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Burning

Eddie Rastocky refuses to leave the theater until the film projector has been turned off, and he watches the screen with an intensity that matches his love for baseball. Eddie always slides into third, even if it isn't necessary. I like this about him. He also has a chameleon named Sicily that he won at the Pomona County Fair. I've only heard about it; *everyone* in tenth grade at North Hollywood High has heard about it.

Eddie drives me home, and wants to walk me to the door. On the living room window shade my mother's movie-star shadow is frozen, perfect—one hand on hip, the other holding a cigarette. She's waiting up for me. "Maybe we shouldn't go in just yet," I say.

"It sure is cold," he says, blowing on his fingers. I've heard he wants to get his hand up my shirt. For my part, it is necessary that my mother see I can certainly get a date if I want one, that I am a pretty girl, that I will make it without her help.

My mother opens the door in her flowered wrap and fuzzy slippers. She has just taken the rollers out of her hair and it hangs around her shoulders in dark, fat, shiny curls. "Well, hello there," she says, and pulls Eddie inside by the wrist. "You'll catch your death," she says, smiling at him. Our grey poodle, Francie, sniffs at his shoes and sneezes. "Want some soda, Eddie?"

"Yes, please," he says, too earnestly. He is sweating a little; the hair around his face has darkened.

In the cool yellow of the refrigerator I see that someone has drunk nearly all the Coca-Cola I bought yesterday. There are three bottles of tonic water, a tomato and a

package of bologna on the metal shelves, that is all. If I don't go to the grocery store we eat popcorn. Four years ago, when my father died, I became the person who makes dinner, does the dishes, sees that the Christmas tree gets decorated to my mother's ridiculous standards—one strand of tinsel in each space between the needles of the Silvertip pine.

My father drank too much but was a remarkably kind person. On Sundays, when I was younger, we'd pack lunches and drive northwest toward the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains where there were orange groves, though even then some building had begun. My father would tell us how the whole San Fernando Valley used to be farmland, so quiet some days you could hear the waves breaking at Santa Monica beach from twenty miles away. Now the oranges are gone, but around our neighborhood peach, walnut, apricot, and plum orchards stretch to the horizon. The air in spring smells of magnolia blossoms, and along the side of the house, camellias, bougainvillea and azaleas grow without much prodding.

"Joan, will you make me a drink?" my mother calls. I stare at the sparkly stucco ceiling for a moment, then pour her a gin and tonic, pour Eddie the remaining Coke, filling the glass to the rim with seven ice-cubes, and get some water for myself. I put the drinks on the painted metal tray and carry them out. My mother is sitting close to Eddie on the brown, rough-woven sofa, and Francie is leaning against her legs, staring lovingly at her. The flowered wrap has fallen slightly open and I can see her freckled skin and the shadow of her full breasts.

"Thanks, baby," she says, and I smell her sour breath. She's probably been drinking since she got home from work.

"Where's Bill?"

"Post Office. Late shift," she says. "George is out doing whatever it is he does with Joe What's-his-name."

My mother does not expect my brother to check in with her; if she really needs him she'll send the poodle after him. Once Francie found him three miles away, riding his bike on the muddy bottom of the wash near Sepulveda. Francie's almost a legend. My mother can talk about her for hours.

I sit facing them in the high-backed chair. Eddie presses his glass of Coke to his cheek.

"So, you saw a movie?" my mother asks him.

"*Shane*," he says, and nods, rubbing his palm over his knee.

"Anything else I should know about?" she asks, then throws back her head and cackles. "Of course not. Of course not. Not with a shy skinny like Joan." She lights a cigarette and motions toward the end table for her ashtray. Eddie hands it to her quickly, his shoulders slightly hunched, like he's expecting a beating.

"You only wish you were skinny," I say, too quietly to make her angry. She blows smoke into the air between us, not meeting my eyes. Eddie stares at her red mouth; he can't help it.

Everyone says they wish for a mother like mine—beautiful, a little dangerous. At conferences, the one she came to, anyway, she swept in wearing her new fur-collared jacket and flirted with the principal, Mr. Jenks, and my homeroom teacher, who is, everybody suspects, an alcoholic. I don't know what she said to him, but he always asks after her. He says "your mother" as if a little troubled, trying to understand where she is in my face, in my sensibilities.

"I saw you driving the other day, Eddie," she says. "Is that your car?"

"Yes ma'am," he says, looking to me for a moment.

"What kind is it?"

"A Fairlane," he says, straightening up, puffing his chest out a little.

"Did your father teach you to drive?"

Eddie nods and I smile, imagining the first bumbled efforts and his father screaming, “Clutch! Clutch!” My stepfather Bill taught me to drive our Roadmaster, after many unsuccessful tries. He’d grip the side of the passenger door and stare out the windshield as if afraid I would not see the car in front of us, or the woman crossing the street with groceries. He’d smoke half a pack of Luckies before we left North Hollywood.

But Bill is a nice man. Sometimes he’ll sit at the kitchen table while I wash the dinner dishes and sigh, “Joanie, Joanie. You’re a pretty girl but you should eat more. Your mother worries about you being so skinny.”

I do not consider myself a pretty girl, and I don’t try to fake it. My mother thinks I am obstinate for effect, and tells me men like girls who flirt, girls who laugh out loud. This is true, obviously, though maybe I am not looking for men, or even one man. For a long time I wanted most to be a rodeo rider—so daring and agile that no one would even guess I was a girl—but now it would be enough to simply be around horses again. Every Saturday afternoon, for five years, my father drove me to the stables near Griffith Park. He’d sit in the car with a newspaper, and for a blissful hour I rode Tally Ho, the sleek bay mare, on the wooded trails behind Traveltown. Afterwards he’d buy me a soda at the little corner market on Laurel Canyon and let me tell him everything I could think of about my ride, about Tally Ho, about the extreme freedom and wonderful trickles of danger I felt while on the back of a horse. When my father was alive I never worried about my personality. I was Joan, and everyone, including me, seemed to know what that meant.

“You don’t smoke, do you?” my mother asks Eddie, who has finished his Coke and is twirling the glass of melting ice cubes slowly between his palms.

“No ma’am.”

“That’s good,” she says. “Stunts your growth.” She smashes her cigarette into the ashtray and lights another. “I keep telling Joan that, but she still sneaks them.”

“You wish,” I tell her. I have never smoked in my life. To me it is not glamorous, but the reason all our chairs have burns on the armrests, my clothes smell musty immediately after being washed, and the bristles of my mother’s toothbrush are tinted brown. Even the fact that all the movie stars smoke does not make it any less of a dirty habit.

“So what’s that burn on the linoleum?” she continues. “You thought I wasn’t going to notice something like that? Bill says he didn’t do it and your brother would never smoke in the kitchen.”

“Well, if Bill says he didn’t do it, then by all means, believe him instead of your own daughter,” I say, as calmly as I can. Eddie rattles the ice in his glass in time with my mother’s tapping slipper.

“You look like you could use another, Eddie,” she says, as if I am not in the room. Watching her walk toward the kitchen with his glass I remember that there isn’t any more Coke, but I don’t say anything. Francie follows her, the little bells on her collar jingling merrily.

Eddie looks at me and clears his throat. There is a red, blotchy mark on his neck that I hadn’t noticed before. “I had a swell time tonight,” he says, softly. I remember suddenly that he’d worn a clown costume to school for Halloween, and nobody made fun of him except my brother, who has always been a bully. George stepped on the hem of the black cape and made Eddie’s neck snap backwards like a puppet’s.

“I don’t smoke,” I tell him, staring at the scuffed toes of my shoes. “I never have.”

My mother comes back with two full glasses and hands one to Eddie. She watches him. Her raised eyebrows look like they’ve been painted onto her pale skin with a thin brush. Eddie squints, and she smiles, as the gin goes down his throat. “We’re out of Coke,” she says, laughing. “I won’t tell if you don’t,” she says.

“Oh, good, let’s all drink ourselves to death,” I say.

“Watch your smart mouth,” my mother says, half-heartedly, without looking at me. Color is high on Eddie’s cheeks. I think of him telling people how she sat close to him on the couch, her robe falling open when she crossed her legs, and that he could smell her skin, her perfume.

“Would you like to look at some pictures, Eddie?” my mother asks.

“Mom, please?” I say, but she gets the photo album from the large drawer of the coffee table, then holds it open on her knees.

“That’s me,” she says, and I immediately know at which picture she is pointing. I have looked at it many times. She is wearing a black bathing suit, and my father, very young, is kneeling in the sand beside her, hands clasped.

“Wow,” Eddie says.

“I was beautiful when I was young,” she says, smiling over my head.

Eddie flips the pages slowly. “This is you?” he asks my mother.

She nods.

“And this?”

“I was prettier than Joan is. I had so many dates,” she says. “But she’ll age well. She has good bones.”

“Good bones,” I say. “That’s a new one.”

Eddie coughs nervously. Francie jumps onto my lap and licks my hot face.

“Disgusting animal,” I say, shoving her to the floor.

“Joan, don’t scream at the dog,” my mother says. She hands the album to Eddie and walks into the kitchen. I listen to her popping ice cubes from the plastic tray, and singing a bit of “Waltzing Mathilda”—*you’ll come a-waltzing Mathilda with me.*

“Do you still ride horses?” Eddie asks, torn between looking at my face and the pictures in front of him.

“Not much anymore. It’s kind of far.”

“Maybe I could drive you sometime,” Eddie says. “If you want.” He closes the album and crosses his legs. Dirt lines his visible sock, and he notices at the same time I do and covers his ankle with his hand. I don’t feel like talking and have a slick, metallic taste in my mouth.

“Is your brother going to play basketball this year?” Eddie asks.

I shrug and put the tip of my ponytail in my mouth.

“He’s pretty good,” Eddie says.

“He’s pretty stupid,” I say, though I wonder what else he knows about my family. In our neighborhood the boys run wild, throwing green apricots and water balloons at cars, digging battle trenches in the wide vacant lot a few streets away. The long dry grass can be pulled up with the roots still holding clumps of hard dirt, and the boys swing them around their heads before releasing them, like Olympians doing the hammer throw, into enemy camps, or sometimes at little sisters or cats walking on the sidewalk. My brother is one of the fearless ones; I don’t see him much during the long summer days but always hear about his mischief. If he comes home for dinner his fingertips are white and wrinkly and his eyes are bloodshot from swimming in the Smith’s pool. There are no secrets here—when Sally Bernard’s father started screaming at her mother night after night, scaring everyone, the Klusnaks, who lived next door and could hear the fighting, held phone council with a few key people in the neighborhood. The fighting stopped, and has been mostly forgotten about.

My mother, still humming, comes back into the family room and sits down. She calls to the poodle, then looks at Eddie for a long time. He reddens.

“Ignore her,” I say. “Please.”

She asks him about sports and tells him all about my brother, the world’s greatest athlete. “He’s always been so strong,” she says, and Eddie, who probably knows this better than my mother, tells her about the time he and George threw water balloons at a

moving car and got chased seven blocks. Of course she knows this story, everybody does, but it pleases her.

“I remember when your father ran over that kid’s leg,” my mother says, swaying slightly. “Tell me that story.” She strokes the dog’s head and takes large sips of her drink.

“Well, okay,” Eddie says, looking up and squinting at the ceiling as if to summon the memory. “We were messing around in the front yard. My dad was backing out of the driveway and didn’t see that Gary Lasky had fallen off his bike. He ran right over his leg. My mom started screaming, ‘You ran over Gary!’ and my dad panicked and put the car into first and ran over him again.”

“That’s right,” my mother says, laughing. “Horrible. It was horrible.”

But we are all laughing, at the impossibility of the accident and the screaming chaos that resulted. I remember then that it was my dad, out walking our old poodle Francis, who rushed over, picked Gary up and carried him into the house. He was everyone’s hero that day.

“Dad called the ambulance,” I say, “remember?”

“Yes,” she says. “I remember. That was a good summer.” She closes her eyes and seems to lose all her energy, all her anger. I relax a little, thinking she will think about my father and be quiet and sad for a little while.

When my parents drank together it almost made me happy. My father would sometimes tell my mother she looked like a movie star or a beauty queen, and then pick her up and dance her around the living room, the beach, wherever we were. Now I cannot take my eyes from her, and I notice everything, the slight sagging skin below her jaw, the line of eyeliner drawn towards her temple, her garish, flaking lipstick. She is not beautiful. She has not been beautiful for a long time and I never noticed.

She opens her eyes. I look away, but I know she’s caught me. “What are you staring at, Joan?” she asks.

I don’t answer. I am terrified she will cause a scene, throw some kind of tantrum.

“You see something you don’t like?”

“Mom,” I say, “come on.”

Eddie reaches out his hand as if to pat her shoulder, and as he does her face changes, a horrible mix of sorrow and glee. She points at me as if she’s about to say, “ha ha, Joan,” and I see Eddie’s nostrils flare. Suddenly I smell it. She’s peed all over herself, but she doesn’t get up. She covers her face with her hands and starts to laugh, rocking back and forth over her knees. I open my mouth and nothing comes out. My mother and Eddie and the walls and couch shimmer and nearly disappear. Everything is swimming inside me; I know my life is over.

Eddie sits next to her, frozen. “Are you okay?” he asks her, but she shakes his hand off her arm. “What do I do?” he asks, panicked.

“You should go,” I tell him. “I’ll take care of her.”

“I could stay with you,” he says, when we get to the front door.

“No. You should go.” I can’t keep from crying and I wipe my face with my sleeve. “Eddie, please don’t tell anyone,” I whisper.

He pulls on his collar and shakes his head. “I won’t,” he says. “I won’t say anything.”

I rattle the doorknob, wanting him to stay right there, on the porch, forever. “I still haven’t seen your chameleon.”

“He’s dead,” he says, examining the pearled buttons on his shirt. “Mrs. Smith stepped on him.”

“Oh, Eddie. I’m really sorry.”

He closes his jacket around his throat and looks at my eyes, nose, forehead, and mouth. “She was just scared. She didn’t know what she was doing,” he says. Beetles hum in the Chinese elms along the street and Frank Sinatra’s faint voice comes from a faraway radio. Eddie moves a little closer. I can smell the gin on his warm breath. I want him to

put his arms around me and just hold me there, tightly, but neither of us moves. We stand side by side, looking into the dark, not saying anything.

Behind her closed bedroom door my mother is singing quietly to herself, *da da dum, you'll come a-waltzing ...*

“Are you crazy?” I yell, pounding the wood once, hard, with my fist. “What’s wrong with you?”

She doesn’t answer.

“I hate you,” I say, my forehead against the door.

“Just leave me alone,” she says, crying now—a pitiful, naked sound. “Please, just leave me alone.”

I want to comfort her. I want to shake her, hard, until she screams, but I just stand there, scratching a strip of peeling paint away from the wood with my fingernail. “Are you okay?” I whisper, finally.

“Go away, Joan,” she says, and slamming something against the bureau. “Just go.”

I don’t move for a long time, thinking she might change her mind and need me to be there. Francie sniffs the hem of my felt skirt, then sits heavily on one of my feet. I conjure my favorite memory of my mother, a day at the beach when I was five. I’d burned the soles of my feet running on the hot sand and come to my mother in tears. She lay me gently on her soft towel and raised my legs up. “My poor baby,” she said, and poured her cold drink all over my feet, then blew on them. “Now you’re okay,” she said. “Now you’re fine.”

I put my ear to the door. “Mom?” I ask, slowly turning the handle. She is sitting on the floor with a bottle of gin, her back against the bed, knees drawn to her chest. Feathery veins mark her thighs and I can see the tattered lace of her underwear. She sees me looking and doesn’t move. “Mom?” I say.

“Is this what you want?” she asks. She jabs her finger at the dark smudges under her eyes. “This? You want to see me suffer?”

I go to her, kneel beside her. “No,” I tell her, “no.”

“Well, maybe I want to suffer,” she says. “Maybe I deserve it.”

“Maybe you do.”

“Well, maybe I don’t,” she says.

“Come on, get up,” I say. I put my arms beneath her arms and try to lift her. “Get up.”

I manage to get her onto the bed though I can’t get her under the covers. “I’m not tired,” she says, but I push her forehead down until her hair spreads over the pillow and she relaxes. When I put a blanket over her she pulls it to her chin and stretches, then touches the side of my face and keeps her hand there for a long time, looking at me as if I have saved her life, and we will be together forever. She looks at me with love. I stay beside her, watching, until she has fallen asleep.

In the kitchen I get on my knees and search until I find the yellow cigarette burn on the linoleum, near the aluminum leg of the table. With Comet and a wire brush I scrub until the floor whitens, though the stain remains. I sit back and close my eyes. Francie rests her wiry head in my lap and sighs. I sit until the cold comes through my skirt, waiting for my stepfather to come home, thinking about the strength and shine of Tally Ho’s shoulders when we’d run along the dusty trails.

The silence of the house is a steady throbbing in my head. I open my eyes, pick up the Comet and the brush, and try again.

