

Woman on Fire

“Kill him! It has to be tonight!” Levi demanded.

“No matter what has happened, he’s my brother, my child, a part of me. This terrible thing I cannot do,” Cordelia pleaded.

“You must cleanse him, eradicate his demons, purge him, and do what Father did for Mother. Are you your brother’s keeper?”

“I am, but how...” Cordelia’s voice trailed.

“Then you know what must be done,” Levi interrupted.

“leave me alone! I don’t want to hear anymore! Your mind is always turning, scheming. You’re a black scorpion injecting poison in my ear! I want to be rid of you!” Cordelia shouted as she slammed the door open and fled from the cottage.

Attempting to leave Levi behind, Cordelia crossed the fallow farmland and passed the dilapidated barn. In a surreal haze, waves of swirling air whisked around her. A pounding pressure pulsed in her head. She felt trapped, watching the rugged Ozark mountain range frame the unbroken Appalachian forest. Before her, tall branches reached beyond the sky, forming bars against the heavens. Miles of trees, valleys and dreams separated her from the known world. Caged in this isolated terrain, the loneliness consumed Cordelia. She had been abandoned by everyone. Perhaps Levi was right. To save herself, Paul must die.

Upon leaving the chicken coop, Cordelia paused and reconsidered.

“Are we having second thoughts, my dear?” Levi asked.

“Stop talking to me! Leave me alone! He’s my brother! I won’t do it!” Cordelia yelled, flailing her arms in the air.

“You will listen to me, little Miss Cordelia Kringlehein! Remember the truth!” Levi scolded. “When your mother fell ill with demons, your father snuffed out her life. You crumbled, cracked but I came to you. I loved you in a time of great loss. And I remained by your side...even as the good reverend preached and prayed while whipping the skin from your back. Remember, I healed you, comforted you, and pulled you from the darkness. I have always known what’s best.”

“Yes, I remember,” a wide-eyed Cordelia whispered. “Father went mad, always screaming about sin and the devil.”

“Your father didn’t go mad. He was weak. He was selfish to leave you behind to clean up his mess. But you had me, your longtime companion, and I have always helped you.”

“How can you say this and ask me to harm Paul, the flesh of my flesh?”

“When fever almost killed your precious Paul and left him forever trapped as a five year old. Who did you turn to?” Levi responded.

“I turned to you. Yes, Levi, it was you who helped me carry on. It was a hard time. Paul’s mind was stunted, though his body grew strong. He could haul hay and toss bales like feathers in the wind. It was quite a sight. I can still...” Cordelia’s voice trailed as

she stared into the clouds above.

“Daydreams! Just daydreams! Focus, Cordelia,” Levi urged. “Wake up, your brother has not been that man for twenty years. Paul is a degenerate, drooling lump. He is lame beyond saving. They shoot horses...don’t they? If you don’t sever this bond, you are doomed. Look at the window pane. The reflection reveals the truth.”

In the glass, Cordelia saw a haggard look on a face no longer familiar. Weary, creased eyes appeared much older than her years. Cordelia’s weathered, wrinkled face sagged. Strands of brittle gray hair fell from her mottled crown. Dejected, she turned away from that strange woman and sat on the ground. Cordelia rubbed her hands, toughened by a lifetime of fieldwork. Her blood boiled as resentment swelled inside.

“The worst is yet to come if you continue at this pace,” Levi warned. “How much longer can you carry this family burden? Your back bending and breaking, lifting Paul’s heavy weight? Washing him? Feeding him? Years of care, work, worry? I know you can feel it.”

“Feel what?” Cordelia asked.

“The burning,” Levi replied. “Your soul is on fire. Extinguish Paul and put out the flames.”

“This can’t be the answer. I’m so confused. I love Paul.”

“Doesn’t your heart ache to see him struggling?” Levi asked.

“Yes, he is fading to nothing,” Cordelia responded.

“Then you know what you must be done. Release Paul. It will be an act of kindness,

a sister's gift.”

With those words, Levi left Cordelia to ponder Paul's fate. She kneeled in the dirt, clasped her hands and began to pray.

A glorious sunset ushered in the evening of Paul's execution. A refreshing breeze blew through the flowing curtains of an open window. Cordelia stood before the cracked mirror hanging in the dining room. Unsettled, she trembled at the sight. Cordelia cringed and turned away.

“It's all Paul's fault, you know?” Levi chimed in.

“He's my brother. It's not his fault,” Cordelia responded.

“Oh, but it is. After he arrived, your mother succumbed, your father died, and worst of all Paul left you alone to do all the work. Remember, my dear, you were beautiful once.”

“Yes, I was,” Cordelia said, touching her cheeks with callused fingertips.

“You will be again, but first you must excise the demon. Paul must not live,” Levi whispered. “Now this is what you must do...”

Adhering to Levi's request, Cordelia prepared Paul's favorite dishes. The aroma of meat simmering filled the kitchen. Delicious mustard greens, tasty mashed potatoes with brown gravy, a succulent feast of stuffing and apple pie graced the fine-laced cloth covering the table. She served Paul two generous helpings before feeding him a slice of dessert. Paul chewed and swallowed every bite. Occasionally, he raised his head to meet Cordelia's tired eyes. He appeared happy. This made Cordelia proud. Gently she

caressed his face. Paul brushed his head against her arm. Cordelia recalled holding and rocking him when he was a tender babe, a precious doll with porcelain skin, a button nose and big blue eyes.

With sporadic thumps, Paul's gnarled fist banged the table. Once again, his spastic movements disturbed a special moment. The memory vanished. Annoyed, Cordelia frowned and shook her head. Paul's pale face and gaunt presence proved too much for her. His wasting had taken the best of him. Exasperated, Cordelia sighed as Paul's hands finally came to rest.

"Are you your brother's keeper?" Levi asked.

"I am. I am my brother's keeper," Cordelia responded, wiping tears from her eyes.

"I think not! I think not!" Levi growled.

"I can't! I won't do it!" Cordelia yelled.

"You must and you will!" Levi demanded. "It has already been decided. We gain nothing from failure at this juncture. You know what you must do."

Cordelia turned her attention to Paul. His twisted body slumped lazily in the chair. Suddenly, Cordelia could clearly see Levi's vision of the misshapen mute whose vampire essence continued to suck her dry.

"Yes, I know what I must do," Cordelia muttered as she rose from her chair.

When it was time for Paul to go to bed, Cordelia prepared his bath. She could feel Levi's presence hovering. Cordelia helped Paul into the water. He relaxed in the soothing warmth as she bathed him. Cordelia kissed Paul's forehead and pushed his head

beneath the water. Seconds passed. Eyes bulging, Paul panicked. He struggled and thrashed about in the tub. Cordelia forced him down. Heat surged through her body. Cordelia's fingers tingled, face flushed and heart pounded.

When the last of the bubbles broke free from Paul's lungs, the surface of the water calmed to reveal the face of their mother. Shocked, Cordelia screamed. Her mother's image vanished. Cordelia pulled Paul to her bosom. Transfixed by what she had done, Cordelia struggled to pull his soaking-wet weight from the tub. With all her might, she embraced Paul's lifeless body, toppled and collapsed to the floor.

"Now there will be peace. Paul's suffering soul is free. There are no more chains. Not even I can hold you now," Levi declared, and was never heard from again.

For the last time, Cordelia dried and dressed Paul. She chose his blue pajamas with Mr. Teddy on the pocket and the thick socks she knitted for his birthday. With the aid of a pulley and a ceiling beam, Cordelia lifted his body into a wagon used for hauling winter lumber. She secured Paul with rope and twine.

Cordelia bundled her body in layers of clothing and ventured into the night. The cold winds of early March did not deter her. Pulling the wagon, she lumbered towards Paul's favorite cliff overlooking the river. Tears welled in her eyes. Cordelia's legs wobbled. Arms shook as she jerked the wagon forward.

Exhausted, she soon arrived and paused to wipe the perspiration from her face. She untied his trappings and inhaled deeply before continuing. With care, Cordelia laid Paul's body on the makeshift structure of stacked with dry wood. His ghostly pallor

shimmered in the moonlight. Cordelia placed her mother's treasured gold coin in Paul's mouth.

"To pay the man for the journey," Cordelia spoke softly while weeping. "Goodbye my brother, my sweet child."

Using her father's matches, Cordelia lit Paul's funeral pyre. Soon, everything was ablaze. Flashes, flares and lights rushed into the night sky. Paul's form faded beneath plumes of black smoke. Cordelia sat vigil before the bonfire of flesh, sticks and brush. Lips quivering, she prayed and sang Paul's favorite songs. Cordelia remained by his side all night, rocking, singing, and waiting until there was only smoldering rubbish. The next day, she would spread his ashes over the river. Cordelia listened for Levi, but heard nothing. The crackling of the fire and howling night creatures were her only companions.

For forty nights and days, Cordelia mourned Paul's passing. Forty days of storm clouds, rain, regret and release informed her emotions. At once, Cordelia felt cleansed and drowned by the necessity of choice and grief. Thoughts of a childhood lost, parents and Paul's torment streamed through her conscious mind. Forty days reprieved forty years of toil and trouble, forty days for every year of Paul's life.

With the forty-first day, Cordelia welcomed the sun. The warmth stirred a revival in her soul. She bathed. Cordelia donned a flowery, rose-colored blouse and a bright yellow sundress. She opened the windows to usher in the promise of nature's revelry. The songs of chirping birds enticed a rhythmic, pulsing desire. The scents of

honeysuckle and magnolia inspired intoxication, a delightful elevation of spirit.

Cordelia prepared and devoured a breakfast of poached eggs, bacon and spring onions. Returning to the bedroom, she wrapped her mother's blanket around her and basked in the sun's rays. Her full belly bewitched her to nap like a baby. Weaving a maternal spell, the dream of her mother's bosom embraced Cordelia in atmospheric imagination. She swayed and floated. Cordelia's slumber carried her several hours beyond mid-afternoon.

A shadow passed, blocking the sunlight from the window. When the brightness returned, its sudden presence broke the tranquility of Cordelia's immersion. Revitalized by the rest, she rose and walked to the kitchen. From the entrance, Cordelia danced across the floor and retrieved a treat from the icebox. She spread a padded, down-filled coverlet across the cool floor. It had been stitched before Paul's birth and often served as a pallet. Enjoying the solitude, Cordelia reclined and relaxed.

After a couple of hours of decadence, a peculiar compulsion turned like a skeleton key in Cordelia's mind. A mysterious impulse prompted her to leave the cottage. Cordelia placed a pair of crimson sandals on her feet. She draped a baby blue shawl along her shoulders. Cordelia walked into the evening air.

It was beautiful, joyous. The roaring rush of the creek announced the return of Spring. Cordelia scampered across the uneven rocks of a small stream as it passed through the reeds. In the distance, the Appalachian mountains rose from miles of lush green valleys. All around her the wind whipped wildflowers into bursts of color. The glorious

explosion of white blossoms from serviceberry and dogwood trees enchanted the girl inside the woman. Her journey concluded at the basin of Paul's river.

A strange scourge replaced the bounty of natural beauty. All the trees, flowers and fruitful remained burned and blackened. A choking smell weighed the air with uncertainty. The disturbing feeling of being watched overwhelmed Cordelia. She desperately wanted to flee but felt compelled to remain.

A loud scream startled Cordelia. The screeching cries of an animal shook the surrounding stillness. She searched for the source. Cordelia found a large bird thrashing against the ground in agony. A lame wing crippled the bird as a gold arrow protruded from its rose-colored chest. Cordelia reached to gather the bird. Two hollow, haunting sounds diverted her attention.

Fwump! Whump!

Cordelia turned around. There was nothing. Looking back towards the bird, she saw it spread its wings and take to the sky. Something approached behind her.

Fwump! Whump!

Cordelia's pulse raced as she turned quickly. She was alone. The bird screeched. Cordelia looked to the sky as the bird dove towards her. Falling, she cringed and dodged its attack.

Fwump! Whump!

The thuds were heard again as footsteps approached from behind. Cordelia twisted her body and saw that she was alone. Above, a shadow hovered.

Fwump! Whump!

Cordelia jumped to her feet and started to run. A startling discovery stopped her cold. Stern and strong, Paul stood with the bird perched on his shoulder. Tears of blood streamed from his eyes as he pointed towards her. Cordelia screamed. Again, a shadow passed.

Fwump! Whump!

Cordelia did not turn to face the shadow this time. She escaped. Cordelia's legs carried her to the edge of the river where she fell to the ground. She crawled, stumbled and got back on her feet.

Fwump! Whump!

Cordelia froze. Her rippled reflection shook in the small waves. A dark shadow passed. A cold chill filled her body.

Fwump! Whump!

The strange sounds came closer. The disturbed water calmed to reveal Paul standing above her with a gold dagger in his hand. Tumbling back to earth, she turned to defend herself. Looking around the barren space, Cordelia realized that she was alone. She rose to her feet and ran home. Breathing heavily, Cordelia stopped only once to catch her breath before moving on. Edging out the setting sun, the blight of night arrived as darkness covered her trail.

Cordelia was gasping, wheezing when she reached the cottage. Slim rays of moonlight shrouded the home in an alabaster alchemy. From the rooftop, gray mists rose

like ghosts from graves and tombs. The wind howled and whipped through her hair. Cordelia stumbled inside and lit the kerosene lamp. She rested her weight against the wood counter. Cordelia sighed with relief as she poured a glass of whiskey. A shadow passed.

Fwump! Whump!

Stunned, Cordelia regained her balance. She looked nervously around the room searching for her predator. The back door swung open. Paul's silhouette walked through the dim doorway. He crossed into the light. As he emerged, his figure fleshed out. His stone face, steely eyes disguised any flicker of emotion. Paul pointed towards Cordelia.

Speechless, she fell backwards knocking the lamp to the floor. A stream of flames crossed her exit. Within seconds, the curtains burned. The room disappeared beneath the flames. Flickering flashes of fire seared idle objects. Crisp flakes floated through gray rolls of smoke. Fierce flames burned the buckling ceiling.

Paul's fiery image wavered and melted in the incendiary hues of orange and yellow. The visceral vision hypnotized Cordelia. She remembered Paul as a fragile flower suffocated beneath the soot of darkness. Betrayed by Cordelia's venomous kiss, Paul's return summoned a reckoning.

The cracking screeches of breaking wood woke Cordelia from her hypnosis. Paralyzed by panic, Cordelia looked up. Tears welled in her eyes. Flames rolled across the ceiling like the waves of a stormy sea. Consumed by rage, the burning beams of the roof broke and crashed in a thunderous bonfire.

