

The Fire

By Jim Roberts

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As the fire raged about him, Gary Adams reflected on why it was he'd screwed up so badly.

Not that smoking in bed is inherently wrong. It's just that the punishment so outweighs the crime. A little cigarette here and there, and what does it bring you? Emphysema. Lung cancer. Heart disease. And fiery death. Adams knew he was dying, but the flames had not yet seared his lungs; as a paramedic he knew what it took to die. As a man, he knew what it took to live. And today, he lacked the will.

Let it burn, he said.

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As the fire raged about him, Gary Adams reflected that today would have been a good day. He was two weeks away from a month-long vacation (hadn't taken any time off in five years) and he was looking forward to a trip to Colorado. He had a couple of high school friends there. High school sweethearts that periodically sent him letters, and later, e-mails, urging him to come to their home outside Greeley (or was it, Greeley? Maybe Greenly? As the smoke swirled, specifics didn't emerge.) The plans were laid; he'd written a letter in January, sent an e-mail in February, sent another e-mail in March plus made a phone call; in April he sent a long letter outlining his itinerary which included a week-long stopover to see another high school chum in Kansas City. They were expecting him in Colorado May 12.

Adams coughed. Couldn't move.

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Smoking had always been his downfall, Adams decided as flames licked at the bed sheets. He'd taken his first cigarette in 1977. He'd pulled a short stint as a radio news reporter in Macon, Missouri, and had gone with a veteran reporter to the site of a shooting. Shootings were rare in Macon. The veteran reporter allowed as there'd only been a couple in the past decade. But Old Man Francis and his wife, Lonnie, had gotten into it at one of the taverns. That wasn't unusual; Adams had frequently written their names down for the early morning news (not a whole lot happens in Macon; bar fights and school news make Page One and highlight the drive time news.) But Francis had finally had it with "the old bitch's mouth" and grabbed a fistful of her hair and slammed her into the bar top (*whomp!*) until she quit yelling (*whomp-whomp-whomp-whomp*) and until the sounds she was making were soft and mush (*whomph-whomph*). When urine started trickling down the stool she was still impossibly sitting on, Francis pulled his little .22-caliber pistol, stuck it into his wife's ear and pulled the trigger. It made a soft sound (*whump*) – barely audible.

The police had been called when the assault began and again when Francis shot his wife. Adams and the old reporter came to the tavern to find a tableau as officers and troopers waited for Francis to exit. Francis went pushed open the screen door and came outside – outside, where three city cops, nervously twitching with handguns drawn, stood beside a pair of coolly professional state troopers who'd also rolled in response to the shooting call. Francis aimed his

handgun at the group – Adams always thought the little pistol was pointed directly at him – and before he could shoot all five officers discharged their handguns.

Adams had been rolling audiotape the whole time and caught the last moments of Francis' life; death immortalized on tape to be parceled out with the news the next morning.

His cool head won him the statewide Radio Spot News Award that year.

Adams remembered the surprised look on Old Man Francis' face – as if he didn't expect the pain to be as great as it was; fired searing his lungs and vital organs; blood pounding out onto the ground where the thirsty soil drank it up.

It was hot that summer.

Adams never forgot the look on Old Man Francis' face as the gun dropped from nerveless fingers.

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So Adams became a paramedic.

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And he began smoking.

The fire at his feet was spilling over onto the top comforter, which was now belching a foul green plume. Adams still couldn't move. The heat was intense. It was hotter than the blast that comes from the oven when you bend over to pull out the pizza. It was hotter than the fires at the end of the cigarette. He remembered sticking a cigarette into his mouth backwards – the red tip scorching the tip of his tongue before he pulled it out. Tears spilling out of his eyes.

And as he reflected, Gary Adams wept.

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Two years of schooling. Six months as an intern paramedic. State examinations. And he passed on the first round. It seemed that Gary Adams had finally found his calling.

He remembered what he'd been told. He'd learned to turn away when CPR begins; to avoid vomit and water that spurts from inside the drowning victim. He'd learned what to do, where to pinch, when to push, what to press, how to say it, and why to do it. Cool voices that rolled out of the radio in RESCUE 9-1-1 on old television re-runs didn't flow from the creaking telemetry equipment he was using at his first job in Mount Sterling, Missouri. Instead, he was on his own when he rolled on rural calls.

When someone died, they died with different looks on their faces. Some were surprised. Some bored. Some just flat and empty. He'd had a couple of kids in a car wreck die while he was setting up for a chopper transfer. In the big city, he fumed, this wouldn't have happened. City aldermen fired him. Couldn't work with the other emergency response personnel, the mayor told him privately; it just wasn't a good fit.

People kept dying. But the people working half-heartedly to save them could work together; were a good fit, the mayor said. Adams ground out his cigarette on the floor of the small City Hall, and left.

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He worked in the big city. Kansas City. Heart attacks, accidents, knifings, shootings, and trauma. Big time trauma. He'd been assaulted while on the job once, too, by a mugger whose would-be victim turned out to be an off-duty Kansas City cop. The mugger took out his frustration on the hapless paramedic.

Adams found out that his attacker later died in a twisted metal shell – he'd hit a guardrail at 90 while fleeing police. Actually, he did get away, Adams thought.

Never enough. Never quite enough. Some of them never could make it. Adams could tell by looking at the patients whether the ride would be worthy it. Survivors looked different than those who were going to die. Survivors had that look about them that said "Do your best buddy 'cause I'm going to make it." Adams acquired a ghoulish reputation as the Bookie. He'd lay odds on who'd make it, and who wouldn't. He was never wrong. The toughest hood, the frailest little old lady, the youngest little kid – those that were going to make it had that look. They didn't have the look of the victim. And Adams could discern the survivors from the victims.

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One day, Gary Adams cut himself shaving. Blood tricked down his left cheek and curdled at his chin. He looked at it professionally, then glanced into his own eyes.

Staring back was a victim.

Gary Adams knew then he was going to die.

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Breathing was labored, rattled. Smoke filled the room as Gary Adams moved toward the end.

Finis. What the hell does that mean, he thought.

He heard a click and glanced to where the flames were thickest. There he was. Old Man Francis. Francis, rattled and tattered in pauper grave clothes, glaring down at Adams through the fire. Francis drew his mouldering .22-caliber pistol and pointed it at Adams.

When the gun went off, Gary Adams died.

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They found two skeletons in the ruins. One was identified through dental records as Gary Adams; all that remained of a shattered 30-year-old man. Fellow paramedics claimed the body and held services that drew hundreds of mourners.

The other remains were never identified.