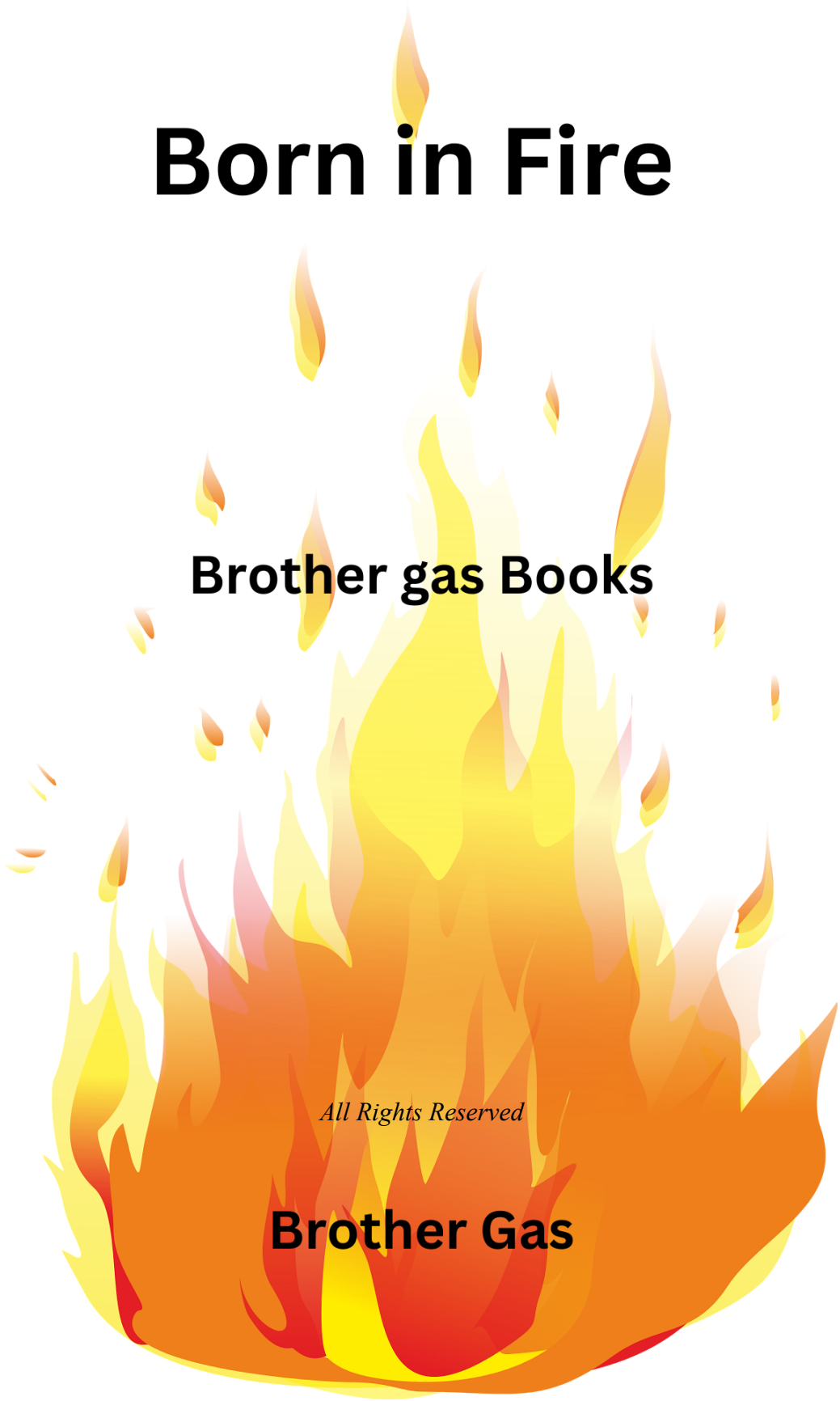




Born in Fire

Brother gas Books

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Brother Gas

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Joe Davis lifted the neck string of his rubber apron over his head and tied the waist string around his back. He grabbed his elbow-length black gloves and slid them on, then lowered his protective goggles over his eyes. He read the thermometer on the cremation furnace: 1,400 degrees Fahrenheit.

“Just right for cooking.”

Joe worked as the crematory operator for the regional University Hospital system. He had the evil job of burning all the rejected human body parts, aborted babies, and deceased prison inmates unclaimed by family members.

Not knowing the stories behind any of the excised body parts, lifeless babies, and rejected inmates, Joe imagined a tragic story about each one. Sometimes Joe got overwhelmed with emotion when thinking about these stories.

The job was lonely; maybe that’s why Joe had taken it. He was a recluse, and this was the only work Joe could stick with. It was a way to escape the teasing and condemnation from childhood to adulthood of people making fun of him for being the product of mixed blood. Even his wife was sometimes bullied by people talking down to her and despising her for marrying a “half-breed.” Cremation Operator was the perfect job for Joe Davis.

While loading the tray to slide inside the furnace, Joe removed the name tags from each bag containing parts or bodies. He opened each bag to verify that the contents matched the ID tag. After Joe loaded the tray halfway with body parts, he filled the remaining half with aborted babies. But today something different would happen.

Only one baby was ready for cremation. He opened the bag and looked at the baby inside. A beautiful baby boy with all his fingers and toes attached to a whole developed body lying lifeless. Why did they abort the little boy? Was it for health reasons? To satisfy his curiosity, Joe removed the baby from the black bag to examine him for injuries. None to be found.

Joe began to guess and imagine all the tragic reasons for someone to discard a beautiful little child. His thoughts turned to family members crying and mourning that their little boy was dead. He could only surmise their agony, pain, and great sorrow. A tear fell from Joe's eye, landing on the little boy while placing him back into the terrible black bag.

Or was it a case of convenience? Maybe the mother or father didn't want to deal with an additional life. Or maybe the mother was overwhelmed by a rape or by poverty or . . . Joe would never be allowed to know, so it could not, must not matter to him, even if he wanted it to.

Joe opened the superhot furnace door and slid the stainless steel tray into the hell-bound flaming fire. He shut the door and sat on a stool, waiting for the hungry flames to consume and reduce the carcasses to ash.

Joe buried his face in his hands, praying to God for answers to why babies had to die. Joe needed answers. After thirty years of marriage, Joe and his wife, Angel, were childless. Joe told himself it wasn't fair. Joe and Angel were financially poor by social standards but rich in love.

Entranced in his pity party, he suddenly snapped out of his deep thoughts. *What's that noise?* Joe couldn't determine whether he heard a noise or imagined one.

He heard it again.

It couldn't be a baby's cry. Other than Joe, no living person was anywhere near.