

I Burned Myself in Sin

Before the fire ate my brother alive, he dreamed of a world where a man could rescue another person without the fear of consequences. He was younger than me by two years, but he acted like my guardian. He worked as a firefighter in the twenty eight division of my home district, and he'd come home from a hard days at work, face sweaty, hands grimy, and tell me all about how his day went, how he wished there was a real event that might preclude him to use a fire hose dead on rather than just acting as if he was on a practice run. There was nothing happening. There were too many false alarms and calls coming out, but no real fire. Until the night of the burning happened, my brother sought danger.

The drought ravaged our backyard. The grassland turned a muddy brown color. No life grew from it. It came to me as no surprise when the hills of our home caught on fire. Somebody had deliberately set it ablaze. Nobody knew who--not even the newscasters airing their nightly report. My mother called on the phone, asking if I was all right. She lived just a few blocks down the road in a two story home. I strained to hear her voice over the phone.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I asked if we should be evacuating.”

“Why on earth would we be doing that for?”

“Isn't the fire coming our way?”

“Mother,” I said, expelling a curt sigh. “That's happening twenty miles away, which is still far away from us.”

“But you never know.”

“Yea, I know that.”

“Is Leonard coming over?” my mother asked with a pause. “How has he been?”

“You can ask him yourself,” I said, irritated at the way she coolly tiptoed around the subject. My mother and Leonard had a falling out because she didn’t like the girl he dated; the fact that they had a child out of wedlock might’ve something to do with it. Mother thought she was trouble. Their daughter’s name was Jolene Parker and she was five-years-old and such a cutie pie rascal. My mother tried to sabotage their relationship all the while wanting desperately to be in Jolene’s life. You can’t take your cake and eat it, I told her one time.

“If I have cake in one hand, I’ll eat it,” she replied.

“It’s a figure of speech, Mother.”

“Oh, don’t think I don’t know that,” she said, setting the roast pork aside on the dinner table. She had come over to deliver a home cooked meal for Memorial Day. She always did this with less than conspicuous attention. “Get your brother to take the restraining order off of me. You’re the one who can put some sense into him.”

“Mother, you don’t have a restraining order on you. He just said that scare you.”

My mother stood next to the table and sat down. She touched her forehead and fidgeted her fingers, playing with a rubber band. The hair band had a Hello Kitty face on it.

“I got this for Jolene,” she said. Were those tears in my mother’s eyes? I was confused and alarmed; crying wasn’t my mother forte—it was something she seemed incapable of doing, yet here she was batting her eyelashes, sniffing, doing her best to expunge her red-rimmed eyes.

I shrugged my shoulders. “Well, I’ll let Lenny know.”

“Can you give it to him and tell him it’s for Jolene?”

“Sure, I can do that,” I took the hair band and placed it in my bag. The roast pork steamed from underneath the aluminum foil of the saucepan. My mother waved a hand through, flapping the vapors away. She inhaled deeply, sighing, and mentioned to give some to my brother and not to forget even if he didn’t like pork for health reasons.

“I’ll try,” I said. “I can’t promise anything. The last time you sent your famous recipe, he didn’t touch it.”

“I can imagine. It’s that damn lover of his—convincing him eating pork isn’t good. We lived off pork, you remember, even as a young child.”

“I’ll have most of it,” I said. That was the end of that discussion. Just as I had imagined, he didn’t want any of it. This occurred seven weeks ago, before the blaze took my brother away in a flaming chariot.

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On the day he went to fight the fire hugging the hills and scorching the shrubs, he knocked on my front door. It was a quarter to one. I had just finished a typical conversation with my mother over the phone; I thought it was her dropping by for another visit, but saw my brother loafing around at the entrance. He had Jolene at his side, and a fatigued expression crossing his face. He propped his daughter on the crook of his arm, picking her up.

“Can I come in?”

“Everything all right, Lenny?” I asked.

“Yeah, it’s fine,” he said with downcast eyes, then bounced Jolene on his arm. “Say hi to your auntie, Jo.”

“Hi, Auntie.”

“Hi, Jolene. How’s the little rascal doing?”

Jolene giggled and stuck a thumb in her mouth.

“What are you doing here?” I said, turning to Leonard as he walked in the entrance. I stepped aside, and he passed me by, treading down the foyer toward the living room.

“Thought she would change,” he said as he brought Jo down to her feet. He stooped low and brushed the bangs out of her eyes and fixed her spaghetti strap.

“Eva again? What’s she been up to now?”

“Hey, Jo, can you stay here for a moment? You can watch your favorite cartoon show,” he said, pressing the button on the remote. The television snapped on and a rainbow unicorn flew through the air.

“Okay, daddy,” she answered, jackknifing her legs up and down. She slowly placed a well worn thumb in her mouth.

“And no sucking,” Leonard said. He traversed into the kitchen area and I followed. Under his breath, Lenny whispered said five shocking words which left me stunned. “We might lose the house,” he said.

“Is the fire near your area?”

“No. It’s down lower south.”

“Then what happened?” But I already knew the answer. His girlfriend was an addict; she tossed in chips like they were discounted earrings.

“She swiped my card without my knowledge. I told her time and time again, not to use it, but she *had* to just pay for that online poker. I don’t get it. Why can’t she leave it alone?”

“How many chances have you given her?”

“Way too many to count.”

“You can’t change a person,” I said, touching his shoulder. “Their natural habits are fixed for a reason. As a young child, they haven’t been taught the proper way for coping.”

“It’s killing me. Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“You can stay here if you want,” I assured him and gave him a hug. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t be stressed out when you have a work to accomplish.” I fetched the Hello Kitty hair band out of my wallet. “Here, this is for your daughter. It’s from mom. Everything will be all right, brother.”

“Maybe, my mom was right.”

“They both have issues,” I corrected him. “You shouldn’t have let her borrowed your card.”

“I didn’t,” he said, “she forged a signature under my name.”

“Did she say anything beforehand?”

“No. It’s what she didn’t say that worried me. I don’t know what I’m going to do with this debt. We’re at the brink.”

“How much is it?”

“50k.”

He loved her, but it looked like he was at the end of his threshold. What a bitch, I thought. A conniving fucking gold-digger.

“Divorce?”

“I don’t know yet.”

“I’m so sorry, Lenny. I don’t know what to say. I’m here for you if you need anything.”

“No, it’s not your fault. I just came by to drop off my daughter. I have to go back to work,” he inhaled harshly, choking up. “But I don’t think I can be with her anymore. She only cares about herself.”

Yea? I screamed inside my head. It took you that long to realize that? Finally, he sees the light.

“Yes, she’s spoiled.” I didn’t have anything else to say so I remained quiet.

“Thank you,” he whispered, and hugged me again. “I have to go, duties calling. I’ll be back, honey.” He said to Jo and went up to battle the smoke and fire. As the sun dipped beyond the valley peaks, I never realized that would be the last I saw of him.

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I could see smoke cloud rising off into the horizon. It was a real fire burning low cutting a path through the hills. A blazing inferno raced down the basin through the canyon ridges as the flames reached my home.

* * *

When you see a person crying, does your heart go out to them? Something about watching the red eyes and the sniveling of a person who’s trying to keep herself together, you wonder, you ask questions. It’s a human emotion where everybody wants to know why.

* * *

“What will I do with the photos?” My mother asked. After my brother passed away firefighting the fire that destroyed the terrace, back porch, and left me running with Jolene in my black pickup truck, roaring across a red stained sky and ashes that fell, my mother remained holed up in her townhome unable to recover from his disappearance.

She left all the photos of Leonard up and memorabilia hanging on the wall. Sometimes she *talked* to him, during the day, asking him question as if he was right there to answer.

“Mom, stop talking foolish.”

“Can I come by?”

“Yeah, you know you’re more than welcome.”

* * *

I left. I couldn’t stand the memories overcrowding and the idea that I could never talk to my brother again so I had to leave. I purchased a home not too far away—only a few miles—

Leonard had received a call from his mother just before he went into thwart a fire from engulfing the side of the valley that linked to his mother’s community. She called him to say she was trapped on a local intersection and that there was no way for her to escape.

What Leonard failed to realize was that his mother was in a different location then where he presume she was. When Lenny went to combat the fire, the fire came on him from three sides. He was stopping the moving fire with his body. The fire veered off to the side, flanked up a hill, and came roaring down to light up my neighborhood.

The dreams still followed me. In them he was reading a book next to the fireplace with a crucifix in one hand. He had black hair, blackened fingernails, and smoldering irises that shone golden ringlets of despair. The fire blazed, throwing light on his face, and, as the flames shot higher, the book in his hand also caught on fire, letting off sparks like a red inferno. He twisted in his chair, mouth frozen in a grimace. And out of that charred mouth, a guttural sound issued from deep within his throat, saying, “You left me to die, sister. It’s *all* your fault. You left me—”

I awoke sweaty in my bed. I huddled in the corner and cried.

He never knew how close he was to losing his daughter. I almost lost my life with her. Through his heroic act, we lived. A band of three that were supposed to survive, Leonard perished in the fire. He went to save his buddies and never returned. I saved every picture and objects that reminded me of him for Jolene.