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The Fire Baby

Jim Kelly

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Tuesday, 1 June 1976 – The Great Drought

East of Ely, above the bone-dry peatfields, a great red dust storm drifts across the moon, throwing an amber shadow on the old cathedral. Overhead a single, winking plane crosses the star-spangled sky. Flight MH336, just airborne from the US military base at Mildenhall, flies into the tumbling cauldron of dust.

The diamond-hard sand begins to shred the turning turbines and the dislodged blades scythe each other like spinning knives. The fuselage dips as the engine suffocates, and begins a descent of such violence that the passengers float, despite their seatbelts, in a weightless fall towards their deaths.

At precisely 11.08 pm, according to the pilot's watch recovered at the scene, the fuselage buries itself in the soft earth. The distant cathedral tower shudders with the impact and the crows, roosting on the Octagon Tower, rise in a single cloud. Heads turn ten miles away at Littleport with the earthy thud of the crash, followed by the crackling combustion of the airfuel.

A fireball marks the point of impact at Black Bank Farm. Here there is too much sound to bear. At the heart of the fire a cold white eye burns where 50,000 gallons of kerosene turns to gas in a single second. Then the flames come, licking the stars.

At the foot of the vast white pillar of rising smoke the air crackles with the heat. And in the ashes of what had been Black Bank Farm she stands alone. Her, and the baby.

They are the only ones alive. Her, and the baby.

The family died at the table: her mother caught in the act of drowning in a flame, her father's blackened arm still stretched towards his throat. His last words will stay with her to her deathbed: 'The cellar, Maggie.

A celebration.' She'd gone to get the bottle, leaving Matty in his cot by the empty fireplace. Celebration: a family christening to come, now that Matty had a father.

In the dry damp of the stone cellar she heard it coming. Machines, like people, can pretend to scream. But the pretence was gone in the final wail of the failing engines, the ripping metal, and the blow of the impact.

Sometimes she wished she had died then, as she should have.

Instead she saw the light and heard the sound that was the fire, the dripping fire, falling through the floorboards. The liquid fuel from the tanks, the quicksilver light that saved her life. So she found the stairs and climbed up to count the dead, hung, like game, from the burning rafters. Then the real horror, in the tiny swaddled bundle with the blackened limbs.

Outside, with her secret in her arms, she felt him kicking, and nudging, with the jerky half-conscious movements only a child can make.

Even here, in what had been the kitchen garden, she felt the heat prickling her skin. She smelt her hair singe, as the black hanging threads turned to ash-white corkscrews. A lock ignited, and burnt into her cheek. She had a lifetime to feel the pain, but even now it terrified her with the slow, insidious intimation that the worst was yet to come.

A fire in her blood. And the baby's.

A silent fire. The only sound a flapping inside her ear, like a pigeon's wings.

She took a limping step towards the coolness of the night. These ashes weren't cold like the ones in the grate at Black Bank. These were white with heat, an ivory crust beneath which breathed the cherry embers. She smelt flesh burn and knew, with the clarity of shock, that it was hers.

And then she saw him. A hundred yards from the house, shielding his face from the heat with an out-turned palm.

He'd been waiting to join the celebration. Her father had been confident Maggie would change her mind that night: 'Come at eleven. She'll come round for Matty's sake. It's the baby. She'll come round.'

And with the intuition of a lover Maggie knew where he'd been, knew where he'd been waiting in the night. The old pillbox. Their pillbox; the concrete hexagonal space that she had once dreamed of in the damp and guilty night, the place where they'd made Matty come to life.

She heard a siren then. The first. From the base. They'd be at Black Bank soon, but not soon enough to save him. Not soon enough to save him from the life she planned for him in those few seconds. It was the best decision of her life. And the quickest. Taken in the time it takes to light a match.

And then they were together. So she smiled as she trembled. The yellow-blue light of the kerosene was in his eyes and briefly she remembered why she'd loved him once. But she saw that he looked only down, at the baby. His finger turned back the fold in the blanket. He saw the face for the first time, the tiny red wandering tongue. And the fool smiled too.

'Our boy,' he said, wishing it was so. 'He's safe. Our boy.'

She let him believe it for another second.

'Dead,' she said, and pulled the blanket back to let him see the stencilled blue capital letters on the soft linen: USAF: AIR CONVOY.

He looked at the ruined farmhouse then: 'Dead? You can't be sure.'

He looked at the blanket again. 'I'll get him,' he said. 'Stay here.' She watched him run into the flames, until they closed behind him, like the hushed velvet curtains of a crematorium.

Saturday, 14 June 2003 – 27 years later

The single glass of water stood like an exhibit on the pillbox shelf. When the sun reached the western horizon it shone directly into the hexagonal room through the gunslit and caught the liquid, sending a shifting rainbow of incredible beauty across the drab concrete walls.

It haunted him now. He could see it with his eyes closed. Its cool limpid form was held for ever in his memory: but then he knew that for ever, for him, was not a long time. As the heat rose towards midday he could see the level of water drop, and he sucked in air to catch the memory of the moisture.

It was his life now, trying to reach the glass. But he knew, even as he stretched and felt the handcuffs cut into his wrist, that he would never touch it. He'd marked the full extent of his passion on the floor. On the first day he'd stretched out and left a line in the sand, three feet short of the far wall. By the third day he'd stretched until he heard his joints crack, a sickening pop of cartilage disengaged.

The next day he won six inches in a single panic-stricken lunge, the pain of which had made him swoon. When he came to, the blood had dried and the cut at his wrist showed the glint of bone, like a gash of knuckle glimpsed on the butcher's counter. That night the fox came for the first time, circling, sniffing death.

His jailer noted his efforts to reach the glass with obvious satisfaction, smoothed clean the sand and re-filled the glass with bright water from the sparkling plastic bottle. Then he took the carved knife from its place, sticking out of the door jamb, and held it to his victim's throat. A minute, maybe two, then he returned it, unblooded.

There was something familiar about the jailer. Something in the way

he leant against the concrete wall by the glass and smoked. Something in the downcast eyes.

He yearned to hear his voice, but the jailer hadn't spoken.

The routine was silently the same. He'd hear first his footsteps on the tinder-dry twigs beneath the pines. The iron door pushed open, the glass re-filled. Then he'd stand and smoke. A packet sometimes. How long does that take? An hour? Two?

Sometimes he came twice a day, the sound of his car suddenly loud as it parked beyond the trees he could see through the gunslit. But he'd always go without answering the questions. And then once at night. He was afraid then, for the first time, that the jailer would kill him before the thirst did. His tormentor was drunk, and the storm lantern put tiny red flashes in his eyes, but still he said nothing.

He'd speak before the end came. He felt sure of that. But he wanted to know now. Know now for which of his crimes he was being punished.

Nine Days Earlier
Thursday, 5 June

I

Philip Dryden looked down on the taxi cab parked on the neat shingle forecourt of The Tower Hospital. In the front seat was a large sleeping figure encircled by an Ipswich Town sweatshirt. The driver's delicate hands were clasped neatly over an ample tummy. The slumbering cabbie's tiny mouth formed a perfect O.

'How can he stand it?' Dryden asked, turning to the figure laid out under a single white linen sheet on the hospital bed. 'It's eighty-four degrees. He's parked in the full sunlight. Fast asleep. All that meat. Cooking.'

The figure on the bed didn't move. Its immobility was a constant in his life, like the heat of that summer, and equally oppressive. He turned back to the large Victorian half-circle window and put his forehead to the glass.

Heat. Inescapable heat, like a giant duvet over the Fens. He felt a rivulet of sweat set out from his jet-black hair and begin a zig-zag journey across his face. His features were architectural. Precisely, Early Norman. The head of a knight, perhaps, from a cathedral nave, or illuminated on a medieval parchment. Illuminated but impassive; a dramatic irony which nicely summed him up.

He tipped his head back and turned his face to the ceiling. He had a powerful imagination and he focused it now, as he had done a thousand times that suffocating summer, on conjuring up a snow storm. The ice-cold flakes fell on his upturned eyelids. He listened to them falling in the silence, punctuated only by the tick of the bedside clock.

When he opened them it was 11.57 precisely. Three minutes.

He closed his eyes again and tried to wish the heat away. The Tower was on Ely's only hill. A precious hundred feet above the limitless expanse of the Black Fens which stretched in a parched panorama to the distant wavy line of the horizon. A tractor, wobbling in a mirage, trundled across a field slightly smaller than Belgium.

He looked down at Laura. His wife had been in The Tower nearly four years since the accident at Harrimere Drain. Dryden had met the other driver on a lonely fen road head on, swerved over the verge, and the two-door Corsa had plunged into twenty feet of water in the roadside dyke. Harrimere Drain. Whenever Dryden saw the sign he could feel the seatbelt cutting across his chest and the dull, distant, double click of his collar bones breaking.

He'd been dragged to safety, but Laura, unseen on the back seat, had been left behind. He tried never to imagine what she must have thought when she regained consciousness. Alone, in the dark, in pain, and gasping for breath in a remorselessly diminishing pocket of damp air.

Three hours later the emergency services got her out. She was in the coma then. Locked In Syndrome: LIS. Locked away from the horror of those 180 minutes of total isolation, locked away from the knowledge that she'd been abandoned, locked away from him.

The clock flipped over a number: 11.58. Dryden pulled at the frayed linen collar of his white shirt and fingered the gold chain around his neck. He pulled on it until the single brass Chubb-lock key came out into his hand. The car crash had been two days before his thirty-third birthday and he hadn't got back to their flat in London until a month later. That's when he found his present where she knew he'd stumble on

it, in the top drawer of their desk. A single white envelope, a card showing a black and white landscape shot of the Fens near Ely, and a newly cut key. The inscription on the card read 'Love, Laura'; nothing else.

He'd tried the locks in the flat first, then her parents' café and flat, but nothing. He tried the local locksmiths in the North London suburb where they lived but none could recall a visit from the Italian girl with the copper hair. He'd tried the two cottages out on Adventurer's Fen they'd inspected during their long debates about moving out, starting a family. But the doors were rotten and the keyholes rusted. Ivy obscured the sign engraved in the bricks: Flightpath Cottages.

How many other locks had he tried since Laura's accident? A thousand? Two? But nothing. Only Laura knew which door the key opened, and she hadn't spoken since the night of the crash. It was a mystery which tormented him subtly because it seemed the perfect symbol of his life since the accident. That he should have the key, but not the door. An answer without a question.

'Unbearable,' he said out loud, and the heat seemed to intensify.

Eleven fifty-nine, and one minute to the news. He flipped open his mobile and rang Humph's business number: Humphrey H. Holt, licensed mini-cabs for all occasions. Not quite all occasions. In fact, hardly any occasions at all. Humph's cab, a battered Ford Capri, looked like it had been retrieved from a dump on the outskirts of Detroit.

Dryden's face, normally stonily impassive, creased with pleasure as he watched the cabbie start awake and fumble for the mobile.

'It's me,' he said, unnecessarily. They knew each other's voices better than they knew their own. 'Put the radio on. Local. Last item. I need to hear.'

They zoomed dizzily over the wavebands until Humph picked up the signal.

'The headlines at noon on Radio Littleport . . .'

Dryden, for a decade one of Fleet Street's sharpest reporters, listened with complete indifference to the usual tales of political intrigue, international violence, and lurid showbusiness before the station moved on to local items.

'. . . with an entire lorryload of turnips. Meanwhile on the coast at Cromer the heatwave again brought havoc to the holiday beaches. A huge cloud of ladybirds descended on sunbathers by the pier. A spokesman for the local council's environmental health department said the insects were breeding in huge numbers and were desperate for food. Apparently they can live quite happily on human sweat. And with that thought the time is now four minutes past twelve.'

There was a short jingle, a digital version of Fingal's Cave. Dryden swore at it.

'This is Radio Littleport. The Voice of The Fens. And now an important announcement from East Cambridgeshire County Police Force.'

Dryden had his reporter's notebook ready on the window ledge. His fluid shorthand left an elegant scribble across the page. Elegant but unreadable: he was only fooling himself.

'This is an urgent message for Estelle Beck, the only daughter of Maggie Beck of Black Bank Farm, near Ely. Please contact immediately The Tower Hospital, Ely, where your mother is gravely ill. I'll repeat that –'

Dryden clicked off the mobile without thanking Humph. He brushed away a fly which had settled on Laura's arm. Then he walked across the large, carpeted room and folded his six-foot-two-inch frame into a hospital chair beside the room's only other bed. In it lay the curled, wheezing body of Maggie Beck.

'Why now?' he asked nobody.

There had been four radio appeals, each as urgent as the last. He hoped her daughter came soon. He had seen very few people dying but the symptoms were shockingly clear. She held both hands at her throat where they clutched a paper tissue. Her hair was matted to her skull. She seemed to draw her breath up from a pit beneath her, each one a labour which threatened to kill her. Her skin was dry and without tension – except for the single mark of a livid burn which cut across one side of her face in the shape of a corkscrew.

'They'll come,' he said, hoping she'd hear.

In the oddly detached way in which he expressed almost all his emotions Dryden had come to love Maggie Beck. When his father died in the floods of '77 Maggie, still a teenager and newly married, had moved in to look after his mother. Dryden had been eleven. Maggie had taken the spare room and helped his mother through the few weeks before the coroner's court inquest, and then the excruciating absence of a burial. His father had been presumed drowned, swept off the bank at Welch's Dam, and the body never found. For his mother this had been the final burden which Maggie helped her bear. The heartache of grief without a corpse to cry over. After that they combined their sorrows in often companionable silence. Maggie had her own tragedy to carry – the air crash at Black Bank which had killed her parents and her infant son. They shouldered their grief together, farmers' wives who didn't want to subside under the weight of their misfortunes, at least not without a fight. They'd travelled together – day trips and weekends which took them far from the memory of their lives. He'd met her many times at Burnt Fen in his mother's kitchen, a big woman with farmyard bones as familiar and comforting as the Aga, with that corkscrew burn like a tattoo on her face.

Maggie knew she had cancer. The radiotherapy would last six weeks, the convalescence longer still. Dryden had gone out to Black Bank to see her and knew instantly that she expected to die. The specialists had suggested that it might be good therapy for Laura if she shared her room. Maggie said yes without a pause and raided her savings to afford The Tower's substantial fees. She would spend her last months in comfort, for she had a task to complete before the cancer took her life. She wanted to tell her story. Dryden gave her a tape recorder so that each day she could spill out her tale to a silent audience. The story she wanted to tell, the one she wanted Laura to witness. And Laura, if she could hear, had a story to listen to.

Dryden had visited in those first weeks and found in her a desperate insecurity. She'd hold his hand and tell him that her life had been a failure, that she'd failed Estelle, that she'd failed Black Bank. But she still hid the heart of this failure, a secret Dryden sensed was burning her from within. And then she'd turned to him one night just a week ago, as he sat with her enjoying the breeze that came through the open windows. They'd heard the cathedral clock chime midnight and she'd taken his hand and held it with the intensity of a bullclip: 'Promise me they'll come,' she'd said.

She'd been in The Tower a month and each day Estelle had visited – until now. Each day she had come to sit with her mother. But the best days for Maggie were when she brought the American. Dryden had met him twice, by Laura's bedside. 'Friend of the family,' said Maggie. A pilot, tall and slightly wasted, with the drawn features of a victim. Every day they came – until this last weekend. The doctors assured them that the end was months away, if not years. Maggie had agreed to a break, to let her daughter go. Let them both go.

The moment they left, Maggie's health had rapidly col-

lapsed. The cancer cells had begun to multiply in her blood and she had felt the change within her, the subtle beginning of the process of death. She had to get Estelle back, she had something to tell her. About the secrets that had consumed her life.

'Promise me you'll find them in time,' she said. Dryden noted the plural.

He didn't like telling lies. 'I can't,' he said. 'The police are trying; what more can I do?'

Her eyes pleaded with him, with a look which seemed, prematurely, to cross the divide between the living and the dead. 'Then promise,' she said. 'And promise you'll forgive me too.'

'Forgive you for what?'

Her hand fluttered, searching out the bedside table where the tape recorder stood. 'I've said it here. But I must tell them too. Promise me.'

He'd always remember the white arthritic knuckles and the parchment skin clutching his fingers. He stood, angry at the suggestion he needed a public oath to make him keep his word, and angrier still that she'd penetrated his emotional defences.

'I promise.'

She cried. The first time he'd seen her buckle after all the months of pain.

'I promise,' he said again, and by some peculiar transference of emotion he felt vividly that he'd made the promise to his mother, to her memory, to the gravestone on Burnt Fen. Even now the thought produced a fresh surge of sweat on his forehead. He was doing all he could. The police appeals, ads in the papers along the coast where Estelle and the American had gone touring. Why didn't she ring? Why didn't she answer her mobile phone?

He walked back to his wife and touched her shoulder through the white linen sheet. 'Laura?'

Her eyes were open. Seemingly sightless, but open. He imagined she slept – why not? So she needed waking like anyone else. And he liked using her name, now that he knew for certain that on some level, however deep and however distant, she could hear him.

The caretaker walked by in the corridor outside, dragging laundry bags and whistling the 'Ode To Joy', each note perfectly pitched.

Maggie Beck turned in her bed and struggled, as she always did, not to cry out.

Humph beeped from the cab. They had a job. Dryden had to go, back out into the world where people talked. But Dryden knew there was no real hurry. *The Crow*, the paper for which he was chief reporter, had a final deadline of 3.00pm. The handful of stories he had yet to file would take him an hour to knock out, probably less.

'Loads of time,' he said, sitting on the bed and taking Laura's hand.

They'd made the breakthrough three months ago. Dryden, unable to sleep, had spent the night on the deck of his boat at Barham's Dock. The sunrise had driven him to walk and a fox had dogged his tracks into town, scavenging across fields of sunburnt crops. The Tower had slept, the night nurse looking up from her studies to wave him through. He'd tried the routine a thousand times: taking her hand and beginning the endless repetition of the letters. Waiting for the tiny movement which would signal intelligent life, like a radio blip across the galaxy.

That first time, she'd done it perfectly. L-A-U-R-A. No mistakes. He'd sat on her bed and wept for her. Wept for joy that she was somewhere. But wept most for himself,

doomed perhaps to spend his life beside a hospital bed, waiting for messages from another world.

Humph beeped again. Dryden placed the smallest finger of Laura's right hand in his palm so that it barely touched his skin. The neurologist had shown him how. They had a machine too, the COMPASS, but Dryden liked doing it this way – the way they'd first done it. The communication was intensely personal, as though he were a lightning rod, channelling her energy to earth.

'OK. Let's concentrate.' The specialist, the one with the dead-fish eyes, had told him to give her a warning.

Humph beeped again and Dryden suppressed a surge of petty anger.

'Loads of time.'

He counted to sixty and then coughed self-consciously: 'OK. We're starting. A, B, C, D, E, F . . .' and on, a full two seconds for each. He felt the familiar tingle of excitement as he got nearer: 'J, K, L' – and there it was, the tiny double movement.

It didn't always happen. One out of five, six perhaps. They'd always got the next bit wrong until Dryden had hit upon the idea of beginning at M and running through the alphabet rather than starting at A. He moved on, with the two-second gaps, but she missed it. Two tiny movements – but on the B.

He felt irritation, then guilt. The neurologist had explained how difficult it must be. 'It's about as easy as playing chess in your head. She's learnt to combine certain muscle movements, small tremors in the tissue, to produce this timed response. We have no way of knowing how much time she needs for each letter. How long she has to concentrate.'

He did the rest to spite Humph. L-B-U-S-A. Three letters right, two just a place away in the alphabet.

He felt fierce pride and love burn, briefly, at her achievement. The specialist, an expert from one of the big London teaching hospitals who had treated his wife like a specimen preserved in a Victorian museum jar, had told him to be patient – a word which always prompted in Dryden an internal scream. Laura's messages were halting, disjointed, sometimes surreal. He must wait to see if she would ever emerge from the confused penumbra of coma.

'Patience,' he said out loud. A virtue, if it was one, of which he had no trace.