

The Day the School Burned Down

“I pulled off the expressway as usual at 5:15PM. I had left early but the traffic was very bad, worse than usual.”

“Then I see the smoke, it is near. The fire trucks are everywhere, screaming into place, hoses, and the men, shouting. I can’t get through. I can’t get through.”

“I leave my car and run to see. The school was in the apartment complex up ahead. The smoke was coming from there.”

“I felt my heart thumping faster, I am scared, terrified. Fire is my enemy, my dreaded enemy. I have survived two of them. I know that I will not survive another.”

“I run. I am fighting shock, fighting screaming.”

“The teachers, I see them grouped with the children, but not many of them made it out.”

“Douglas? Douglas? Did he make it out? Is he safe? My baby, my darling, my little son.”

“I’m sorry, they tell me. We couldn’t get to him. He thought it was a game. You know how he always runs Away. He laughed and ran.”

“No! I scream inside. I die inside. I run closer, trip over hoses, push past the busy men. The smoke is heavy, the heat, feel the heat!”

“Stop! They shout at me, I struggle but they hold me firm hands on my arms. Oh God! Douglas! Where are you? Where is my baby, my son!”

“I wrestle. Let me go! I must go! Can’t you see? But they are firm, relentless. Stay back. There is no hope.”

“The flames are building, the roof is going up now, the fire leaps out of windows, long flames beckon me, laugh at me. My son!”

“I think I can hear him. Hot! Hot! His word for anything past lukewarm. A baby voice. He’s only two. Hot! Momma, hot! My mind can hear him. Hear him scream in terror, in fear. My baby!”

“It is him! He still lives. I must go. I struggle again, fierce in my determination. Nothing must stop me.”

“I run. The door is flame. The smoke is higher though the fire is up on the ceiling. I crash through, drop low and turn right. I cannot see, my eyes burn. Hot! It is hot! Searing my lungs. I pull my jacket over my face, I force my eyes to see.”

“The second door has burned away and I stumble through it. My feet burn, my shoes are smoking. Only the water I fell in as I ran saves me, keeps me going.”

“I call, choking, sobbing.”

“Douglas! Douglas!”

“Hot Momma! comes back to me, nearer.”

“I hear him. I listen and I see him alone in the center of the room. The walls ablaze.”

“He is so tiny and the smoke hanging so high – the open window has saved him even as it feeds the fire.”

I run to him, stumbling, half-blind. My clothes, dry now with the heat are beginning to burn. I ignore the pain.”

“I breathe shallow short breaths through the jacket and force my tearing eyes open, force my legs to function.”

“I have him! Clasp him tightly.”

“Pool. Pool. He points to a wall of windows and flame.”

“Debris litters the pool, I swear the water boils.” We have no choice, the roof will go soon.”

“I run for the windows, step on a burning toy truck, and crash through the glass as my hands and arms shield him.”

“He is screaming. My clothes have set him on fire.”

“I leap for the pool, the water is hot, but it’s water. The clothes that had flared went out.”

“Hot! Hot! Ooooh hot! Momma!”

“I see the entryway collapse, the way out a mass of burning timber, lumber burns so hot, so fast.”

“I reach the edge of the pool and see the hose coming, it’s full force. I can’t go against it. I wait a moment. They move the hose to soak the wall.”

“My shoes catch fire now, my nylons long melted off my legs. My clothes catch fire again.”

“I hold him high wrapped in my jacket, force myself to concentrate leap the beam. I must go through this way. I leap the beam. Don’t fall. Don’t fall.”

“Oh God! It’s hot blinding heat searing heat, I can’t breath it hurts so. I hold my breathe.”

“They see me. The hose comes back, gentler but strong, clearing a path.”

“I make it. I hand them my prize. He is quiet. They take him. Quickly. Oxygen. Blood Pressure. He lives, he is not badly burned. I try to scream but I cannot get in enough air to do so. I scream inside my head. I faint.”

“I wake up here.”

The nurse shut of the tape, looking at the two men. The old doctor, who had cared for the woman for 26 years, was about to retire. And the younger doctor, new to the ward, soon to be his replacement. The younger one speaks first. The men ignore her presence.

“The same as last time?”

“The same every time. Every year, on the anniversary of the fire, she records a new tape. She asks to be off the respirator. Otherwise, she never does. There are never any different details. Never any variation. For twenty-six years she’s done this. Otherwise, she never speaks.”

“And the others? The firemen who restrained her?”

“They swear that she never got away from them. Never got inside.”

“Who did?”

“No one was seen going in. Only a few remember who came out. Just suddenly this burned creature handed them the baby.”

“And the woman?”

“She just stood quietly until she fell. They said she just burst into flames at their feet.”

“And the burned creature? A woman? The one with the baby?”

“While they put her out, the other victim vanished. They never found out where she went. There was no one reported missing.”

The younger doctor’s tears were flowing freely. In a trembling voice he softly asked, “Could you take my mother off the respirator for a little while? I’d like to hold her.”