened, clearly remembering the fire. The fire which consumed me and almost ended my life. The conflagration started quickly. I recalled hearing the woosh of accelerant poured over the dining room floor and seeing the flames shooting high into the air. It was an exhilarating sight I thought at the time. I tried getting out the back door, but it was no use. The door was locked, blocking my escape. The fumes, the smoke, and the sheer power of the flames overwhelmed me. It was only by dumb luck and the good graces of the firemen who rescued me from the inferno that I survived. They should have let me die.

The pain continued for an indeterminable length of time. I could not keep track of time, only the pain which inflicted over half my body. Third degree burns they said. They told me I was incredibly lucky to be alive. I didn't care for the annoying banalities, the bullshit the medical staff fed me. Feed me more morphine, please!

I eventually learned I was a patient in the burn unit at Presbyterian Hospital in Chicago. A short distance from my home in Rogers Park, a close burb. I was twelve years old and just beginning

life only to have this happen. I didn't know if it was a cruel quirk of fate or God's will at play. No matter really, it was merely a distinction without a meaningful difference.

The skin grafts were the next step in recovery process. Thankfully, they put me under for the many procedures I underwent. To add insult to injury, they used pigskins for the grafts, mentioning that they couldn't use sections of my uninjured skin. I didn't have enough useable skin to remove, and I'd risk infection and sepsis. The doctors claimed that pigskin was a suitable replacement as it had the structure and close DNA to human skin. Oink, oink, I thought. Funny how black humor pops up at the direst times. But that wasn't the least of the insults to my body. No, it would be slimy leeches next. Were these bastards going to bleed me too? Come on, this was the twenty-first century after all!

But that was exactly what they did. Medicinal leeches were applied to my grafted skin. Leeches, it seemed, were standard practice in burn cases like mine. The Docs stated that leeches had traditionally been used for bloodletting. The therapy was proven for its analgesic and wound healing effects, and for stimulating blood flow at postsurgical sites. For twenty minutes each hour the creepy crawlers would suck on my wounds and then removed. With the process repeated until they were satiated, or so it seemed. So, it was, in fact, a type of bloodletting. What is next? A voodoo ceremony? No chicken entrails. Thank you very much.

I was now feeling less pain but more frustration as time went on. I was antsy to get out of the hospital, but I had no place to go. Moreover, who would take me as a Frankenstein monster with a sutured face and a pigskin body? Gruesome was the word for my physical condition. Horrific was the word for my personality and mental state. I was sick, sick of mind and spirit. I sensed I was evil incarnate. Always had been and always would be. That was what I knew of myself, down to the very core of my being.

My mom and dad along with my two older sisters died in the fire I set. It was nothing personal since as a sociopath I had no feelings for them one way or another. My love first started with a large fire at a gas station in our neighborhood. As a seven-year-old, it was something that I was drawn to like a moth to a flame. The blaze thoroughly captivated me in ways I couldn't imagine until later. I was enthralled by the majesty and beauty of the flames as they grew higher in the air. It was if I was entranced by its power for all to behold, especially me. The power to unleash this magnificent display was too overpowering. It was at that moment that I knew what I wanted to be.

My dad's Bic lighter was the chosen instrument that set me firmly on this course. It started out small, lighting twigs and leaves in the backyard. I watched the gleam of the small fire for as long as possible, making sure that no one saw me. I lovingly gazed into the flames, watching the colors and inhaling the scent of the smoke. It was truly exhilarating.

It went well until one day my mom questioned my activity. It was the smokey smell on my clothes that tipped her off. She was angry, so much so she cut off my TV rights for a week. For a whole week, I was grounded. Several instances followed when I set fires in the neighborhood. The next to last was a large brush fire which got out of control causing the fire department to come put it out.

My parents realized I, or they, had a serious problem. I was shuttled off to a series of shrinks over the next few years in hopes they could cure me of lighting fires. Fortunately, none helped my obsession. I simply wouldn't, couldn't quit my passion. I was hooked and looked forward to my next adventure.

When I was deemed well enough and released from the hospital, I was taken into custody for killing my parents and sisters. As a juvenile, I was adjudged to be guilty of the crime and sent to a state facility for wayward youth.

I would be released soon, on my eighteenth birthday to be exact. No longer would I have to live in this regimented place where I was told what I could do and when. I would finally be free from custody and my records sealed forever.

I had a lot of time to think about what to do next, now that I was all grown up and mature. I thought about my goal and how I could achieve it. Something spectacular was in order. Wildfires, massive, glorious conflagrations. My mind's eye could envision the miles of charred ground in every direction. God yes, that would be my life's destiny.

California, ready or not here I come!