

THREE FIRES

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In his *Fire Sermon* the Buddha identified three poisons or three fires, the negative qualities of mind that cause all of the world's problems: greed, hatred and delusion.

' . . . the temper of the multitude is fickle. While it is easy to persuade them of a thing, it is hard to fix them in that persuasion . . . in our own days the Friar Girolamo Savonarola had not the means to keep those who had been believers steadfast or to make unbelievers believe.'

Machiavelli, *The Prince*

THE CONFESSION

*The Great Hall, Palazzo della Signoria
Florence, Wednesday 18 April 1498*

It's late afternoon as Fra Girolamo Savonarola shuffles onto the raised stage at the front of the Hall of the Five Hundred. He drags his sandalled feet, scuffing the stone floor with a *shush, shush, shush*.

Savonarola commissioned this chamber, currently the largest room in Europe. It was built to hold the five-hundred-strong Grand Council, part of the new Republic of Florence established under his authority. The vast walls are plain, not yet frescoed. Through the high windows a clear spring light floods into the room from the west.

The full council watch him walk on in silence. They are seated in neat rows, but standing behind them and around them are a substantial portion of the male population of Florence. Everyone is perfectly still and listening. It hasn't rained in Florence for a week and the men have walked dust from the street into the room. It

floats above them like a scum on a broth, swimming in the warm air, rising high.

Savonarola looks out at the gathered crowd and admits that God is not talking to him. He made it up.

He has been lying to them for years.

He admits that his prophecies were so accurate because he knew certain things in advance: anyone could see that Lorenzo de' Medici was desperately ill, that Pope Innocent VIII was obese and spectacularly debauched, that the King of Naples was very old. Accurately predicting their deaths was a cheap trick that he did to get power for himself. He didn't foresee the French Army invading Brescia six years before war was even declared, he just got lucky. He didn't foretell the coming of plague, famine and war to Florence. It was a coincidence that those things happened years after he said they would.

There is no mention of the Charles the Affable prophecy because that's impossible to explain.

The shocking announcement reverberates around the room, echoes over the heads of the gathered crowd. Some of them are here because they couldn't believe he was actually going to do this. They still cherish their belief in him, have given up so much for him; they needed to hear it themselves to really take it in. Others have always known he was a fraud and a liar and have been waiting years for him to own up. But even among them the mood isn't triumphant. Even they feel something die.

Savonarola hangs his head and sags with shame.

He is not speaking these words himself. They're being read out by one of his inquisitors from his confession, extracted under torture, written down by a scribe and signed by him. But he's standing there and he's not disputing it.

A fellow Dominican, Fra Domenico, was arrested with him and subjected to even more intense torture, but Domenico isn't in the hall confessing in front of everyone. He held fast: he still ecstatically and completely believes Savonarola was chosen and directed by God. But it's not a fair comparison because they are being asked different questions: Domenico is being asked if he still has faith in Savonarola. Savonarola is being asked if he still believes in himself.

Savonarola stands as the full confession is read in a loud braying baritone, his head slumping forward on his weak neck. His nose looks bigger because his face is drawn. His shoulders are small and sloped. They've all heard him speak: he's a famous preacher. They're familiar with the rhythms and cadences of his voice and know that the document doesn't sound like him. But it's signed by him and he's there, in front of them, owning it. There's no doubt it is his.

I lied.

I am no prophet.

I have not received messages from God.

I said these things to get power.

I lied to you.

I was vainglorious.

I was informed of sundry illnesses and so could foretell the deaths of certain powerful men.

I was told the French were coming.

I lied to you all.

Four pages of this. Four pages. At the end of the reading he is asked by officials if it is his own true confession.

He nods.

Not good enough. Say it.

It is my own true confession, he says.

Louder, for the people at the back of the room.

IT IS MY OWN TRUE CONFESSION.

His voice clatters to the high ceiling. It resonates from bare wall to bare wall until it dies away and is just a memory.

A pause.

Savonarola hears air sucked slowly in through teeth, sniffs, affirming grunts, despairing sighs. A Sniveller, one of his loyalists, sobs quietly at the back of the room. Savonarola's life is nothing but fractured fragments, connected, somehow. Bits of moments. This moment.

His withered arms are bound behind his back. His knees are swollen. Everything hurts. He looks up to the high windows and the light, at the dust motes swimming aimlessly in the warm air above their heads, and imagines that each speck is an iota of faith leaving a person in the room.

He is a preacher. His life's mission is to bring people to God, to faith.

He didn't think anything else could hurt him, but this blow lands so deep that it takes him back thirty years, to Ferrara and Laodamia Strozzi.