



WHAT TO TAKE IN CASE OF FIRE

LEE HOPE

(To my brother)

The summer after our Disastrous Move to Michigan, I again revised my list.

- 1. Stuffed black Baby Bear*
- 2. Two pair designer jeans*
- 3. Make-up kit*
- 4. Two t-shirts, extra large, to hide tiny tits*
- 5. Phone to call girlfriends, who don't exist*
- 6. White Bible with gold script*
- 7. Photographs of me and Dad*

(All must fit into one backpack)

Mother, almost forty years old, was nine months pregnant. I had just turned thirteen, too old for Mother to be acting hormonal, especially when I was. We

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had tantrums galore.

If I talked back, then I was sent to my room. To wait. For hours sometimes. Until my father returned from work when he would shut us in his den for one of his “Discussions” about morals—respect, responsibility, patience, maturity—topics that I had no interest in. He entered into these diatribes under the auspices that I had a voice, when, in fact, no matter how much I argued my point—that Mother had started it, yelled at me, called me names—nevertheless, I was to blame and deserved to be punished.

Guilt. I grew up with that, also from the Missouri Synod Lutheran church that I still attended back then, with its weekly rants about sin, which I committed, like talking back.

“Cecelia, zip your lip.” “Cecelia, who do you think you are?” “Cecilia, you smart-alec, you loudmouth, you bitch,” Mother yelled. A bitch herself. An inherited trait. Except I was not allowed to raise my voice. Another injustice. I had to backtalk deadpan, bury my yelling within. I remember in my pre-backtalk stage, when I was about six or seven, playing downstairs, when I heard my parents’ raised voices in their bedroom overhead, then the house-shaking thump a body makes hitting against a wall. I tiptoed into the paneled kitchen, opened a drawer by the sink, took out a box of safety matches, sat hunkered at the small table and ate my first match tips. A sulfuric waxy aftertaste. Not bad.

That Sunday, at church Mother wore sunglasses under her black feathered hat. With her chignon and in her mink cape, she looked like a glamorous, if heavysset, movie star. My father, who never attended church, wore new purple-blue marks circling one wrist. My mother had big-boned hands. She must have clamped on tight. And she was bigger than he was.

Years later, that summer, when pregnant she grew, of course, bigger yet. The more weight she gained, the more I lost. “You’re nothing but skin and bones,” she said. At lunch, I ate only one half slice of American cheese and one half slice of white bread. She could not force me to eat more. Our first battle, where I fought back, she had to relent or I’d have spent each mealtime in my room

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alone. I won that round, although I lost the period I had recently gained. That is, if bleeding is a gain.

“What happened to the nice little girl I used to know?” Mother would ask.

I couldn't answer that. At seven or eight, I had run joyous and free through fields in Wisconsin and caught turtles and frogs in nearby swamps. And when ten or eleven, I'd played dress up with Lisa Lucy, whose mother had a streamer trunk filled with old costumes — velvet robes, golden scepters, jeweled crowns. I was older, so I was the queen, Lisa my servant. I ordered her to call me “Your Majesty,” to bow and kiss my invisible ring. Like Mother wanted me to kiss her invisible ring when I was thirteen after our Disastrous Move to Michigan when I'd left behind all my childhood friends.

No matter. I had my lists.



One day, Mother, bursting to give birth, sat me down at the kitchen table, and served me apple pancakes like back when I was little. Back when she'd take me out to lunch before shopping at Marshall Fields, just the two of us, all dolled up, or drive me to ballet, tennis, or swim lessons. But the pancake turner that she used to flip pancakes was what my father used to spank me, because even when little, I guess, I was bad. “Go to your room and wait.” At long last my father would come in and say, “This is for your own good.” Pull down my panties, flop me over his lap, and whap me with that metal spatula till my bottom burned. I don't remember my sins.

Sins are something you should forget, if you know what's good for you.

In any case, that summer, Mother, nine months pregnant, served me apple pancakes with real maple syrup and said, “The ultrasound showed it is a boy. Your father did not want another child. But now he does. He always wanted a son.”

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“Since when?”

“Since I was pregnant with you. He wanted you to be a boy so desperately that just before my due date, I drove four hours to Madison to my parents and gave birth to you in that hospital without him. I knew if you were a girl, he’d be too upset for me to bear. Don’t tell your father I told you that.”

My parents each told me secrets about the other, even back when I was little. And as a little girl, I ate the tips off matches. Though I never struck them. Don’t play with fire, Mother said. Instead, even then I made lists of what to take, just in case. At age eight:

1. *Pet turtle Elvis tho his back legs rotted off*
 2. *Jeans and hooded sweatshirt*
 3. *White Bible with gold print*
 4. *Poster of Jesus hanging on cross*
 5. *Stuffed black Baby Bear. Leave Mama and Papa Bear behind.*
- All things must fit into LL Bean backpack.*



I kept revising as I grew. I had a secret notebook with entire lists crossed out. Delete poster of Jesus. Insert *Black Beauty*. Delete sweatshirt. Insert yellow full skirt and chartreuse blouse. I don’t know why I thought about fire. Although back in Wisconsin, each fall, my father burned heaps of leaves and let me light the pile. The red-orange-yellow leaves glowed from within. While the aroma of mold and earth curled up gray into the sky, I’d imagine standing in that heap of radiant flames, my body strapped to a stake. Sometimes I’d be burned as a witch, with a whisper huff for breath, though I’d cast a spell to live, or sometimes I’d be a saint so pure that I could walk barefoot on burning coals, or sometimes I was a heroine like Joan of Arc, who rode a white charger into battle and killed in the name of Christ. In my fantasies, fire was not hot.

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Flames did not have tongues because fire could not speak. And flames did not lick. A fire was dry, bone dry. Real tongues that licked were soft and wet, like my dog's.

I had a dog that summer after we moved to Michigan, a Pug named Doug, who my father brought home from the Humane Society, a creature who would need extra protection in case of fire because he was dumb as a stump.

Meanwhile, it grew inside, Mother's infant. "Your father did not want another child," she had said. "Your father thought we were over this stage." *This stage*, meaning me.

I prayed to be worthy to exist at the Missouri Synod Lutheran church, the strictest of sects, and I prayed for forgiveness for talking back. Which I went home and promptly did. Talking back is shorthand for being a bitch.

"You pick up your clothes, or you're grounded," Mother said. She saw things in black or white. She wore a black-feathered hat. Her face was white. I was into grays. I lived in a mist. I demanded my room be repainted in silver cloud.

Toward the end of nine months, Mother was fat. I was fasting. My martyrdom. St. Cecilia burned at the stake.

"Your father always wanted a son," Mother had said over apple pancakes.

One day, when Mother was out, I asked my father if he was glad it was a boy. He shut me in his den and said that in college he had loved a petite woman, a gymnast, but because he was short, had given her up to marry my mother who was big-boned and could give him a big son, an athlete. "Not that I didn't love your mother, of course. Don't tell her I said that."

I grew taller than either of them, but small-boned, fragile, thin. Nothing but skin and bones. Although, while Mother grew bigger yet with her unborn infant, I grew little breasts. I let my hair grow long. I slouched. I wore jeans and huge t-shirts. No boy looked at me even once. Mother said: You'd be pretty if you'd get the hair out of your eyes, if you'd stand up straight, if you didn't talk back, if you weren't selfish, if you'd think of others not just yourself, if you'd smile, if you'd gain weight.

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She took off my weight like flesh burned at the stake. Flames do not sizzle, they hiss, like a snake hisses and clings, like the new baby clung to Mother's breast.

"Cecilia, don't hold my baby like that."

"Cecilia, don't ever let my baby cry."

"Cecilia, give me my child!"

"Cecilia, I pity the man who marries you."

Tongues set fires. I was sure of that because one Sunday in church, Pastor Bob read a verse from the Old Testament that said, "For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God."

I thought if God can be jealous, why can't I?

The baby was named Matthew, after some saint, though he only sucked and squawked. You could not converse with him. Who was he anyway? Yet Mother doted on Saint Matthew. She nursed "on demand." While none of my demands were met. "I always did like them best when they're babies," I heard her say on the phone to Meredith, one of her new friends.

My father brought home a miniature baseball mitt and talked of little league in a few years.

I played with Doug, my pug. I'd read a newspaper article that said a dog was as smart as a two-year old toddler. Totally accurate. Because Doug could come when called, sit, shake, and fetch. While the tiny angel could only suck, wail, and crap.

And then, after the initial so-called *thrill of birth* wore off, the tensions set in. I'd read that too, in a book on the first years of parenting that Mother had on her night table. I skipped to the chapter, "Problems in the Marriage": "A child can create marital distance, sometimes leading to divorce. Parents must present a united front." Then one night, I heard my mother yell at my father, "If you don't like it here, Kyle, move out."

A threat I had overheard before. She knew that his mother had divorced back when divorce was unfashionable. In his teens, my father had moved out and

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lived at the YMCA and vowed never to divorce and put his own kids through that.

I sat in my misty gray room when I heard her yell, and I pictured my father saying, “Fine, I’m out of here!” He’d grab his suitcase, come knock on my door and say, “Let’s go. Hurry. Pack your things.”

I had my list so I would quickly scoop numbers one through ten into my backpack and follow him out to his Buick, not Mother’s Audi, and we’d drive off, triumphant, free at last. Except then I’d remember my mother in her black feathered hat taking me for lunch, and the fancy clothes she’d buy me — the red dress, yellow skirt and bright green blouse, black flats, designer jeans — and she’d say, “Don’t tell your father,” because he’d object to spending so much on my school clothes. Even though I still loved playing dress up. But in my father’s Buick, he’d turn to me and say, “It’s just you and me now, kid.” The two of us speeding down the open highway. That is, until we’d come to a traffic jam, where my father, a Type A who hated to wait, would do a U-turn and head back home.

So I’d wake from daydreams to find myself in my silver gray room on my pearl gray bedspread, light gray carpeting underfoot, dark gray drapes — I’d overdone the gray. But I tended to be dramatic, ever since I’d dressed up in Lisa Lucy’s velvet robes and bejeweled crown and ordered her to address me as “Your Enema-ence.” I’d been given enemas, prunes, and Ex-Lax, at my grandmother’s, my father’s mother, who also had wanted my mother to have a boy. That grandmother often made me sit for hours in the corner when I was bad, though I don’t remember my sins.

Anyway, that night when I sat on my gray bed in my gray room and overheard my mother yelling again for my father to move out, I opened the secret compartment in my bottom bureau drawer, took out my notebook, and revised my list. This time I included Doug, even though my pug would not fit into my backpack, so I also had to add his Sherpa Bag, which would slow down my exit strategy, but sacrifice is sometimes necessary.

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Then came the day when I overheard my father singing to his beloved son. Even now I can hear the tune, my father's raunchy baritone:

The boys they swim in the clear water.

The girls they swim in the scum.

My father sang this ditty to Saint Matthew in his crib. My father did not know I was in the hall. Did my father's father sing it to him? Or did his mother? Surely he must have known that the little mammal in the crib, who was dumber than our pug, could not understand one word of it.

I snuck away down the hall to my gray room, and I wondered about scum, a sticky slimy substance, chartreuse not green, like the yellow-green blouse my mother had bought me. And I vowed to never, no matter if I was in the Amazon or the Everglades or wherever scum was, to swim in it. As a little tomboy I had waded in nearby swamps to catch turtles and tadpoles, but sloshing through that thin greenish slick was different from swimming in sticky scum coating your hair, up your nose, that sulfur stench, like the smell of match tips. Like the matches in the kitchen cabinet in the top drawer. I sometimes slid open that drawer and wondered what would happen if I took out the box, struck a safety match against the sandpaper strip, let the match fall... and purge us of all possessions, like Jesus gave up all he owned and said, "Follow me. Be reborn. Start anew."

It is not as if I suffered abuse. Can't blame it on that. It was more like a daily static, like two sticks rubbing together back and forth, until something combusts.

And as that summer reached an end, the time came for Mother's and my annual shopping trip to splurge on whatever I coveted. "Don't tell your father. It's our secret." I believed in secrets. I believed in splurges.

But during those crucial possible shopping days, Mother's infant colicked. The minisaint shrieked nonstop, even though my parents worshipped him in

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his crib and came bearing gifts, following their burning star.

It was obvious, even to me, that I was jealous. I prayed in church for forgiveness yet again. But only Pastor Bob was present, and he'd once preached that even bad intentions are sins. So no absolution. Just God and me across the void. No small still voice spoke like in the Old Testament from the burning bush that did not burn. Like in my martyr fantasy, fire was not hot. Ah, to be a martyr, yet feel no pain.

But then Mother announced our school shopping trip might have to wait, while rocking the wailing, scary saint in her arms, rewarding his disobedience.

I said, "You're spoiling the little brat!"

Mother said, "Don't you talk like that to your mother about your brother."

When she referred to herself in the third person, I knew I was in Big Trouble.

But I was on a roll. "You're training him to cry."

At that, she stood up, gently laid the little mammal in his crib, swiveled around and said, "Go to your room!"

That old refrain. And now, at long last, I said, "No way!"

She took off after me then — open floor plan — she chased me around the island through the living room, kitchen, dining alcove, around again, I was a gazelle, a thoroughbred, leaping through air. She would never catch up until I slipped on the oriental rug, fell flat on my back, and she leapt on top, outweighed me even after the birth by at least forty pounds, she held my hands down, her big fingers circled my wrists, imprinting bracelets, and she said, "You're crazy!"

"No, you are!"

"No, you are."

"If I am I inherited it from you!"

Yelling into each other's face, me beneath all her weight.

"If I'm crazy," I cried, "so is the Holy Infant you worship. He inherited it too!" Heresy. She raised one fist, then stopped; she had never hit me, no, not once, but words are fire. "May you never have children of your own!" she

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cursed.

I twisted free. Ran to where? To my room. Right where she wanted me. Locked my door. Straight to my secret hiding place, to my fat notebook, to my many pages of lists . . . And I heavily revised my latest version.

Delete chartreuse blouse, yellow skirt. Insert Sackcloth?

Delete designer jeans. Insert sweatpants.

Delete black flats. Go Barefoot.

Delete make-up kit. Go Barefaced.

Delete training bras. Go Braless.

Delete white Bible with gold print. Go Godless.

Delete posters. Keep cell phone to call 911.

Delete all photos of Mother and Father. Insert 5 photos of me.

Delete Baby Bear. Insert Doug inside Sherpa bag, zipped.

Get a new fireproof backpack. Asbestos? Illegal now? Some flame retardant stuff like the little saint's pajamas are made of.



As if that could save him.

That night when my father came home, he took me into his den and spoke of Responsibility and Obedience and Humility, and of a “Higher Moral Imperative,” as if he were a minister instead of a real estate broker.

“A Higher Imperative?” I asked. “What’s that?”

“There are values that are immutable.”

As if I knew what immutable meant. “For example?”

He shook his head, quickly said, “Like the fact that fornication is a sin.”

“What’s fornication?” I asked. I had a good idea, but I wanted him to say it.

He sighed. “Sex without marriage.”

What did that have to do with this? I thought of all the sex scenes in movies

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and on TV and said, “Everybody’s a fornicator.”

He shook his head, lit a cigar, tapped his small short fingers on his big dull desk. He always tried to take a reasonable tone in our Discussions, as if his logic could persuade me. I remembered my mother said in one of our “secret chats” that my father was an atheist. So I asked, “By Higher Imperative, do you mean God?”

He fell silent.

“Ah ha!” I said.

He had as good as confessed his own lack of belief. His Higher Imperative was invented by him. Plus, I’d got him to shut up, a major victory. But no matter what I said, our “Discussions” always circled around to how I must be punished. He said, “Your mother told me about your fight. Surely you realize that wrestling your mother to the floor is against all moral scruples. Also calling her, and worse, your innocent brother, *insane*. As a consequence, you will receive no new school clothes this fall. And no shopping trips for the next six months.”

Strip me bare at a new school where I had no friends? My father did not grasp who he was dealing with. He had underestimated the opposition. If you’re going to punish, do it up, like the Old Testament God: “You unleashed your burning anger, it consumed them like stubble.”

I went to my room and deleted my entire list, except for Doug. I inserted:

— *Black shirt*

— *Black tights*

— *Sneak out, take taxi to mall*

— *Shoplift black biker jacket, biker boots*

— *Go punk*

— *Go truant*

— *Flunk*

— *Get into drugs*

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- *Have sex with a dealer*
- *Get pregnant, no, delete that*
- *Become a prostitute, shoot up.*

Make them see what being really bad was. Make them sorry for their sins.

And that Sunday in church, as if part of some Higher Plan, Pastor Bob read from the book of James, “Even so the tongue is a little member and boasteth great things — Behold how great a matter even a little fire kindleth.”

That lit me up inside. Even a little fire could do great things.



After the Birth, each night, I was the last to go to bed. My parents retired early due to the little creature who still did not sleep through until dawn. Even saints have insomnia. One night, I trod down the long hall of the rambling ranch house, deep carpeting silencing my footsteps, past my sleeping parents’ room, then past the small nursery, both doors ajar so they could hear each peep. I was dressed in my convict pajamas, wide black and white stripes. I was a prisoner in this house so why not dress the part? Yet I also felt this wondrous calm, like I used to get as a small girl in prayer, before I’d learned of the Higher Imperative, decreed by a dictator.

No moon that night, crickets chirped their usual malaise. I snuck into the kitchen, stood by the drawer where the safety matches lurked, then heard something faint, and looked through windows in the back door into the back porch used for storage—lawn chairs, a second fridge, cardboard boxes leftover from the Disastrous Move, a stack of old newspapers. Inside, it was dark as a womb. Except in a far corner, a dim light wavered from a big packing box. A shadow shifted inside like some giant fetus. I jerked back, locked the door, silently hustled down the hall to my room, slid into bed. Did I doze? After however long I woke to a faint smell like the bonfires in Wisconsin. That

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primitive mix of earth, wood, and heat, but this with a foul chemical tinge. I stalked silently down the hall, the stench and smoke seeping in from under the door to the back room. I stepped to the door, the glass fogged, touched the handle, singed my fingertips, turned and dashed to my room for my cell, called 911, “Fire,” gave the address.

Plenty of time, I told myself, for firemen to quench that infant blaze. For me to save Mother and Father from a little fire.

I knocked on my parents’ door, flipped it open. “Let us sleep,” my father said. “Fire!” I called again, more loudly, “ Fire!” A special authority in shouting “Fire!” as loudly as you can.

Mother instantly leapt up, big and tough and quick, raced down the hall to the saint’s door.

I stood to one side in the hall, a faint flickering in the kitchen by then, what if fire spread to the living room and the carpet lit, was it flame retardant like the saint’s pajamas? My mother burst out of the nursery carrying her infant swaddled in blankets, my father catching up, leading out wife and child. Darker gray swirling beneath the back room door and cloaking the stainless appliances. I could see it all from where I still stood at the mouth of the long hall. Through a gray mist, I saw my mother flip open the hall closet door, snag her mink stole, saw my family drop to hands and knees and crawl as a darker gray shroud spread in. Crawling toward the front door, my mother — one-armed, the infant clutched to her breast, shrouded in her mink stole — seemed like a wide furry animal scurrying across the carpet, furling at the edges, though she commanded loudly, “Stay low! Keep down!”

Yet I still stood at my post. Beneath a burnt orange tinge, my mother’s deep voice. “Do not take one thing. Get out!” The edges of the doorframe to the back room aflame, fire searching for more to burn, sliding toward the living room, the brash cracklings more intense, the smoke darker, I could not hear or see if my family escaped.

Still, I did not move. I imagined them outside, realizing too late, they’d left

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me behind, that I was burning up like Joan of Arc. They'd collapse from grief, sob, beat their chests, feel their Responsibility. But what if at the last moment, a fireman dashed in, a big-boned athletic type, who flung me over his shoulder and whisked me out? But then I remembered my list, and the ten items secured in my backpack in my room at the far end of the hall. How had I forgotten? My pack was evidence. Should I go get it? I stood thinking even as the edges of the living room carpeting lit with liquid orange, but suddenly from the front door, my father's deep voice, barely heard over the crackling, "Cecilia, Cecilia, this way! Keep low!" He had come to my rescue. He wanted me to exist. I held my breath, fell to hands and knees, and crawled beneath a black mass, an orange haze, past a fire I could not see or hear or smell, feeling my way along the front wall to my father's gray bare feet.

Once outside on the front step, I stood, breathed deep. My hands held nothing. Nothing. After all those lists. Dressed in black and white convict pajamas. What would the firemen think? Would they find my lists, call it arson?

But no firemen, no sirens. What was taking them so long? The little fire growing bigger, fat and furious. Where was Mother?

I saw them then, my mother and the saint, inside her Audi at the end of the long drive. My father saying, "It's all right now. Cecilia, you're here. We're all safe."

He still didn't get it.

"Get into my car," my father said. "We might have to drive away fast." I climbed in. Just my father and I in his Buick. Him in the driver's seat. Would we hit the open road? He sat very still. The motor dead. Even, with the car windows up, an acrid fecund stench, singed skin, hair, eyebrows.

We sat and watched our dream house burn with a smoldering glow. I reached out and touched my father's shoulder and said, "Don't worry, Dad, it's all insured."

I thought he would turn to me and say, "You woke us, you saved our lives." He would see me as the heroine at last. *Daughter Saves Her Family's Lives in*

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Late Night Blaze. I'd be interviewed on local radio and TV.

My father shook his head. "My company's going under. Real estate's a bust. I let all the insurance lapse." Hands on the wheel, he bowed his head.

I didn't understand. My father was successful, he was immutable.

I said, "We'll rebuild."

"We've lost everything." Slumped over the wheel, he looked smaller yet, his thin hair ashen, suddenly an old man.

"Don't worry, Daddy, I'll save you."

My father did not react.

Muffled, his mouth pressed into his hands on the wheel, he asked, "Where's Doug?"

"Isn't he with Mother?"

"I shut Doug in the back porch last night," my father said. "He kept waking us up."

And I knew then what the moving shadow was in the dim cardboard womb that I had feared. I had locked the door, sealed off his escape. Doug, too dumb to bark, was ashes. I felt nothing, as I had felt nothing since the fire began, only that cool calm.

Then my father lifted his head and said, "I made a little dog house in one of the empty cartons. Doug howled, so..." He stopped, as if holding back.

"Go ahead, tell me."

And my father confessed, "I made him a bed, lined the carton with newspapers...rigged a light bulb inside the box...plugged the bulb into an extension cord. He must've shoved the papers against the light...or else the cord overheated." He sighed and said, "Don't tell your mother."

I knew I also should confess, should say that I ate match tips, that I'd been burned at the stake, that I often revised my list of What to Take, that I had fervently prayed my brother, not Doug, would sizzle to a crisp. That I had seen a dim light flickering in the back room and did not go in. I should absolve my father of his sin.

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But it was as if I heard my mother's voice, *Don't tell your father.*

And then at last, sirens, and two small fire trucks streaked in past our two cars. How long had it been, longer than I'd ever imagined, as men in black, shiny rubber boots and black coats with yellow stripes jumped out and unfurled black hoses, and suddenly out of the black Audi, my big mother appeared, and still clutching the saint to her breasts, still shrouded in her soot-stained mink and her blackened nightgown, she strode strong and straight to the firemen, and in the spit and glare of flames, she pointed to the front door that they should go in, commanding the firemen, as she had commanded me. Mother, a big strong woman, stronger in emergencies. Mother, our savior. Fire her element. I had been upstaged.

But the firemen did not go inside. They trained their gushing hoses on the huge florid house from outside. And I sensed that all would be lost.

My father climbed out of the Buick. I watched him walk to Mother and the infant and wrap his arm around her wide frame, wider with their baby and the mink. She was a head taller. He seemed to have shrunk.

I sat alone in the passenger seat and watched as flames whooshed out of the roof, windows, doors. And I thought again of the burning bush that did not burn, and after that fire, a still, small voice, but no still voice came to me, only the strident crackle, a dull orange glow inside "unleashed with burning anger, consuming like stubble" all we had owned, no evidence—no backpack, no lists—only ashes and Doug's charred thin bones.

A house fire doubles in size every minute, a fireman told us that night.



We stayed at a local Motel 6. All four of us in one prefab room. We wore donated flannel pajamas. The saint slept, oblivious, in a Red Cross crib. I lay alone in one queen-sized bed and pretended to sleep. My parents lay in the other bed, and in the dark, I heard my sleepless father say, softly, so as not to

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wake me, “Could’ve been faulty wiring in the backroom. It was an accident.” Trying to placate his big wife.

She whispered, “We’ll get through this.” Strong even in the face of disaster. Had to admire her for that . . . for a moment, until she said, “And the baby is safe.”

He said, “Yes. All of us.”

Then Mother asked, “Do you know one thing I already regret?”

“What?” my father asked, hesitant.

“Taking that fur coat.” The room infested with a feral furry smoky stench.

I knew then that she did not suspect my father. That his secret was safe . . . with me. And I knew that my father would never again lecture me in his den.

Beneath the poly bedspread, I secretly smoothed down my pink, floor-length, flannel Red Cross nightgown, as years ago, I’d smoothed down my red velvet robe while playing dress up with Lisa Lucy, back when I’d worn a jeweled crown, and commanded her to bow and to kiss my invisible ring. And to call me Your Majesty.