



FROZEN LIGHTNING

I was in my shipping container, at my desk, with the doors and windows open. The afternoon was still, but then I heard a clank of metal. Or more of a clink. Something metallic, like the strike of a hammer. Whatever it was it sounded close, and that shouldn't have been. I own about forty acres and nobody should have been on the property. A few seconds after the first clink I heard another, so I decided to take a break and investigate.

As I set out on my walk I noted that the leaves on the mesquites had finished falling. It was close to Christmas and life should have been going into hibernation all around me, but I saw insects flitting through the grass and cactus. I even caught a whiff of flowers from somewhere. I wondered what would happen to the burgeoning life when the freezes hit.

The clinking sounds had come from a corner of my property that's up near the county road, so that's where I headed. I walked fifty yards or so along my rutted driveway and then took a game trail that snakes through the brush. When the power company's easement came into view I paused behind some chest-high prickly pear to look ahead.

Five poles carry power lines across my place. The poles are tall and spaced every couple hundred feet, and the ground beneath the lines is cleared of trees and brush. From my cover I saw somebody at the base of the pole nearest my gate. He seemed to be digging. He struck at the ground with what looked like a hammer and I heard another clink. I

assumed he worked for the power company and I resumed my approach. I hadn't been off the property for more than a week, so it would be good to visit with someone.

When I was almost to the pole I saw that it was a woman and not a man working at it. She was on her hands and knees, but when she saw me walking toward her she settled back to sit on her heels.

I stopped a few feet away and nodded in greeting. Her straw sunhat nodded in return. The hat covered short black hair, and she was dressed in jeans and an old T-shirt with PEARL BEER stretched tight across its well-filled chest. She was older, with sun-darkened leathery skin, but there was nothing old about her eyes. They were deep blue and danced like two pompoms at kickoff.

"I heard you up here," I said, and I gestured to the hammer and the long chisel in her lap. An old canvas bag was on the ground beside her.

"I didn't know anyone was here," she said. "I mean, on the property. It looks uninhabited." Her voice was thicker than I'd thought it would be, not soft and reedy but kind of sultry. "So I guess I'm trespassing," she said.

"Not at all. Or not much. But I don't think the power company will appreciate you digging up their pole."

She smiled, a curlicue pulling toward a dimple in one of her cheeks.

"Yeah." She held up the hammer and chisel. "I guess this looks strange, but I have an explanation. It has to do with copper."

"Copper?"

She pointed to the length of thick copper wire that was stapled to the side of the pole. It ran from

below ground level up to the top of the pole and ended in a squiggle that stuck into the air.

“Isn’t that for lightning?” I said. “To prevent surges?”

“Exactly. And I’m looking for frozen lightning.”

“Oh, well, that explains everything.”

She smiled again and said, “When lightning strikes the wire up there, it grounds down here and fuses the dirt into rock. Some people call the rocks frozen lightning, but ‘fulgurite’ is the technical term.” She waved a hand and said, “This red soil is full of iron, so it should conduct electricity really well. I thought I might find some fulgurites around your poles.”

She dug through her bag and produced a couple of rocks. They were about the size and shape of my thumb.

“I found these in the ground here.”

She handed the rocks over and I examined them. They were fused dirt like she’d described, and one of them had some brittle roots sticking out of it. Both were red running to black and gave off a strong smell.

“Creosote?” I said.

“Yes. From the pole’s treated wood.”

I handed the rocks back and said, “Well, that’s a new one. . . fulgurites. You learn something new every day.”

She put the rocks and tools in her bag, stood up and brushed the dirt off her knees.

“I guess I’ll be going now. Sorry I trespassed.”

“But you’re not finished. I mean, isn’t this the first pole you’ve checked on my place? If you’re working your way down the power lines, then you still have four to go.”

“Well, yes, that was the plan. But that was before I knew I was disturbing you.”

“You’re not disturbing me. I needed to take a break.”

“From what?”

“Writing, in my cabin down there. I ran out of words an hour ago, so you’re not bothering me at all. Let me carry your bag to the next pole.”

“What do you write?” she asked as we walked.

“Fiction. Political stories lately.”

“Political thrillers?”

“No. Current events stuff. But I guess some of it’s pretty thrilling, what with the explosion of leftist fascism this year.”

“Sounds intense.”

“Yeah. I try to lighten the stories where I can, but, you know, it’s hard to write perky pieces about fascism.”

“You said leftist fascism. Isn’t that a right-wing ideology?”

“It’s authoritarian, no matter who’s doing it, and at the moment it’s leftists that are storm trooping around America. I write about the phenomenon from a conservative point of view.”

“Well, you’re in the right place for that.” She gestured to the cactus and mesquite we were walking past. “This part of Texas is the enlarged heart of conservatism. But aren’t you afraid of the leftists? They destroy people for posting critical tweets, so if you’re writing whole stories that criticize them. . . Well, aren’t you concerned?”

“No. I’m just doing my civic duty. I’m sure the ‘politically correct’ goons will come after me someday, and when they do I want them to have something more than just a tweet to squall about. I don’t want there to be any doubt that I disapprove

of them, so I'm giving them hundreds of pages to criticize."

We reached the next pole and she took the chisel from her bag. I stood watching as she knelt down and began probing where the copper wire entered the ground. The dirt was soft and the chisel didn't encounter much resistance.

"I liked your 'enlarged heart of conservatism' line," I said. "I'll probably steal it."

"It's a gift. From Austin, the enlarged heart of liberalism."

"Austin. How's life there nowadays?"

"Crazy." She sat back on her heels and sighed. "I always thought I'd live out my days there, but now I'm not so sure. Age and experience change a person. Nurses are supposed to be liberal and nurturing and all that, but I got tired of watching people take advantage."

"Take advantage of what?"

"Of others. It seems that half the people I treated either drank or drugged or ate to excess, then they wanted to be pitied when they got sick. But they didn't pity the taxpayers. They expected them to pay for the damage."

"Have you retired from nursing? You used the past tense."

"Yes, I'm retired, thank God. The only thing I nurse now is an occasional beer."

She went back to probing the ground and hit something solid with the chisel. She tapped with the hammer, to loosen the dirt around the object, then dug with a hand spade. And she turned up another fulgurite. It was a little larger than the others and she seemed pleased.

We continued down the line of poles and talked along the way. She said, "The world is a vast

ball of electromagnetism, and fulgurites are the momentary manifestation of the flux. They freeze it for a nanosecond and in the process capture a bit of the planet's life." She told me there was a paying market for the rocks, but she used them in her work. She was a psychic. "I began tapping into the electrosphere about ten years ago, and now I use what I've learned to help others. I've adopted the name Xandra, but my clients call me Lady X."

"So you're a psychic, huh? Then you should know what I'm thinking right now."

"That's not how it works."

"Well, I'm thinking you look like somebody I used to know. Her name was Jan."

"Was she special to you?"

I started to answer but felt myself choking up, so I changed the subject.

"Tell me some more about the psychic stuff."

We stopped so she could dig at the next pole, and the next, then by the time we reached the last one she seemed a little tired. So I volunteered to do the chisel work. And I hit something about a foot down. After a couple minutes of digging I'd pulled up a fulgurite the size of a soccer ball.

"That's. . . that's incredible," Xandra said when I set it on the ground beside the hole. She knelt, sat back on her heels and gazed at the rock in awe.

It was just fused red sand, like the other fulgurites she'd shown me, but in addition to being so large this one was curved in the shape of the pole on one side and had a groove from the copper wire inside the curve. The rock and the hole it came from gave off a strong smell of creosote.

Xandra stared at the fulgurite while I used the chisel to probe some more. I didn't find anything else and I filled in the hole. When I'd finished I saw

Xandra watching me, waiting.

“How much do you want for it?” she asked.

“For the rock? Nothing. It’s yours.”

“Oh, no,” she protested. “Fulgurites are . . . well, like I said, there’s a paying market for them, and no telling how much this one is worth. The small ones I showed you might bring ten or twenty dollars online, but this one . . . it would bring a lot more.”

“Without you it would have been in the ground forever. Take it.”

Her pompom eyes danced with joy.

I told her I had an old towel she could wrap the rock in, then I carried it when we walked to my campsite. She checked out my cabin while I looked for the towel. The big doors on the end of the container were open and she saw my desk and computer setup inside.

“So what story are you working on now?” she asked. “What’s it called?”

“The Spectrogyph.”

“And it’s about leftist fascism?”

“No. Luciferians. But most of the other pieces I’ve written this year are about fascism. Mainly I’ve focused on how our leaders are using Covid to reorganize American society. They want to shift us over to the Communist Chinese model of governance, and they’re using big business to help bend us to their will.”

“That’s true,” she said. “I’ve seen it with the Covid shots. The government would like to make everyone take them, but it can’t, so private companies are helping. They’re telling their employees to either take the shots or lose their jobs. And they say they won’t serve unvaccinated customers.”

“And if you challenge the companies about refusing service, they say they’re private and can

do what they want.”

“But they’re not private, are they? They issue publicly traded stock. And when they refuse to do business with someone, the loss of revenue hurts the stock’s value. I’m surprised that shareholders in the companies don’t sue the people in charge for that.”

I paused in my search for the towel and said, “That’s a very good point. What other insights do you feel like sharing?”

We talked some more, mainly about politics, and she surprised me by saying that Biden stole the presidential election from Trump. “But Trump stole it from Clinton,” she added, “and Obama stole it from Romney, and Bush stole it from Gore.”

“I think you’re right,” I said. “They try to keep us divided as close to fifty-fifty as possible so they can shift votes one way or the other to pick our presidents.”

“They,” she said. I’d found the towel by then and was wrapping the fulgurite in it. Xandra looked around at the mesquite and cactus. There were some insect and bird sounds, but otherwise it was quiet. ““They,”” she repeated, then said, “They seem so far away here. This is really peaceful. But it must get lonely.”

“Yeah, sometimes. But it’s good for writing. Not much else to do.”

I put the rock in her bag and we headed up to where she said she was parked, near my gate. Along the way we chatted some more about Austin. I was sad to hear that most of my old stomping grounds had been demolished and/or paved over.

When we reached the gate I held it open and passed her the bag containing the rock. She passed me a business card.

“Call me the next time you come to Austin,” she said. “I want to give you a free reading.”

I looked at the card, and among all the lightning bolts I saw “Lady X—Fulguritic Insights.”

“So you want to tell my fortune?” I said.

She smiled an enigmatic half-smile and said, “Come see me and find out.”

She left and I filed her card in my pickup’s ashtray, then I dug it out a couple of weeks later when I was driving to Austin to take care of some business. I gave her a call on my cell phone and she said she would be free later in the day if I wanted to stop by.

I went to see her after I had lunch. The address on the card was in South Austin. Lamar Avenue was sporting a shiny new makeover, but the flood of fresh money hadn’t trickled very far down the streets that branched away from it. I bifurcated my way to a little cul de sac where all the houses needed paint and the trees begged for trimming. Xandra’s place was distinguished by a sign in the yard that said “Lady X.” The X was fashioned out of lightning bolts.

Xandra looked different than when I’d last seen her. She’d been in jeans and a T-shirt before, but at her door she was dressed in a long black skirt and a puffy purple blouse embroidered with colorful flowers. Her black hair, dark skin and blue eyes were striking. I gawked for a moment and then I said, “Excuse me, miss, is your mother home?” She snickered and invited me in.

She asked if I’d like some coffee but I declined, and we went straight into what she called “the consultation room.” It was a small bedroom made dark by black carpeting and black paint on the walls and ceiling. The window was blacked out too.

She flipped a switch and some directional lights mounted up high came to life. They threw yellow light on a mirror ball hung in the center of the ceiling. She flipped another switch and the ball began to turn. The slow swirl of glittery yellow made me think of fireflies.

Two bentwood chairs and a small round table were the only pieces of furniture in the room. They were in the middle of it, and a large lump covered with black cloth was on the table. I figured the lump was a crystal ball.

Xandra closed the door and gestured for me to sit. I took one of the chairs and she took the other. I looked around the room, at the black with the bits of light circling, and she said, "I know the surroundings seem strange, but they should help you enter a trancelike state. We'll be in it together, and I'll try to guide you."

"Guide me where?"

She lifted the cloth off the lump on the table, and instead of a crystal ball, I saw the big fulgurite from my place. She'd cleaned it up but it still smelled faintly of creosote.

"Your fulgurite has proven to be especially powerful," she said, dropping the cover to the floor. "I've had great success with it."

"Really? What kind of success?"

"You'll see."

She slid her hands across the table and I took them. She said, "People talk about everything being connected by spirit or atoms or DNA, but electricity is the strongest binding force of all. It links all things, spiritual and worldly. It binds time too. It connects what is, what was, and what will have been. Existence is one long electrical impulse, and if you learn how to navigate it, as I have, you can

visit anyplace you want.”

Her voice was soothing and I found myself growing relaxed. But at the same time she was very attractive, and we were holding hands, so I couldn't help having thoughts. Carnal thoughts. She squeezed my hands more firmly and I wondered if she was thinking along the same lines. I tried to read her face but couldn't because her eyelids were drooping slightly. She continued to talk and her words became a drone. Then her eyelids lifted and a speck of light flitted across her face. It caught an eye and the reflection caught me.

I tumbled into darkness, and then I was in a shower of sparks raining down from a power line onto a streetcar full of derbies. From there I shot upward and joined a web of veins at the top of a crackling thunderhead. I zipped through the synaptic network and then bolted down and buzzed through an electric razor while somebody screamed a watery curse in Italian. The scream ended with the snap of a breaker tripping, and out of darkness I shot to a glowing green sign in the shape of a Chinese pictograph. I bounced around the neon for a moment and then I was circling a terminal on a car battery. I spun faster and faster before bursting out through a dashboard.

I looked around and realized I was in South Austin, behind the wheel of my pickup, and I was driving north on Congress Avenue. There was a sense of *déjà vu* about the scene. I felt I'd made the drive not long before, and then I passed a sign that said "Merge left" and I knew where I was.

Strange as it seemed, I was in one of my short stories. Or one I'd partially plotted and then set aside to work on later. I thought I might call it "Merge Left," but other title possibilities were "Right

Lane Closed” and “No Center Line.” The piece would be about hardcore leftism taking over Austin.

In the story, an older man like myself had to go to a state office to take care of some business. I named the man Hank. He entered Austin from the west and then turned up Congress Avenue to drive to the cluster of office buildings around the red-domed capitol. The traffic was start-and-stop, and he passed a road sign that flashed whatever the title of the story would be. At one point he had to slam on the brakes, and the bale of hay in the bed of his pickup slid forward and thumped the back of the cab.

He noticed lots of blue bumper stickers as he drove. Everybody in his county had red Trump stickers on their pickups, but the little hybrid cars in Austin all bore Biden stickers. He thought back to when half the cars in Austin had stickers endorsing Ralph Nader or Willie Nelson for president.

When it became obvious to Hank that he wouldn't make it to his destination before things closed for lunch, he stopped at a restaurant to eat. He wanted a chicken fried steak, but the only steak on the menu was soy. He asked the Covid-masked waiter if he could get something made of real meat. The waiter said no and delivered a mean-eyed lecture about methane damaging the planet, so Hank ordered the fried veggie platter. He studied the other diners while he munched. He was the only one not wearing a mask. The others all lifted the masks to take bites of food, then lowered them again to chew. It looked like they were engaged in some kind of ritual.

Hank finished eating, and when he returned to his truck he found a yard sign stuck in his bale of hay. It was a Biden sign. He removed it and

went on his way.

He crossed the river, and traffic got thicker as he neared the capitol complex. Both vehicle traffic and pedestrian moved along at the same pace, then the vehicles dragged to a stop. But the pedestrian traffic continued. People streamed past his truck on foot, and many of them carried signs that said things like “Free Speech” and “Speech For All.” He leaned out his window to ask a passing green-haired woman where everybody was going. She said, “To the free speech rally, ya freak!”

He sat stuck in traffic for ten minutes and then decided to pull over and abandon his truck. It would be quicker to walk. But disengaging from the traffic took awhile, and he got blasted with horn and verbal abuse as he nudged his way across three lanes of taillights. Finally he made it into an alley and parked by a dumpster.

That was as far as I'd gotten with the story idea in my notes, but in my fulguritic vision the main character took off walking. Or rather I did. I became Hank and joined the flow of people moving toward the capitol. I looked pretty rough in my denim work clothes and scuffed boots, and the fashionably dressed trendies sneered at me. Most of them were college age and I figured they went to the University of Texas. They all wore masks that either matched their clothes or made some kind of political statement. Many of the masks were miniature Chinese Communist flags.

The crowd carried me to the capitol building, where the grounds were swarming with people. I'd never seen so many tattoos and stylish body mutilations in one place. I remembered reading once that demons like to redecorate bodies after they take them over, and I felt a definite demonic vibe in

the crowd. People flashed contorted hand signs and lifted their masks to flick studded tongues at one another. One woman with a picture of Lenin on her mask seemed to speak backwards when she hissed at me.

There was a general din surrounding me, with swells of chanting here and there. I got pushed from one chant to another. One group of Bernie Sanders supporters chanted, “Bern, baby, bern!” and a group of Black Lives Matter supporters chanted, “Kill the po-po! Kill the po-po!”

I moved through other chants, and then I came to a group that was shouting, “Fas-cists-fas-cists-fas-cists!” In the middle of the group, surrounded by it, I saw a couple dozen old people wearing red Trump caps. The chanting crowd was slapping the caps off their heads and hitting them with Freedom of Speech signs. Some of the old-timers were using walkers and canes, and the crowd took special delight in kicking those away and then pummeling the fallen. The most viscous pummeler wore a black pointed hood over his head and face. I tried to get to him, to stop him, but I was pushed away. But not before I saw a “KKKamala Kollection” label on the back of the hood.

I was bounced around between other horrors for a while, and then I saw a placard that said “Love” sticking above the tumult. It seemed firm and unmoving. I tried to make my way to it but was pushed away, tried again, and again, and then finally the flow of the crowd turned in my favor. It thrust me toward the placard. The crush of bodies squeezed hard and I felt my feet leave the ground. We gained speed, the sign came closer, and then the crowd loosened its grip on me and I

fell.

When I rose to my knees I saw that I was in a kind of island space, with people streaming past me and the woman holding the sign. The woman was looking down at me, and I realized it was Xandra, with blonde hair. She smiled a shower of sparks and then I was opening my eyes on her again. We were sitting at her table, still holding hands. The bits of yellow from the mirror ball still circled the black room.

I cleared my throat and said, "Well, that was...that was quite a ride. If it's over. Am I really back here now? In your house?"

"You're back. What'd you see?"

"You were a blonde."

"Jeez. That was a long time ago. We were in high school."

"Gimme a B."

"I outgrew my cheerleader's outfit."

"Nonsense. Gimme a badger bark."

"So is that when you liked me best, when I was a blonde in a skimpy cheerleader's outfit?"

"Maybe. But I liked it when you were a red-head too."

"That was after my first divorce. I wanted a change so I dyed my hair."

"And you called me. We lasted, what, about six months?"

"About. And less than that after my second divorce."

"You were auburn then."

"Starting to gray, though."

We were still holding hands.

"So what are you thinking, Jan?"

She didn't respond.

"Gimme a J."

A smile curled her lips toward the dimple.

“Come on, baby. Tell me what you’re thinking.”

“That we agreed never to do this again. We were too different. You were always so...sure about things.”

“I’ve had my moments. But you seem pretty sure yourself nowadays. You’ve changed your views quite a bit. About politics, at least.”

“Age and experience, like I said.”

“So why’d you look me up? Do you think we can make it work now?”

A speck of mirrored light swept across her eyes and I saw tears forming. I’d known the eyes the instant I saw them at the base of the power pole. They were couched in weathered skin but still bore the look of longing that had haunted me most of my life. And as I leaned forward at the table I saw my own eyes reflecting the same longing.

I don’t know how long we sat there, hands fused, staring.