



THOMAS CLARK

Burning

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A human body on fire on a quiet street in a safe European city is a scene your mind is remarkably unequipped to comprehend. You see it first through the clear back panel of the bus-stop shelter as you get off the bus: Just a pile of something burning. Much bigger than a campfire. Perhaps a bonfire to keep the homeless warm.

Then the bus leaves, and you move around to a different angle and see it more clearly. It is certainly shaped like a face-down human body, blackened and roasted, flames leaping three or four feet into the still night air. It must be a mannequin. The arms stick out too symmetrically, like someone in the movies who raises his hands when confronted by a gun-wielding assailant. But the left leg bent at a ninety-degree angle, the heel pointing skyward as though curled from the heat — that looks . . . realistic.

You allow yourself for a moment to think that this might be a person, that you might be watching a human burn, but you quickly dispel the thought. The leg, well, that is a nice touch, you think. Whoever staged this — as a protest? a performance artwork? — was attentive to details.

“C’est une personne!” a bystander says.

You speak little French, but you understand the word for *person*. Gwen, your Belgian colleague who got off the bus with you, tells you that the people on the sidewalk say they saw the man while he was alive, that he came running down the street just five minutes earlier and ignited himself in front of them.

You tell her they must be in on the prank. The smell is not that of burning flesh, you say, though you’re not quite sure how you know this, or *if* you really know this. It smells of something inorganic, like gasoline burning. Not a bad smell really. It is all a big hoax, something political, you say to her. But you soon realize that only one of those two observations is correct.

You can’t look away, and you know that if this is a real man, he is beyond hope. The flames are strong and relentless. The fire is not dying. And there is nothing on these clean Geneva streets with which to roll him over or put him out. No pole, no bench, no trash can. Perhaps you could throw your coat over him, but this would be pointless. Yes, you say “him” now in your mind and not “it.”

And while you are thinking these thoughts, the police show up, and then a firetruck. The firefighters, in their long coats and helmets, work quickly, unwinding the high-pressure hose and beginning to spray water almost before the truck has stopped. They douse the man for several minutes until he is only steaming.

A man’s body lies smoldering in front of you, no more than fifteen feet away, as though it were any other cooked animal. Then suddenly he reignites, and they have to hose him down

again. Your mind has become, in a very short time, equipped to understand that you have been watching a human being go up in flames on an otherwise immaculate sidewalk near the United Nations office in Geneva.

There are only a few witnesses: you, Gwen, the men who were here when you first arrived and who told Gwen they’d seen him alive. They are not “in on it,” you realize. They don’t even know each other. One is a young man wearing an oversized ski jacket with fake fur in the hood and a tight fleece hat pulled to his brow. His shaking hand covers his mouth, and he is crying and mumbling in French, which at this moment is the most tragic language you’ve ever heard.

The police push you away. You don’t see their faces, transfixed as you are by the man’s body, which is now covered with a thick plastic blanket. You wonder how long he lived while on fire, what his final thoughts were.

Then you are walking briskly through the frozen Swiss night toward the restaurant where you and Gwen will meet your colleagues, UN agency staff from around the world. You are here to learn how to manage emergencies and protect displaced people, how to apply humanitarian principles and coordinate responses to a crisis.

Though you met Gwen only this week, you find yourself putting your arm around her. After what you’ve both witnessed, it seems all right. You stare at your feet as you walk and mumble that perhaps you should skip the dinner. You are still having trouble naming what you saw, whereas Gwen is already wondering why the man did it, who he was, what compelled him to set himself on fire. He must have chosen the setting, so close to the UN office for a reason; it doesn’t seem coincidental. You take your arm away from Gwen. Such a small, vapid gesture, thinking, or pretending, that you were comforting her. She has never worked in a conflict zone, never been in an emergency, like you have, never accompanied a boatload of half-starved refugees or driven a newly dead teenager back to his village with family members moaning in the back seat. But you need comfort too. You want her to know that you are also affected, that you still see the burning man everywhere you look.

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