



IN CASE OF FIRE

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For four days and four nights last September I lived outdoors at a camp in a valley outside of Sedona, AZ. I kept looking up into the mountains for any signs of life. We'd tucked twelve people, each alone, inside the boundary of a seven-foot square of land chosen specifically for the challenges it might pose to its inhabitant. All twelve had prepared diligently for a vision quest, each filling 144 squares of red cloth with a pinch of tobacco then looping those squares into a long thread of prayers, an offering to the spirits. A wispy rope staked into four corners of the earth were the only walls protecting the one inside from whatever obstacles the Sedona land and sky might offer.

My role was supporter, having little knowledge about what that might entail. All I knew was that I had traveled to Sedona to eat for those who would be inside their rope houses without food and water for four days. Once at camp, I learned an equally sacred task: those of us at the camp had to tend to the fire. It could never go out.

For four days and four nights I sat at that fire at base camp watching it fiercely and letting it be my inspiration to write.

On the first day our guide Asher encouraged us to make offerings to the fire: tobacco, sage, juniper, handfuls of flavored earth we could feed the fire and send to our beloveds up on the mountain. I sat by the fire for hours writing in my rice paper book to keep company with the fire, to make sure it did not go out.

On the second morning, I woke to the howl of wolves. Opening my tent flap to the first sky of day, the sky and I became one. I walked to the fire, sat down in the dirt, and wrote whatever blazed from inside me. I filled pages with my own words.

When I looked up from my book from the other side of the fire, Asher said, "Why don't you offer a poem?" I stood up and gave the fire Li-Young Lee's "One Heart":

Look at the birds. Even flying is born
out of nothing. The first sky

is inside you, open
at either end of day. The work of wings

was always freedom, fastening
one heart to every falling thing.

For the rest of the day, I kept looking up at the sky for any sign of birds. That afternoon rain broke free from the clouds. We filled our lungs with campfire songs remembered from childhood as we furiously unloaded wood from the back of the pickup. We had to keep the fire raging, raging in the face of rain.

On the third day, I danced my words around the fire. The red clay permeated every step I took as the blue sky hung above me.

On the fourth day, I whispered into the fire's ear all day, singing faint lullabies throughout the night.

On the final morning, I knelt in the clay waiting for the sound of the truck's grind in the dirt letting me know of the group's safe return. I had fed the fire with words for days while others used wood. Now it was my turn to listen.

We gathered inside the sweat lodge to witness our beloveds' rebirth. The rocks heated from the fire breathed life back into their near deaths. Outside the lodge, the sun blazed over us. We crawled out like babies, then sat around the fire. Those changed from the mountain poured their medicine tea over the coals. The fire spoke its last words before it was gone. We, all of us, were all that was left.

In that instant, my memory of the fire became the fire inside me. How could I keep it from going out? For months now, the fire has continued to burn in the form of "One Heart." Unlike all other poems I know, Li-Young Lee's poem knows me. It has me memorized, and so I offer it to people whenever my mouth and heart want to open to the world.

But what if fire is not what burns creatively inside of you? What if fire doesn't motivate you, but terrifies you?

On July 6, 1944, a boy sat on the bleachers inside the canvas big top of the Barnum and Bailey Circus waiting for the first act to begin. Above him on the high wire, the Great Wallendas warmed up the crowd with their spectacular motions in flight. The boy turned his head for an instant to look at the yellow tent towering behind him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something crawling up the seam of the tent.

"I think I see a fire," he said to his aunt, a grade school teacher who had been given tickets by the family of one of her students.

"Oh, don't worry, somebody will put it out," she said.

Nobody put it out. In eight minutes the great tent from the Greatest Show on Earth burned to the ground in Hartford, Connecticut. While a world war raged an ocean away, the fire that summer day took the lives of 169 more people, mostly children.

The boy, now my father, was not one of them. From that July day forward, he always looked for the escape, the exit, in case of fire. He came to need wide-open spaces, would leave all the doors and windows he could find open. He became a volunteer fire fighter in our hometown, dashing out of the house at all hours of the night when the town's alarm would sound, signaling a potential disaster, hoping he could rescue someone from the fire.

From a young age, I knew what the red tank hanging on the kitchen wall was for and how to pull the pin and use it, even though I couldn't lift it. There's a photograph of me on my first Halloween dressed up in a red sweatshirt with a plastic pumpkin bucket in one hand and a tiny, plastic hatchet in the other. On top of my head: a red Junior Fire Marshal hat.

For years my father would not tell anyone these stories. He couldn't see how a story burning inside him was different from the fire he escaped.

Then one day in 1999, I saw a request for submissions to a popular New England magazine my parents had read for years. The magazine was looking for readers' stories, a sort of "Where were you when?" approach to storytelling. I knew this was the chance for my father to tell his story, to help him extinguish the fire he could not put out that day in July, 1944. Working on his article brought out his passion for writing. His article, "The Day the Circus Came to Town," was featured 55 years later in *Yankee's* July 2000 issue as one of the top 100 stories of the century.

Writing is an act as strange as the impulse to keep a fire ablaze. The stories that inspire us, ignite and terrify us, come from our beating hearts, come out of nowhere to circle inside our vast interior skies. Those birds in the Sedona sky flying over the fire? I wrote them down so you could see them. So, too, I give voice to the fire; the fire gives voice to me. If tended to, both can blaze for what seems like forever without destroying a single living thing.