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## Flaming Leaves

Ben Umayam

It was late in the afternoon and me and the husbear were discussing what was so mysteriously upsetting, when Fred called. She had a guy name. But she was a gal. She and lover Ginger were retired, living in this mountain town since 15 years back. She used to manage an-all-you-can- eat Chinese buffet place in Mississippi. Ginger was a security guard. They decided to study IT and got in before it was the popular thing to do. "Made a shitload of dough," Fred puts it. "Enough to retire here at 59. Have not left since."

They play in the snow during ski season, camp and canoe all over in the warm months, even though Fred has two knees replaced, Ginger, one hip. They invite us to join them, every weekend. We decline, "You won't catch me sleeping in a bag on the forest floor, not at my age," exclaims the husbear.

Ian tells me why Fred called. "That forest fire, above Canyon Road, that is near their house, maybe 1500 yards away. The sheriff has not told them to evacuate. He has told them to prepare. Fred wants us to attend their fire party." Like the camping trips, we decline. We are on the way to Denver for a concert.

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"The mysterious thing," rants Ian, "I thought all those yelling crazees, demonstrating at Planned Parenthoods, that they were far right religious nutzoz. At mass here, all these older Catholics like me are now rallying to the new message, the sanctity of life. Today, the deacon, he is not even a priest, he prayed, 'dear god, please let our

politicians heed the words of Christ regarding the sanctity of life.' Since when did Christ say anything about inseminated zygotes? They wear t-shirts, 'Summit County Catholics for the Sanctity of Life.' Bet they have 'God Made Adam and Eve not Steve' tees in their closets. What stops some bishop or monsignor, dressed in a dress, from whipping them up against the gays so they can fundraise money, money, money. Can you believe it?"

I can believe it. I am not the religious guy my spouse is. He is a devout Asian Catholic, who goes to church and has faith. Me, I have dabbled in atheism and agnosticism, an outlying follower of Ronald Reagan Jr.

Ian repeats Fred's invite. "She says to come over tonight. Pot-luck dinner. A Fire Party, like those December Pearl Harbor parties you threw in the 80's. We bring the food and help them pack. Just in case. You know they have that huge field, below the forest line, above their house. I think the sheriff's office is just being over cautious with people. I dunno or is it like that volcano on the Canary Islands, lava flowing into the swimming pool, people running screaming from their home. Did you see that on YouTube?"

I nod that I did.

"Sweetie let's get packing if we are going to make that Denver bus. A knapsack and that is it, we might not have time to spare. Lordy Lordy, Je suits fatty gay". Big Darlin' is checking himself out in the mirror. He is getting fatter since we moved here. It is a line from Will and Grace that he is using a lot these days. A Jack line. A play with words. Je suis fatigue'. Fatty... gay...get it. Seems you always need to explain gay speak.

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We return the next day. The concert was cool, a walk thru Denver is cool. The big clouds cooling the mountain air.

I am new to this nebulosity. Ian is from these parts. A refugee from Vietnam, raised here in Colorado. I remember when we first met in NYC, he used to say that in New York, he could never figure where he was. "In Colorado, you knew where you were by looking where the mountains were, you knew to go east or west." I had thought that was poetic, lost in New York because there were no mountains. Ian is always terrible with directions. In the car, I navigate, he drives. GPS, those are my middle initials.

The bus trip is an hour and a half long. Time flies. Because of the clouds. The big fluffy ones, they are cumulus. The others, they are different. Full yet thin and foreboding. The mountains are snowcapped. They stick up above the foreboding clouds. The tops have frosted while we were gone.

"Do you smell that. Like burning tires, no more like wood. That forest fire, it must be getting put out. Those clouds, they look like rain. Could've rained here earlier. If not, it is sure to rain later, those clouds have that look."

I follow what Ian says. But as we get closer to home, I see what looks like campfires that have been put out. There are three giant columns of campfire fumes. Looks like that's where the forest fire was. This is confirmed by the grey smoke we see when we get home, up in the hills, at the tree line, above the fields that separate from the line of homes.

In the evening, from our terrace, we see the orange flare up, and smolder as the steady rain falls. The wind seems to be helping, blowing the right way, or maybe the wrong way. Who knows, the flare up of yellow and orange blends with the popping colors of the Aspen in late September in this neck of the woods.

The next morning, I wait for the bus for morning java at the café. The clouds are all shapes and sizes and more like a mist. Above the ridge I see what seems to be a cross peeking out of the mountain top. The misty cloud slowly dissipates revealing the

cross is part of a powerline tower. Attached to the complex is a giant cell phone spire. The wind blows the right or wrong way, and the cross is a cross and then, no longer.

Ian calls me, "Come back home, now." he demands. Fred and Ginger have left town. Their home, completely burned down, to the ground. The field between the forest and their mountain home did nothing to stop flames from leaping to the 15-year-old, dry cabin.

Walking up the hill from the bus stop, I hear it first, chomp, chomp, chomp. Then I see the big 'copter. It looms, white all over, black at the back with propeller on top, a helicopter that almost looks like giant mechanical dragonfly. Have you ever heard dragonflies hovering over a field at the end of summer? It is this dangerous buzz. The helicopter flies to the lake, the reservoir, fills up with water, then flies to the fire sight and drops all its water.

I open the terrace door at home, to show Ian. He covers his ears. "The sound of evacuation. I saw those choppers on tv. During the war, those choppers meant getting people out. Here they mean keeping people in."

Ian is pissed. Fred and Ginger, they have thrown in the towel. They are off to some place in the Caribbean, an island under the hurricane belt. They want to hide from natural disasters. Their house is gone, all burned down.

"What are you so pissed about?" I tell him, we are not changing our plans. It is roughly 6 weeks since we arrived here, six-month retirement plan in the mountains, six months in Europe. We are not going to give up on this retirement plan.

The phone is screaming. It is a pink phone. The manufacturers call it red gold. So that men will buy that color, no doubt. But no mistaking, it is pink. It blasts that horrible signal, the one you get for an amber or flash flood alert. It pierces. Once at mass, Ian says, the whole church, their phones went off. Father Steven kidded, "that

is God's way of saying silence your cell phones." The congregation giggled. Ian did not. "Fr. Steven always jokes like that, to emphasize some doctrinal point I guess."

The chomp of the helicopter and the screeching alert, saying it is safe to go back home, pushes Ian to a momentary frenzy.

He grabs the phone, throws it out the terrace door.

He screams his high-pitched gayest scream, short, shrill. And then he calms down.

He shrugs. "I aimed at the Aspen trees."

We will find the phone later, out on the bed of Aspen leaves, fallen with their fiery colors of yellows and oranges, sanguine and vermilion.