

BURNING LOVE

by

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Flames from the burning building leap skyward, celebrating their power and beauty, throwing sparks like confetti with sheer exuberance and joy. I watch with the same exuberance and joy, wishing I could throw sparks as well. Embers explode in the air, sending more sparks floating downward as if in a fireworks display. There is nothing, nothing I have ever seen or felt in this world, which compares to the beauty of fire. And the sound – an all-consuming roar like violin and brass sections in full crescendo, with percussion – crashes like cymbals, cracks, snaps, explosions like gunshots. And I revel in the warmth, no, no, in the heat. The heat draws me toward it, a lover's arms, even though it becomes painful, really quite painful. Yet it is a beautiful pain.

The screams puzzle me, frightening shrieks that seem to come from the very bowels of the conflagration. I know that there are no people in the building, so the

screams aren't human. It must be the building itself that screams. A living building knowing it is dying? Expressing its rage against the all-powerful flames?

The fire will be the indisputable winner even though the building has allied assistance from the fire department. I try to bring the screams into the pleasure I feel, pretend they are a chorus, singing with the beauty. But they are unsettling.

Once I thought the screams might be some learned guilt from early religious teaching I've had about souls burning in hell. But it's difficult for me to think of the flames as a hell. I see them as perfection, purification, the ideal toward which to aspire. My dream is to be able to snap my fingers and, voilà, I'm an instant torch. Wow.

Did I mention the heat? Oh, the heat. How I need it. More and more heat. I can't get enough of it. My first fire experience, I found to be frightening and unbearably hot and dirty. Now I find it sexy, extremely sexy. I crave the heat along with the visual beauty and the sound, as a lover craves her beloved.

This love of fire has, in fact, taken the place of my beloved. Well, he was never really mine, of course - only in my imagination. I'm sure he doesn't know how I feel and never will. Our relationship was strictly a business relationship, and a short one at that. But he captured my imagination and my heart like no one ever has. He is so completely beautiful and has a voice like angel music. I've never been the sort who falls in love often. Or even in lust, if that's what it is. Men in my life come and go and that's fine with me. Not one has ever stolen my soul until I met this fellow whom I call the Hot Detective. The name is appropriate in many ways. He looks good, he sounds good and he is (oh my) an arson detective.

We met over arson as some couples meet over coffee. One night, about two a.m., my dog was barking furiously, and I found my car on fire in the carport. My first instinct was to save the house, so I dialed 9-1-1 and with no thought to my own safety, I rushed out into the carport, barefoot and in my nightgown, to turn on the water in the garden hose. I had to stretch my body in-between the car and the house to turn on the spigot and unwrap the hose from its holder. The heat was intense. My skin felt on fire. I could smell my hair burning. I think my gown was melting. I sprayed my self first and pulled the hose out so I was behind the car shooting water onto the ceiling of the carport until it was dripping. I sprayed the wall of the storage room on one side of the carport-- everything made of wood, and the door through which I had come. I sprayed the eaves as far as the water would shoot. I sprayed the car too, although it didn't seem to make a difference. I kept the water spraying until the hose melted and the water cascaded uselessly across the floor. I stood there behind my burning car, holding the dangling end of the hose.

I didn't notice the fire truck had arrived until someone pulled me out into the alley, saying, "Come out of there before it explodes."

The water from the fire hoses was full and powerful and put the fire completely out in no time at all.

I know I had taken a terrible chance running into the fire like that, but I couldn't let the carport roof catch fire. If my house had burned, the entire row of old townhouses would have burned, the wood is so dry. I couldn't let that happen. The firemen doused my car until it was bloated and soggy. They doused my house, storage room wall and carport roof until there was no possible chance of a live spark and everything was cool

again. All that water made a rushing river of the alley. Only then did they let me go back inside to get a robe and shoes and lock up the house so they could take me in their ambulance to the emergency room where I was treated for burns and shock.

Later when the shock wore off and I saw myself in the mirror, I laughed out loud. I had the hair-do from hell and raging red burn rash in patches from my face to my feet. And it all hurt, hurt, hurt. Finally I was allowed to return home.

A few days later, Detective Nuñez of the Arson Squad came to interview me. I saw no horror in his eyes when I opened the door to him. Had our roles been reversed, I'd probably have let out a shriek and moved back a step or two. But he was cool and courteous. I saw only kindness and interest in his beautiful soft brown eyes. No doubt he'd had a lot of experience interviewing burnt people. His kindness made me forget my embarrassment.

I answered his questions. I had no idea who had set my car on fire, since I was sound asleep when it happened. I try not to have problems with neighbors. I told him that teen-aged boys from the apartment complex down the road sometimes come through the neighborhood breaking headlights and windows on the cars parked on the street, but I hope they wouldn't move up the ladder of criminal intent to the level of destroying homes and killing people while they slept. I never complain about the neighbors barking dogs. I have a dog, which sometimes barks, so I wouldn't complain about others. I like the dogs, although I am properly intimidated by the pit-bulls.

The detective gave me his card before he went away, asking me to call if I thought of anything more. I wish I had been able to think of something later so I could see him again because his presence made me feel so comfortable, so safe.

A week later there was another fire. In the next row of townhouses to the west, an abandoned house was burning. I stood on my front porch and watched the firemen save the neighboring townhouses until the memory of my earlier fire sent me inside shaking and crying.

Detective Nuñez interviewed me once more. He was courteous and kind and gentle as before. I had regained control by the time he came a day or so later so that talking about the fire no longer set me to shaking, but I was unable to stop the tears even though the saltiness burned my still raw skin.

“Another fire so close in time and proximity,” Detective Nuñez said. “I can understand your distress.” He reached for a tissue from the box nearby and ever so gently dabbed at the tears dripping from my chin.

It wasn't entirely distress that prompted the tears, however. It was the comfort of his presence, a release of the tight control in which I held myself, a feeling of rescue. I couldn't tell him that, though, could I? Although I think that if I had, he would have handled my confession with aplomb and grace. Like a priest. Women do fall in love with their priests, I've heard.

I could give the detective no help on this fire either. For years I had worried about that house – worried that without repair, the roof would cave in, taking the neighboring roof with it. I worried about the tangle of dried grasses and brush in the back yard where a carelessly or intentionally tossed match or cigarette could set the entire neighborhood ablaze.

Detective Nuñez went away again. And never would I have another occasion to see him – unless I were on fire again. And I was determined never to let that happen.

Again. The refrain of a song played over and over in my mind while I slowly healed.

“Again, this couldn’t happen again. It happens once in a lifetime, but never, never again.” Thank you Doris Day. Life went on.

There was another fire about four months later. This time it wasn’t on my street, but in another part of town. I saw the flames licking in the darkness beyond trees and houses toward the southeast. I was drawn like a moth. I had replaced my car by then and I drove in the general direction until I located the fire. I stayed back, way back, to be out of the way of the workers and out of danger. I watched the fire. And perhaps because there was no danger to me, to my home, or my neighbors, I was relaxed, and allowed the energy of the scene to become part of me. Energy is what life’s all about, after all.

We’ve discovered it and learned to control it -- fire, electricity and nuclear power so far, and undoubtedly there is more to be discovered between nuclear power and the ultimate energy of the black holes in space. This is what I was thinking as I watched the fire, feeling my mind expand, opening to the energy around me.

A month later there was another fire in the same general neighborhood. Happily I watched. I was totally hooked. Undoubtedly there was an arsonist in town. The weather could be playing a part because we hadn’t had rain for many months. Everything is far too dry, grass is brown, flowers are gone and the air is filled with powdery grit blowing in the ever-present wind. Heat lightning crackles in the sky now and then, but no rain clouds form. Attitudes are becoming snappish and more. Street warfare has increased, the number of slain young men rising with the temperatures.

Detective Nuñez came by to tell me that the police had caught the ones who had torched my car and the neighboring townhouse. They had done it as a lark, he said, high

on some kind of drugs and taking no care to hide their involvement. The two recent fires, however, could be naturally caused, he told me, or arson by a professional. So far, he and the fire marshal hadn't been able to determine the cause. "But we will," the detective assured me. And I believed him, because he is a good detective and takes pride in his work.

The drought continued, and the arsons continued, spaced about a month apart as if the arsonist wanted to make sure he wasn't stretching the resources of the fire department beyond capacity.

The weather is finally changing. There is welcome humidity in the air. Storm clouds build and thunder rumbles. Rain should come soon.

I stand here now watching this fire, thinking of the beauty of holiday fireworks and of the grand finale in which all remaining rockets are sent up at one time for the optimal wow. I wondered if Mrs. Murphy's cow, on which the Chicago fire was blamed, had set a series of small fires earlier before her famous last hurrah.

I moved closer to the heat, trying to stay out of sight of the firemen and policemen who would move me back for my safety. I can feel the hair on my arms singe, the petroleum-based weave of my shirt is beginning to melt, metal buttons and rivets on my jeans are branding dots onto my skin. I am a part of the energy now, just a few steps from total involvement, a few steps to ultimate completeness, total consummation, my final 'Wow.'

A hand gripped my upper arm, gently, yet firmly. I stiffened with surprise then relaxed when I saw it was Detective Nuñez, my feelings for him still strong. The extent of the feeling surprised me. I thought my new love had replaced him completely. He

drew me back a few steps from the intense heat and I felt a little chilled. We stood together watching the fire, his hand firmly on my arm. Again the feeling of comfort and safety flooded my veins. This time, though, a tiny feeling of confinement crept in as well. I tried to dismiss it. I concentrated on his nearness and the fire's energy. I had both -- my man and my fire, so I'd best enjoy it while it lasted. His presence is so comforting, his appearance so hot! And, joy of joys, the screams have stopped. Have I been accepted? Accepted by the energy?

“Awesome, isn't it?” he said. “Pure energy in its most primitive form. Power to be built upon. It staggers the mind.”

Can he read my mind? The fire raged hotter, as if showing off because we admired it, challenging the efforts of the firefighters.

“We've determined that the first of the recent fires was accidental,” Detective Nuñez said, “caused by electrical wires where the covering had deteriorated. People lived in that house. Luckily everyone escaped safely.” He paused for a while. “The next four, however,” he continued, “and probably this one as well, are arson, arson without an artificial accelerant. That's unusual. Very well done and difficult to do. It's almost impossible to identify the perp because there is no pattern. Except for the naturalness, of course.” Detective Nuñez spoke quietly, conversationally, still gripping my arm gently.

Is he admiring the work of this arsonist? Offering a compliment to the one who assures his job, making his life meaningful? I wondered.

“We had only to wait for the arsonist to make a mistake,” he said. “And he did. A clue was left at the third arson fire, another at the fourth. Small clues, but intentional, I suspect.”

He paused for such a long time that I looked up at him and found him looking down at me.

“I’m getting a feeling this arsonist wants to be stopped,” he said, “possibly before the power of the energy completely controls his reason. He may fear that he will set the whole town on fire like a fireworks finale.”

This man is definitely reading my mind.

“Or perhaps there is no danger to the town, but he wants only to become one with the fire by himself. Privately. I think he feels the compulsion, but perhaps hasn’t been ready to go just yet or perhaps isn’t totally convinced that the wonderful beginning he envisions, wouldn’t be merely the end.”

He is reading my mind. Or could it be possible that he truly understands? Of course he understands. He’s an arson detective. He understands everything about fire. We stared at the fire for a long while without speaking.

“I believe that’s why he’s leaving the clues,” he said, finally. “At first I thought that the clues were to assure that we would identify him and so give him his fifteen minutes of fame or immortality. But this arsonist isn’t a publicity seeker. I know that now. Somehow, I know that.”

“The law says,” he continued quietly, “that arson of an occupied structure by knowingly and unlawfully damaging it by causing a fire or explosion is a class 2 felony. The term ‘occupied structure’ includes any dwelling house, whether occupied, unoccupied or vacant.”

He has memorized the statute word for word. I know because I’ve recently read it myself. He paused once more and we companionably watched the fire and the

firefighters. He released his grip on my arm and put his arm around my shoulders.

“Even though the buildings this arsonist chooses are vacant, the law considers them to be occupied, and the level of felony is the same as if people actually were living in them. Did you know that?”

I looked up at him and nodded.

“So far,” he continued, “I count four fires started by this very clever arsonist. All these buildings have been vacant. I think this arsonist wants to make sure no family will be losing their home and possessions. Or their lives.” He squeezed my shoulder, holding me closer to him. “I believe this arsonist has become addicted to fire as completely as one who becomes addicted to a narcotic. I believe she can’t help herself, yet she cares deeply for others. That’s why she picks vacant buildings. She would never intentionally harm others in order to feed her addiction.”

I notice that his description of the arsonist has changed from the pronoun ‘he’ to ‘she.’

“This addiction happens occasionally to people who’ve survived a fire as you have. The addiction is about as hard to cure as is an addiction to crack cocaine.”

He paused for a long time again. “When I was in college,” he said, with a strange catch in his voice, “a bunch of drunken guys accidentally started a fire in the dorm. Some of the fellows who were sleeping at the time were burned badly. That fire changed my life.”

Why is he telling me this? “Is that when you decided to become an arson detective?” I asked, the first words I had spoken.

He turned sharply towards me. “No,” he said. “No, I finished college and was scrabbling around with one job after another trying to find a fit. I’d studied engineering, but was finding it boring. I went back to school to study Psychology. I took the Paramedic course and every class I could find on fire and arson. Then I joined the fire department. After a couple of years, I switched to the police department. Becoming an arson detective followed naturally.” He spoke more rapidly, perhaps uncomfortable with what he was telling me. Now that he had brought it to my attention, I could see the burn scars on his neck and cheek.

“You found your fit,” I said, “the job that suits you.” I smiled encouragingly into his beautiful brown eyes. I could see his pain and indecision. “As an arson detective,” I said, “you no longer have to fight the fire, the energy, yet you can still be part of it.” I stared with wonder into his eyes. Why had he let me know this about himself? “The fire department must have been a terribly uncomfortable fit for you,” I said.

Detective Nuñez gripped both my shoulders and searched my face. He knows my soul. And now I know his. He is just like me and for some reason he has let me know it. He has trusted me with his secret and I feel a warm rush of happiness.

“Five class two felonies, even sentenced concurrently, means a lot of prison time,” he said, pain in his voice. “Sentenced consecutively, it would be intolerable.”

“A prison cell is cold,” I said, shivering.

“There’s no energy there.” His voice was gruff with emotion. “It’s all sucked away by the system.” He pulled me close once more, his arm once again around my shoulder. We stood together, watching the fire burn more boldly in spite of the efforts of the firefighters. It was burning for us, my hot detective and me.

“Heat and energy, that’s what it’s all about,” I said quietly, tears now pouring down my face.

“Heat and energy,” he agreed, smiling down at me. He put a finger under my chin and tilted my face upward. “Not the hokey pokey.” He does read my mind. I almost giggled.

I saw his tears too. He is a good man, a good detective. He has a job to do, however, to stop arsonists before someone gets hurt. And even if the building is vacant, someone could get hurt. A firefighter, perhaps, and that would be dreadful. I pulled away and turned toward Detective Nuñez. I touched his cheek gently. He doesn’t really want to arrest me, but he must. He knows it. I know it.

“Be strong against the urge,” I whispered, “or be very, very careful.” I kissed his cheek through the tears, then turned and fled directly into the flames.

I feel a wonderful exhilaration. I hadn’t expected the intimacy we just shared, my hot detective and me. I’ve experienced the greatest gift life has to offer. I’ve known my beloved, as if I were he and he were me. We are one, now and forever. And so with total joy I join the consummate energy – the real beginning of life, not the end.