

# The Arboretum

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In a world where crimes are punished with eulogies, The Four Arsonists stand in the scorched Arboretum while parishioners sit on pews of charcoal. If the congregations' squats are light enough, the burned wood might not crumble. The Arsonists must apologize to the arboretum and its friends before the next sunrise, when it will be turned into an Applebee's with two floors and stained-glass windows. Reverend Smokey the Bear presides over the ceremony, makes sure that angry mourners don't throw ashen apples or burnt monkey-nuts. Once The Arsonists have finished their eulogies, they will be sentenced to life, to jobs as car washers, as adjunct professors, or worst of all, as waiters in the new Applebee's. Be assured, this is a hilarious ordeal, but if you could manage to shed some tears, the Arboretum's surviving friends will appreciate it. It had a lot of friends. The Arsonists stand in order of offense: Kindler, Sparker, Stoker, and Snuffer. In this order they confess their crimes.

The Kindler doesn't know that he is supposed to speak first, but it becomes very obvious, very quickly. His knuckles are red with scratches and enough splinters that it's hard to tell he isn't wooden. As he begins his speech, the congregation wonders how and why he didn't burn down with the Arboretum:

"Us Arsonists had our mattress beneath the Arboretum. We'd looked other places, but the Arboretum seemed the warmest. Even now, there's still something cozy about the place, isn't there? The trees insulate the place or something, keep the heat and the cold out. I mean, yes, the mattress are gone now, but I still feel something vital seeping into my socks. Maybe the new Applebee's will save some money on heating bills, right? Too soon? I'm sorry.

“Well anyway, the night of the fire we were discussing the necessity of hell. A subject we all knew very little about. So, us Arsonists had to read a book, you know, get educated. At this time, none of us knew that the Arboretum had an assload of books. So we left the little hole where our mattresses were and went down the street to the public library. There was a pretty good selection of books on heaven, which we found necessary to educate ourselves on so that we knew what hell wasn't, right? The thing was, they didn't have many books on hell, and half the hellbooks we found were musty. Three of them began disintegrating in our hands the moment they left the shelf. We took them home anyway, though.

“The reading was tough, but we were doing what we loved. We finished them very quickly, within a week tops. The Inferno was probably our favorite, we read it like four times each, I particularly loved the cold torture of Dante's final moments in hell. I must've said 'whoa!' like fourteen or fifteen times. If the Arboretum hadn't been so warm, I may have even shivered. By the end of our reading, we all pretty much unanimously decided that hell wasn't a necessity.

“I didn't admit this to the other three at the time, and I wish I would have because maybe the fire wouldn't have started, but late at night, while the other three were hanging out with girls or watching porn, I would stay up late and reread the hellbooks. Then, when I had them memorized, I reread the heavenbooks. Those weren't nearly as fun because they made too much sense. Hell revealed a flaw that heaven simply didn't, or couldn't. I'm not sure...

“So, when the librarians called us and said that the books were overdue, I offered to bring them back. Which I did...sort of. I returned the heavenbooks, but I lied to the librarians saying that I lost the hellbooks. I paid the replacement fines for them, I swear. I mean, the copies I kept were so old and yucky, they needed new ones, right? When I got back to the mattress hole later that night, I stacked all the hellbooks in the corner and covered them with the ugly sweater that I got for being president of my High School's art club. I didn't know that Sparker was going to keep his ashtray there. I just thought that, even though they were both imaginary, hell was somehow still more important than heaven. Even worse, I was afraid that I'd forget this fact. But I did, and look what happened? I'm

sorry. I'm really really sorry.”

The Sparker was drunk and it took him about forty-five minutes of the Kindler's weeping to realize that the poor chap had finished his eulogy. He stood, swayed, sat back down, stood, swayed, and finally walked over to the pulpit. He spun the Kindler around, hugged him, and then kissed him right on the mouth. The sparker's face was entirely covered in black ash, except around his mouth where the cheap brandy he'd been drinking washed some of the soot away. He finished the bottle, burped and whipped it into the crowd of parishioners:

“Good morning, everyone. Good morning. I'm not entirely sure that it would be accurate to label any of the events that took place at this 'Arboretum' to be my fault. You all just heard the little punk. He intentionally stacked those goddamn books and covered them with that hideous sweater. Then the little prick has the audacity to blame the ashtray on me? Listen close, folks, I'm going to explain exactly why none of this blame belongs to me.

“First, I didn't make the damn ashtray. My ex-girlfriend did. She was taking some sort of ceramics class and thought that it would be dandy to make an ashtray out of little clay skulls. She called it a 'metaphor'. It was some sort of symbolic sculpture, 'exploring' the 'real damage' that my current lifestyle is causing me. Well honey, here's too you! Wait. Where are my damn smokes? Oh, hell, I sat on them again. Here's your real moral lesson for today: don't ever put your smokes in your back pocket. They get smooshed. Any you assclowns got a lighter? HAHAHA! I'm just messing around; I've got one. Gimme a second...Okay, so, the ashtray wasn't technically mine. I mean, sure, I used it, but what was I going to do? Throw the butts on the ground? I'm not a damn heathen.

“The second thing I'd like to point out that my 'partner' in 'crime' left out is that he actually put the ashtray on the book tower. His sweater kept slipping off the books and he needed some weight to keep it from sliding all over the place. So, like any rational person, I offered up the weight of that stupid ashtray. If being a helpful friend is a crime, then I guess I'm guilty. I'm willing to admit that.

“The third event, which I didn’t even take part in was the removal of the ashtray from the sweaterstand. That, my fiar Arboretum-goers, was a dear friend: the Snuffer. You see, he caught the Kindler reading those boring-ass hellbooks and, like a good little detective, went snooping for the rest. I guess he thought the moldy old books might’ve be under the ashtray because he lifted the ashtray up and moved it. He must’ve been gone before the sweater slid off because the books were still there when I got home later that night.

“I’ll admit that I was drunk, which made me want a cigarette. Can you blame me, though? No. No you can’t because booze and cigarettes are like PB and J, only better. Also, you can’t blame me wanting to put out that cigarette when its down to the butt. You can’t smoke the damn butt. Well, you can, but it tastes horrible. Nor can you blame me for leaning over towards where my ashtray should have been, or for pushing that cigarette into where the ashtray should have been. I didn’t know the books were soaked in shitty perfume.

“I’m just saying, other than these ashes, my hands are clean.”

The Stoker shifted nervously. The congregation already hated him in particular, but the Sparker had riled the crowd to such a frenzy that Reverend Smokey busted out the bottles of churchwine he’d been saving for the sacrament. Once the majority of mourners were sated and sleepy, the Stoker took a deep breath and shuffled to the pulpit:

“The fire apparently had already started burning as I brought Chloe back to the mattress-hole. I met her at the public library the day we got the books about heaven and hell. She was in the teen-fiction section of the library. If you lean back on your heels a little bit—I’m prone to teetering—while you’re standing in front of the heaven and hell bookstacks you can just barely see the teen fiction bookstacks through a sliver between the biology and psychology bookstacks. She did this weird thing where she would put her ear up to a book before opening it, and, if she did choose to open it, she would put her nose deep into the binding and inhale. That’s how she caught my attention.

“I probably shouldn’t have walked up to her and asked her

why she was doing that, but her hair told me that I would regret not asking more than I was going to regret asking. So, I teetered over to her and just asked. She laughed at me and asked me how I go about selecting a book to read. Personally, I just read the bookjacket to find out if a book sounds interesting, or I rely on the suggestions of some whose taste respect. I told her this, and she laughed again. When she was done laughing, she asked me to show her what I meant. So, I grabbed a book and read the jacket. It was *The Hunger Games*, I think. She was just, like, looking at me, you know? Then I told her that, based on the book jacket, whatever it was sounded kind of clichéd. She just laughed again. I got embarrassed, and walked back to the other Arsonists. I had unintentionally shared a moment that she’d watched, she’d laughed at. She was good.

“I didn’t see Chloe again until the night of the fire. I was buying paper at Wal-Mart, teetering back and forth in the paper aisle, which gives you a small view of the hairbrush aisle. Before I could teeter forward, she made eye contact with me and ran over. She asked what I was doing. I told her. She didn’t laugh this time, but I think she wanted to laugh, though. I asked her if I should sniff the paper to decide what to buy. Then she did laugh, but this time I got to laugh with her. Afterwards, I helped her pick out a hairbrush. Then she wanted to see the mattress-hole and wanted to sniff my books or whatever.

“I’m really sorry, but her hair was in the way when got back to the mattress-hole. I couldn’t see that the fire had started. Yes, I felt the heat, but my cheeks were flushed. She picked up all my books and listened to them. She only found a few, maybe three or four, worth sniffing, which she opened and took a deep whiff from. I held her hair back while she tried re-sniffing them, apparently unsatisfied with the first go. When she was finished, we made eye contact, but, when I smiled, she looked down, then away, then back down, then back up, bit her lip, and ran out of the mattress-hole, leaving me to stare at a pile all my favorite books.

“I’m really sorry. I just got mad and started throwing the books across the room. I didn’t see the fire, let alone realize that I was making it worse. I really am sorry, but I lost something too that day.”

The Snuffer was disturbed and elated to see that most of the congregation had fallen asleep following the Stoker's yarn. Those that remained awake were surely reporters from the city's magazines and newspapers, most of which were online, there only to document the proceedings. If the real mourners were awake, they would throw things at the Snuffer, Reverend Smokey would have let them, and the Snuffer would have deserved it. Once the Stoker had finished apologizing, the Snuffer rose tall, without the fear of projectiles, and strode up to the pulpit:

"I started the fire, and I put it out. I've created the mess that stands before me. During legal proceedings I have attempted to exonerate my fellow Arsonists. These attempts, obviously, did not work. So, with nothing else to lose, I give you these little truths. I made the ashtray because the Sparker should have never started smoking. I doused those hellbooks with the Kindler with his mother's perfume to keep him away from them; he hates his mother. I also farted in the Stoker's books to keep him away from Chloe because she was becoming a horrible distraction.

"Yet here we stand and, well, squat. I knew my actions would be the cause of this fire and, thus, I committed them. Don't get me wrong, I will miss the Arboretum and the mattress hole, but, frankly, if the Arboretum were still alive, I'd look her in the eye and tell her it's barbaric that we needed her. This was, without a doubt, an act of arson.

"When I came back and saw the whole Arboretum in flames, it took me maybe fifteen minutes before I did anything. Only when I realized that my fellow Arsonists might have been in there, did I rush over to the fire station and steal the truck. I forgot to check my cellphone until I'd put out the entire fire. When I did, I saw that I had missed calls from each of the other Arsonists. They were at Dunkin' Donuts and wanted to know if I was hungry.

"Knowing they were safe was all I needed. I grabbed all my burnt belongings and started walking anywhere...until I was arrested.

"This was fun while it all lasted, but one can only live in a

mattress hole for so long. The books were nice, it was warm, I cared for the other Arsonists, but it was just an experience like every other.

"By the end, all I know is that Jesus, or whoever we read about in those heavenbooks, created the strangest trip to Applebee's that anyone has ever seen."

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The next evening, the ruins of the Arboretum had been turned into a beautiful new Applebee's. The stained glass windows depicted intricate images of trees and books. Reverend Smokey and his congregation broke bread and ate boneless buffalo chicken wings during the grand opening. Before they began to feast, they bowed their heads and prayed: "No one can prevent forest fires."