

The Fires of Winter Solstice

Mince pies and loyalty figure in Lily's awakening to women's spirituality; a short story by Lee Lynch.

B Y L E E L Y N C H

The fire, thought Lily Ann Lee, who was six feet tall and black-skinned under her firefighters' regalia, could have been worse. A big old warehouse full of furniture, an alert little watchman who'd smelled the smoke despite the pint in his pocket.

It had been clear right away, from the smell, that the fire was electrical in origin, so as soon as they'd controlled the flames, they began the tedious job of finding where it had all started, and making certain it spread no further. This was the kind of work that demanded only about half of Lily Ann's mind. She drifted above the garbagemen's wet smoke smell, above the splintered furniture, above her light on the wall she excavated like a miner for signs of burning wiring.

Now and then a distinct whiff of burnt cedar reached her from that stack of hope chests she and Horrigan had wet down, then axed for fear of sparks. A smell like that from the cedar they'd burned in Alley Pond Park last year for the Solstice Ritual. Her friends from the Women's Food Coop had been urging her to return this year, but damn, she'd been so uncomfortable.

All those white girls, she thought, those skinny, pale women with their dead-serious incantation of the goddesses. There was something so thin and pale about their very ceremony. They gathered in circles like doubting, but hopeful, supplicants who prayed extra hard to get past a sense of make believe. The priestess who'd studied out in California seemed so intense and desperate, so determined to perform her office exactly right, not to let any wavering spirit she called on flee in the tendrils of smoke that rose from the tiny illicit fire in the park. She wondered if Dawn and Goldy, the other sisters in the circle, felt strange, too. Did she want to go back into the dark night to sit in their cold circle?

She remembered, as she worked along the wall, checking periodically on big beefy Horrigan across from her, the promise of light in the women's words.

*You can't kill the spirit
She's like a mountain
Bold and strong
She goes on and on **

It was getting smokey again. Had Horrigan found something? No. She couldn't see its source. She put her mask on, breathing easier, seeing somewhat better, and waved to Horrigan who didn't seem bothered by the smoke yet and ignored her signal. He was a temporary partner, an old-timer whose regular partner was on vacation like hers. Horrigan was a bigot, but close enough to retirement not to buck this pairing with a black fire impersonator, as he called the women in the company. The only thing Lily Ann had over the other women, he'd made clear, was her cooking.

She peered through the smoke to the wires she followed. Upstairs more of the company searched, heavy-booted, as carefully as she. Sometimes she felt closer to these guys her life depended on, who depended on her, than to the women in ritual circles. While she believed in women's spirituality, found it closer than anything else she could accept to her own heritage, it didn't feel anywhere as meaningful as the firehouse Christmas tree, the chaplain who came briefly to pray for the dead, the injured and the lucky ones each holiday season. Didn't warm her even as much as the staticky radio insistently filling their living quarters with carols. All the firefighters, women and men, talked bah-humbug and complained about Christmas day duty, but the women brought in baked goods, the guys gave out cartons of

cigarettes or quarts of liquor.

Lily Ann had made a ritual of reporting for her Christmas shift early with four uncooked mincemeat pies, and cooking them right there, filling the fire house with their smell. Last year a false alarm had come in while they baked. Lily Ann had forgotten the pies until she was halfway back to the firehouse. She'd raced up to the oven. Someone had turned them off, but she'd never been able to find out who.

She was chanting to herself.

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Her back ached from holding her arms up, the backs of her legs were beginning to tremble from the strain, the mask was biting into her face which had swelled in the heat. She worked methodically on. Crazy things happened in these old buildings: fire just waiting to explode out of a wall where it was trapped, beams so weak the heat and water sent them crashing through the ceiling below. Horrigan was masked now, too, professional, thorough, like her. He'd probably dragged many a black woman from a burning building. She hoped again that she could rely on him to rescue one more, even, she smiled to herself, if she was an unwelcome peer.

Unlike at Alley Pond, where she, Goldy, Dawn, were welcomed warmly, treated with respect, even wooed by the white women who'd learned that a healthy culture was an inclusive one. How the burnt cedar smell pulled her back to that night, convinced her that some part of herself longed for, belonged with the women as they lit their candles to light the way through a dark and cold winter ahead.

They'd used the cedar for purification, burned it carefully, with sentries posted, knowing full well that discovery meant more than a fine for their little bonfire surrounded by buckets of water. Celebrating the solstice was pagan; the authorities could choose to make much of it. Were there still laws on the books against witchcraft?

Her rebellious self would return to the fire circle for certain. Hadn't her people, after all, been as defiant? They'd salvaged their African fires and chants, bits and pieces anyway, from the puritanical wrath they found on these shores. In the solstice circle she'd sat cross-legged, ass cold against the ground, feeling the bodies of those ancestors swell and fill and heat her own body, till she felt like a great Amazon warrior, many many daughters of daughters, gargantuan and powerful. Was this fantasy or memory, she'd wondered. Hadn't the Amazons come from Africa, been dark-skinned?

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The warehouse was silent but for the shifting feet, the shuffling boots. She felt as if she were mining the world for light and heat, a lot more of both than the women's candles. The priestess had instructed each woman to light the candle of the woman to her left, and to address the topic of power when the light reached her. How they'd gather power to warm themselves, arm themselves against the frozen wasteland of patriarchal culture.

Well, here I am, thought Lily Ann, working with that very patriarchal beast, sure hot enough now. Sweat ran down her face. She couldn't mop it with her rubbery sleeve. Was the work making her hotter, or was she nearing a hidden fire?

I couldn't survive that African sun now, she thought. My blood's changed. Where do I

belong — the cold park, the hot warehouse, neither? The men stomped and chopped, getting noisy with frustration as they searched for fires that might not be there.

"You can't kill the spirit," the women had chanted. But even Goldy and Dawn's faces looked drawn and weak and their voices had sounded thin, quavery. Did Lily Ann want a spirit like she'd seen in her own churches? One that would so move woman after woman that they'd flare into words or song and testify to its strength? *Something*, anything but polite turn-taking, awkwardly recited words. It seemed that she, along with the others, chipped and chipped away at the wall between them and their spirituality, bit by bit cut into the plaster that held them back.

Fire makes a sound like a great gulp when it finds enough oxygen to swallow. Lily Ann leapt back from the box-sized inferno that exploded at her. Her sweat was gone. Her training, like a blind faith, took her over. She quickly, distinctly, told her radio she needed help even as she turned to summon Horrigan. He'd heard the great gulp, though, and had begun his run across to her when another dreaded sound filled her ears. A crack, a tearing, a "Whoa!" of surprise as Horrigan crashed through the floor.

So close to retirement, Lily Ann thought, and turned her back to the spreading flames. She ran along what she'd later picture as an aisle of candles — the flames reflected in her mask's eyepiece — toward Horrigan who hung over the deep dark basement below. Cold air gusted up toward the flames, drawn like the rest of the firefighters who she could hear rushing to contain them. She gave them the flames like gifts, trusting to their skills.

Earlier she'd noted the placement of posts in the huge room and now ran to one, attached her rope, then treaded softly to the edges of the cold hole. She was big but still lighter than a running man. She prayed to the goddess that the edge would hold and lay, belly down, to crawl and stretch till she reached Horrigan.

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Damn, she thought as she attached the two rings which must hold Horrigan's weight, damn if that vision of herself as an Amazon didn't come back to her and make her feel trebly strong. And damn, she thought again as Horrigan heaved himself finally over the edge and they scuttled away from the dark and the cold — damn if that aisle of candles wasn't there in her head to guide them through the thick smoke to safety.

They both grabbed hoses and helped drag them in, then trained them on the fire. The hoses were bonds she could see, linking them against danger. Yet the circle whose spirit she hadn't been able to see, touch, believe, had been there for her, too. She'd never expected to feel the joy that flooded her now in this dark, rank-smelling fire site. And she'd never expected Horrigan's words, behind her on the hose.

"For a minute, he shouted, 'I thought I might not be around this year to save your mince pies!'"

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