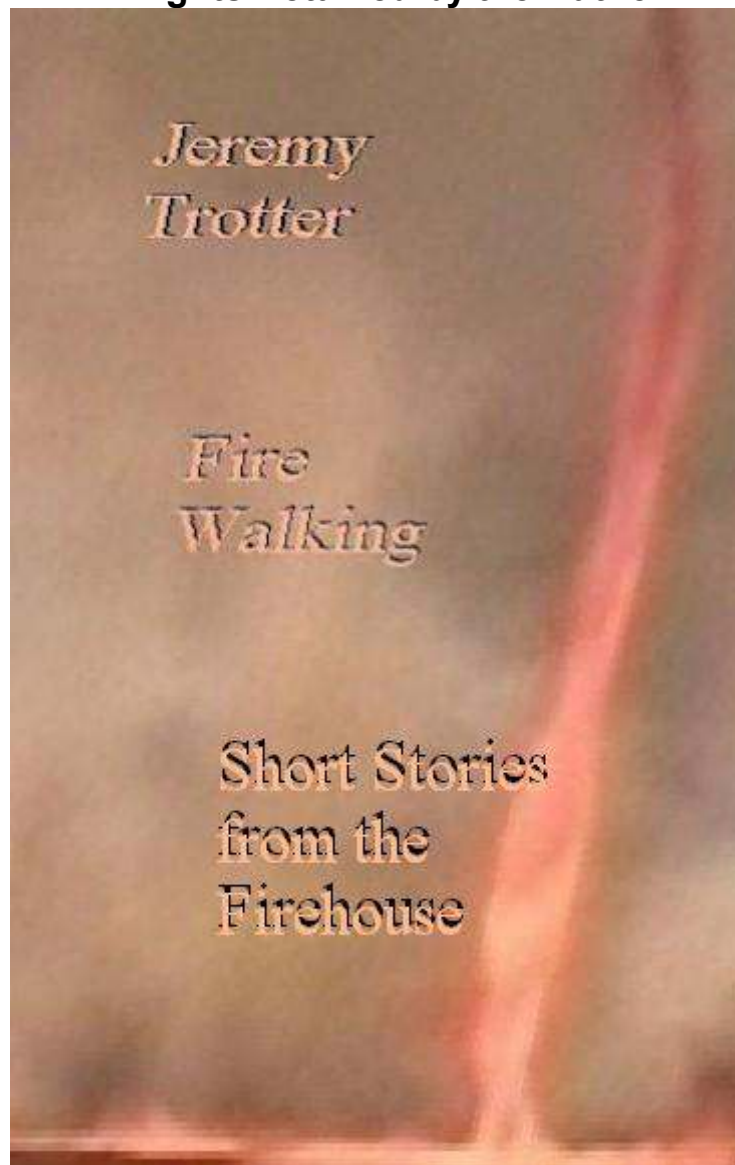


Fire Walking

By Jeremy Trotter
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*Jeremy
Trotter*

*Fire
Walking*

*Short Stories
from the
Firehouse*

Fire Walking

“Engine 5 and Aerial 5 respond to a four alarm building fire, 615 E. Market, at the Salvation Army building.” It is very rare for the guys from 5’s to make it to a downtown building fire. We had been watching the glow over the tree line and listening to the progress of the fire on the radio. Ordinarily, we would switch the radio to ‘alert’ at 8:00 PM. Tonight, we have left the radio set to ‘monitor’ so we could tell what was going on.

As we headed north for the long run downtown, it was clear things were out of hand. Before we cross Pawnee, flames are occasionally visible above the trees. It is a giant fire. Arriving on Market, red and white rotating beacons mix with smoke to make swinging swords of light flashing everywhere. Engines and ladder pipes have even found their way to the overhead railroad tracks. Surrounding the shell of the old hulk is all the spare equipment still fit for use for firefighting. The old building is reduced to a pen, a corral with a caged monster. The stiff Kansas breeze has whipped the air into whirlwind of fire walking and kicking at the walls.

I have seen little fire funnels before, in a trashcan or a dumpster, but now, a living, breathing, walking and above all, an eating demon, is consuming all the wood and tar and paper and punk board that goes into the guts of an old building. The heavy brick walls are notched for the heavy timbers that held the floors. The timbers were ‘fire cut’. The beveled ends of the timbers pull out of the notches without levering the walls into rubble. Instead, floor after floor and finally the tar roof have fallen into the basement leaving just an open top box of bricks. All the windows are consumed or melted. All the glass is gone from the walls. The wind enters these openings and whips the villain into an eating frenzy. The rotating tube of fire roars. The roof is doing just what a roof should do. It is repelling water from the burning debris under it. The fire is so hot, water falling into the building is beaten back as steam. Those of us operating nozzles from ladders are impressed with the sound of the beast when it comes near. The noise is like a jet airplane throttled up for takeoff.

Aerial 5 is setting up in the space between the building and the raised railroad. Too close, I think but no chief asks a firefighter. In fact, the area around the building is so crowded with engines and aerials, there is little other space to place more equipment.

The monster is in an oscillation, now. Dropping out of sight then jumping straight up 300 - 400 feet. A shower of embers is windswept hair pouring out of the top of the funnel whenever it reaches its full height. The bricks are now beginning to crumble and disintegrate. A crack runs from foundation to top edge at the northeast corner. The people occupying that section of wall are making a hasty retreat as the wall grows more unstable. The fissure grows wider at the top for five minutes before the wall begins to fall. It comes apart and reaches out further than the wall is high. Bricks are pelting Aerial 5. The crew has seen the wall falling. They are refugees on the far side of the aerial. The beast has broken his pen and now the monster explores the world beyond his walls. The flame lashes the aerial with its fiery scourge. But, it is a last gasp. The walls

gave the whirlwind life and now that life is vanished. A straight wind is whipping regular flames out of the openings in the wall.

Twenty-six ten

First, let me tell you I am a retired firefighter. Next, let me tell you while firefighters are busting their behinds to get INTO a burning building, cockroaches and crickets have the brains to be going the other way. So, this is a story of intelligence and tenacity. Fires rarely happen to our finest homes in the best neighborhoods. They tend to work the lower rent districts of our little town. Many times, the front porch of a fiery building is crunchy from the little insect bodies that are scurrying to get out of the burning building. That is the 'intelligence' part of the story.

Senior firefighters get to take the prime vacation time because vacation time is drawn by seniority, also. When the senior guys are on vacation, junior types get to drive the machines. It was July 1st and July 4th and I was driving Engine 5. Fourth of July means many fires from Roman candles and pop-bottle rockets. There are field fires, house fires and building fires. We really like July 4th.

You should also know that fire folk like being the first on the scene of a fire. There is nothing better than fighting a roaring virgin fire. Sexual innuendo IS intended. First water is a baptism by both fire and water ... for both the fire and the firefighter. Religious innuendo is purely accidental.

"Fire in a house - - twenty-sixteen south Washington," the dispatcher droned. That section of town is not usually our answering district. "Engine 5, respond for Engine 12," she explained.

I love this run. When we turn north on Broadway, we have a long hill to climb over railroad tracks that are almost parallel to the street. The hill is 100 feet tall and one half a mile to the top. I leave the engine in second gear till the hill flattens at the crest. I shift to third for the rest of climb. The RPMs are high and the noise is great. The Captain hates the noise and I lean on the siren and wish I had control of the air horn. He hardly ever pulls the chain except when I come to an intersection too fast for his liking.

At the top of the hill, I push it into fifth gear, bypassing fourth altogether. I use the hill to accelerate to the governed speed of 78 miles per hour. This is the tricky part; there is a stoplight at the bottom of the hill where 31st street dead-ends into Broadway. There is this rule that a fire truck can't bust a red light going faster than 10 miles per hour.

This time, I time the light perfectly. It just clicks to yellow as I enter the intersection. There are no more side streets entering Broadway for another mile and nothing to slow us from 78 miles per hour. We are a big red steel bird flying low over the city. Then "Engine 2 gives a code one (no fire showing) Engine 2 will investigate."

When another machine gives a code one, everyone else responding has to drop back to regular traffic unless a fire is found. The captain reaches for the siren to toggle it off when I pointed to a column of black smoke appearing over the trees to one side of us.

"I don't know where George is, but it is not at the right address." I yelled. Captain Gilley looked at where I pointed and left the siren turned on. I could see he was wearing a grin. As we neared the intersection with Pawnee, I slowed only to 50 and slid into the right turn lane. The engine came up on two wheels briefly as we slide round the bend. Gilley glared at me. I pointed at the column of smoke that was now slightly behind us and east. The smoke was growing broader at the base. I guessed the street 'Washington' was right but the house number was wrong.

Finally, Captain Gilley picked up the microphone. "Engine 5, we see a large amount of smoke east of our location. We will be investigating." The railroad tracks that lifted Broadway over them at 31st street now cross Pawnee right here. We flew over the little hummock that make the road and rails cross at the same level. Again, Gilley gives me a bad look when I catch a little air with 10 tons of steel. I jam the gears into third as we land, as it is time to turn south on to Washington. Flames are visible at the bottom of the smoke, now. The engine roars as the RPM climbs to match the new lower gear. I pull the gearshift into second as we round the corner. The captain hates it that I drive without ever touching the brakes. Engine revs are enough to slow the beast. But the captain also knows that once the brake pads are hot, they are useless for stopping the hulking machine. I always save the brake pads for parking in front of the fire.

We pull up to the house. I am putting the engine into pump gear as the air brake blasts to a lock. We verify the address for the dispatcher and to those tardy boys from two's and head in. "Twenty - sixteen" is where the dispatchers sent us. "Twenty-six ten" is the correct address.

Oh it is great to beat those cocky guys from 2's. Flames visible in the broken front window are already starting to darken. There will be nothing left but a little clean up. The only thing better will be if I can get them to spill their five-inch hose. That stuff takes forever to reload. "Engine 2 from Engine 5 driver, can you provide me with a water supply?" I ask innocently. Engine 2 was my target because of their load of five inch. They respond in the affirmative.

The closest hydrant is 2-½ blocks to the north. As I see their lights approach, I see the big gut spewing out behind the machine, an occasional fold popping past the driver's side and all of it silhouetted under the chassis. Whew-woo! This couldn't have worked out better. The last of the fire has disappeared from the front room. The captain from two's does not order the water turned into the five inch. The only thing to make this better would be if they had to drain and roll the hose before they reloaded it. As it was, it was still pretty sweet.

I had shut down my engine and the hose has being rolled for reload. The captain from two's was still steamed from having to reload that five-inch hose. "Jeremy" he said as he

puts his big hand on my shoulder, "We need someone to crawl under that house, and I think there is still some fire under there." Of course, pump operators don't usually fight fire directly. This is my 'spanking' for making him lay the five-inch.

I don my gear and grab an air pack. I do it without complaint. A 30-year career is a long time. There is plenty of time to get him back - AGAIN. Why, heck, this little book will be enough get his goat.

I see why he picked this immediate pay back. The opening to the crawl space is narrow and full of mud. The smell of smoke wafting from the crawl says George is right, there is an active fire down there. I slip into my mask, position the tank near the hole. I lay on my back and pulled myself under by reaching into the crawl and pulling on the floor joists. The mud makes sliding easy. I rotate and grab the tank from outside. I just lay the air tank on my belly and hook up to the regulator. Mud from our firefighting water covers the whole crawl. I see blue flame. I ask that a line (fire hose) be brought to me. Captain George says he will. I figure I will be here for a while.

I move over to the flame. I move like the mud puppy I am by sliding myself along by pushing with the heels my boots. Travel is surprisingly easy. The remaining fire is near the floor furnace. I have never had the luxury of seeing fire from below and getting to study its action. Usually, it is 'see fire' and 'squirt water.' Here I am watching a tub of blue light float upside down above me. The fire was missed because the joists and the braces that now contain the fire protected it when the firefighters above stuck a nozzle down on full fog and swept it around.

This is amazing stuff. It is like a softly glowing blue liquid that defies gravity. As I move, the air currents make waves on the surface. The container is slowly filling up as if an invisible faucet provided more of this glowing elixir. It is a corrosive liquid to be sure. As the fire expands in its container, the wood is first stained black, then etched, then grooved by the deep action of flame on wood. The 'bottom' of the container, that is the sub-floor of the house, is deeply "alligatored." The container is now full and flame is beginning to 'overflow' into the next joist space.

The blue ersatz liquid turns yellow, red and orange where it "drips" into the next space. Now it is pouring in a constant stream. It spreads like a puddle spreading, but upside down. The black follows exposure of the wood to the heat. I become conscious of the heat. I am also noticing the fact that the weakened floor is showing me where firefighters above are standing and moving about in the living room. I wonder what progress is being made on reattaching a hose and getting it down here. One especially heavy firefighter from 12's is clearly moving on the floor above me. I can sense him up there from the bowed floor down here. "Hey," I think to myself, "it's time to shed a few pounds."

The second space is now having a torrent pour into from the original space in the joists, a third space is becoming involved with a constant drip of flame coming as the first container spills over the other side. Mmmm. Pretty is one thing, but having the floor

above me come down on me is quite another. Where is that nozzle? Right then, I hear Bushey call out to me. He has a booster line. I tread mud back to the crawl entrance. I wonder what my coat will look like with 100 feet of sliding in mud on my back. I am pulling the hose back to the blue tubs of flame. I open the nozzle. It just drips. "Hey, give me some water." I yell to Bushey. He disappears from the crawl. In a minute, water starts to flow. I darken the glowing "liquid."

I thoroughly wet down the fiery containers. I have had about all I need of this muddy pit. And, the water is pouring back on me making it worse. As I finish my work, I check one last time to be sure that I won't have to come back to a rekindle in the middle of the night. I swim my 'backstroke' to the crawl space entrance and wriggle out into the evening air.

Brute

The big guy was sprawled at the bottom of the stairs. One leg was crossed clumsily over the other. Bill, from ambulance 11 was preparing to wake him up. I look at the walls punctuated with this guy's fury, the door ripped off the hinges and this unconscious monster that had caused all the damage. "Let's not wake him up. Let's strap him to a gurney and get out of here." I said.

Too late! Bill, with mischief on his face, crushed two ammonia capsules. He inserted one into each nostril of the sleeping giant's nose in a single practiced stroke. He covered the guy's mouth with his hand and pulled the big guy's head backward on his neck. It took what seemed a long time. Then everything exploded. The monster got to his feet in one move. Bill was now riding him piggyback. The guy spun two times trying to shake Bill from his back and take a breath that was not concentrated ammonia. He stumbled backward and crushed Bill between his huge back and the wall. When Bill wilted to the floor, there was a paramedic shaped hole in the sheetrock. The big guy was literally screaming with pain.

Both ammonia capsules shot across the room when he could finally inhale through his mouth and exhale through his nose. Damn, he was pissed. And now, I was the only existence in his brutal world. I had his full attention. The guy crossed to me in two steps. As he swung the ham-sized fist at me, I kicked him in the nuts with all my might. He stopped, but he did not crumble. "Uh, oh" I thought. "I am in deep shit, now."

He lifted his foot to take another step, and then he fell. "Thank you, God." I said out loud. Jim, Bill's partner and Mark, my driver, arrived with the gurney and the first-aid kit, I said, "I think we will need some restraints." Jim asked, "This guy giving you trouble?" I grimaced and said "No. But, your partner is completely out of control."

Even in Cincinnati

"35, 36, 37. That is \$37,000 dollars. And, you want to deposit it all?" the teller asked the pretty girl with the large wad of cash. Gary Friedman, the luckiest and the best arson investigator I ever knew is standing behind her in line soaking up the whole scene.

"Yes, please. \$37,000 for deposit." The girl echoed.

Gary has boyish good looks. He looks far younger than his 42 years. I have seen him put it to good use many times. He is always the arsonist's best friend as he escorts him down to the sixth floor of city hall to book them into custody. His detective instincts are ringing loud and clear. "Ya don't have that much cash unless you have been working the fringe of the economy," Gary said to me. Gary has always lectured how drugs, arson and illegal weapons are an economy unto themselves. It is the 'fringe economy' that the government would allow IF they could just figure out how to tax it. "That's the difference between cigarettes and booze and coke from Columbia. If the folks with the dope would just surrender a fair share to Uncle Sam, the 'War on Drugs' would be over by the end of the week." At least that is Gary's opinion.

Still, he is a one hell of a detective. Nationwide, about 5% of arsonists are caught. Willboro averages 35% since we formed our arson task force. Gary averages over 60% 'solve rate.' Not every 'solved' case results in an arrest. Kids playing with a lighter. A fire that does not do felony level damage (currently \$500.00). Other odd things can slip by without an arrest. But, you do NOT want Gary to arrest you, though. In the seven years I followed his statistics, he had a 100% conviction rate. That's 56 people serving 11 years or more for aggravated arson in Kansas.

That would be 57 after the pretty girl made her deposit. Gary was on her like a duck on a June bug. He did not even know what the crime was, but he was sure there was a crime. "Wow! 37,000 dollars! What is it like to have money like that?" Gary dug in like a tick. He would be her new best friend for a while.

She returned his smile but was reticent about the money. "Oh, it's from my grandma," is all she would say. Gary forgot about his transaction and was following her out into the parking lot. After pouring on his charm, she finally says, "Grandma died and left me a painting. I sold it out in Denver. I lived here with my parents. I thought this would be a nice place since I can't stay with grandma, anymore." Four sentences was all she said but Gary had more than enough to start working a case that did not even exist, yet.

Gary went to the city library and got the Denver and surrounding areas phone books. He made copies of the pages with galleries and museums and went back to his office to start calling. Pay dirt was found on the first call. The flatiron shaped Denver Museum of Modern Art admitted they had bought a painting by Whistler for forty thousand dollars from a young woman about three weeks ago. "Yes, we will fax you a copy of the painting. Yes, of course we checked it against the 'stolen masters' list." Gary was like a

little kid waiting for Christmas. Finally, the fax with name and image of the painting arrived.

Gary checked the Interpol 'stolen masters' list and the painting of the little girl washing at the edge of a stream was truly not on the list. So, he would have to dig deeper. After several weeks working with insurance company representatives, "Young Girl Bathing" has found to have been destroyed in a house fire in Cincinnati. It turned out several other paintings had been destroyed in the fire. The Whistler was merely the most valuable.

It fell in place pretty quickly then. The pretty girl at the bank worked for LulaMae in Cincinnati. She murdered "grandma." She took all the paintings worth anything. And, she burned down the house in Cincinnati. The relatives were happy not to check too close. The insurance company had paid off on the house and antique furnishings, LulaMae's life insurance and the paintings. No messy estate to settle. The police did not check too closely. The case seemed so simple. They did not know that Annie (the girl with the stash of cash at the bank) even existed.

So Gary called her up and asked if she wanted to go get some ice cream with him. She had given him her phone number when he promised to call her for a date. I bet Annie picked out something fetching to wear when Gary came to pick her up.

Greta

Greta was a long, shapely woman. She had ample curves and her forest green sweater followed those curves in a most flattering way. The sweater was untucked over a long green print skirt that covered all her legs except the toes of green silk brocade slippers that peeked out from the hem. As she walked to her dead husband, the thin material of the skirt tattled that there was no slip between her skin and skirt. Blond hair was twisted and pinned at the back of her head. My guess is she had been dressed to go out somewhere nice. But, she had a red mark on the angle of her left jaw that matched the buckle on the belt still loosely wrapped around her husband's right fist. She had introduced herself with what I thought must be a Swedish accent. She was an unusually beautiful woman to be living in a crummy mobile home in a crummy trailer court.

The dead man had a clean bullet hole just under his chin and into his trachea. Feeling behind his ears and neck, bone fragments, blood and a tangled brain stem told of his instant death. His eyes still had the surprise in them from his discovery of the gun pointing at his throat. I guessed that it had been a lucky shot. There were no visible powder burns around the entrance wound and that revealed the barrel of the gun must have been several feet or more from the target when the trigger was pulled. The exit wound was very much larger than the entrance hole.... And it was very ragged. Only a tiny circle of blood spotted the floor under Roger's neck. This indicated that his heart had stopped pumping blood when the bullet ripped through his spine. "That is my husband, Roger." Greta said flatly as she introduced the corpse.

I asked Greta, "Where is the gun? The police just don't understand when a gun is not accounted for in a domestic disturbance call." Greta produced the stainless steel, ivory handled .357 from the folds of her loose skirt. I was amazed to see a little smoke still issue from the barrel. "Did you shoot it just once?" I inquired, trying to act casual with an armed killer bent over her victim and me. "Yes, just once." Greta replied with no emotion at all. "Is he dead?" she asked. Again, all emotion was flat and totally absent from her voice and face. The anger that had fired the gun must have followed the bullet into the dead man.

"We will do everything we can." I said using my stock answer to a common question. Of course, I knew CPR would just make the blood spot bigger as meager and ineffective pulses from his compressed heart brought more blood near enough to the wound site to drain out on the floor. "If you would, please put the gun here, next to Roger. I will make sure it is delivered to the police when they arrive." I explained as calmly as I could. I tried to hide my relief as she laid the gun on the spot I indicated with my pointing finger. "Squad 5 gives a code blue." I said to my radio. We commenced CPR on poor dead Roger and the little halo of blood began to grow. Roger did not recover. No charges were ever pressed against tall and willowy Greta.

Blue Cadillac

"Glad to meet you Benjamin." I stuck my hand out to shake his. Bennie Winters looked at me like I held out a stick with dog poo on his end.

"The amount you don't know, Rookie, is enough to fill all the books yet to be written." Bennie said those words with no warmth or mirth intended. He turned and walked away without shaking my still offered hand.

"I wish you hadn't done that." Carlo said. Carlo Cellofinella was my self-appointed daddy bear and he explained to me I was his cub. He told me of the mentor / protégé system used to nurse a rookie firefighter through his first year without either person getting killed. Still, I also made the mistake at laughing at the corny terminology. Carlo wondered why he picked me.

"Bennie is very sensitive about his name. His father named him Benonie, not Benjamin. Benonie means 'sorrow of the father.' Benjamin means 'a father's joy.' Bennie is definitely no joy to his father and he won't be a joy to you, I fear," Carlo explained.

Bennie and Carlo had gone to school together at Willboro South High. It is a school known for it tough guys and hoods. Today is my first day on the Willboro Fire Department and so far it has been a day filled with missteps and blunders on my part. "I think I will be able to smooth it with him," Carlo said. "But for God's sake, try to stay out of his way." Then, the alarm horns went off...

"Still alarm for Engine 32, wash down...." then there was a long pause, "Uh, gasoline. Wash down gasoline at the Holiday Inn parking garage," blared the speakers. I hopped on the backend of the engine with Joe Becker and we were off. Norman was driving and George was the lieutenant.

Debris was everywhere in this little half block area. Two large plate glass windows were shattered in the front of Walker's Department store. Another shattered window was spread on the sidewalk in front of the Fox Theater. People were everywhere; they had poured from the buildings around the carnage. But, unlike milling crowds at fires and car wrecks, these were eerily silent.

An old '53 Tudor Ford was aimed the wrong way on the one-way street. Two frightened, crying kids in standing in the back seat. Tears rolled down their cheeks. The little boy with worried eyebrows sucked on the tip of his index finger. It was strange sight to see what appeared to be the little pair's grandma sitting behind the steering wheel, gaze straight ahead and the big wheel being steered by her as earnestly as if she was moving. But, the motor was off.

And then I see it. Sprawled on the driveway ramp of the hotel parking garage was the figure of a man, dressed to the nines in blue and gold. He was just in front of the bumper of his matching blue Cadillac. His service cap was tossed carelessly and upside

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