

Confession of a Fire-Eater

My first memory is not of the evacuation down to the beach, though I told people it was. I told this to the Fire Chief Ron Hadey. I told it to Mildred Shrapp one rainy day, when she stopped by with something good to eat, something oven-baked in a tin that did not have to be returned. I told it to the nuns at school until they began to suspect I had something more to tell.

My first memory is of Joseph putting a match to a pile of hay up at the top of Boney Ridge at the end of Yerba Mala Road, by an outcropping we call *Los Payasos* because it resembles two clowns sitting back-to-back, or sometimes we call it *The Backward Boots*.

I wore a blue dress the color of dust with a long tear in the front hem that I stepped on and through. The red gas can sat beside me in the truck, smelling rich and dirty and intoxicating. I could breathe it down to my toes. Crawling to the lip of the truck I knelt on the corrugated floor. The pain felt like needles shooting into my knees. I wanted to see what Joseph was up to, making a racket in the brush. Looking down over the lip of the truck I found big spots of oil soaking into the earth like fat balloons. The dry chaparral surrounding me glistened with black beads of gasoline. The heat steamed off the brittle brush and the wet black jewels.

My second memory was of the caravan, old cars and rusted Cadillacs winding slowly down the side of the mountain with everything--beds, fish tanks, all tied up loosely to the roofs of the cars. The fire came too hot and too fast. Sometimes a fire gives you time to think and react intelligently, to strategize and save your house, but this was not that kind of fire. This was duck-and-run, a forced evacuation down to the beach.

Through the car windows I saw televisions and piles of tools. I saw dresser drawers thrown hastily inside. We arrived and crowded into the beach parking lot like a wagon train.

The dogs tore loose and ran on the beach while the cats scratched and wailed inside their cardboard boxes. The men cried out nervously, dancing across the pavement with their horses stamping on short leashes. And the women moved slowly from their car seats, calling out to each other like ladies from the Welcome Wagon.

"Come on now, Catherine!" Mildred called out across the beach. In the bed of my father's truck I knelt painfully, needles in my knees, spying on my mother.

Catherine tripped in the sand, nervously peeling off her clothes to expose her doughy white skin, her chubby rings of fat and her large, unflattering breasts like sad balloons. Her fat bottom certainly looked like an enormous moon. My mother ran and jumped in the surf, and when the wave pulled back she sat with her legs out in front of her and swirled like a leaf in a drain.

Walking painfully in a crippled hip-hop, Mildred stooped to gather my mother's clothes piece by piece off the sand. She waved Catherine's brassiere like a flag.

"Joseph!" Mildred called out across the beach. "Come here now! Do something about your damn wife!" Mildred laughed as if most things, however awful, were really funny. I squeezed my hands over my mouth and laughed desperately. At the time I believed I would grow up to be "special" just like them. But that was not the worst of it. I also believed, loving fire the way I did, feeling I could not get enough of its catastrophic power, that I would grow up to be worse than Joseph. I was learning from the master; I would exceed him in every way, of this I felt certain, unless I could find a way to ditch him, disown him as a father and disown them all--pretend I never even knew them, and turn away when I saw them in the street.

"Come on now, Mister!" Mildred's voice rose and cracked and disappeared on the wind, and

then she walked off shaking her head.

I spied over the lip of the truck.

"Joseph, Goddamn it!" The Fire Chief, Ron Hadey, walked up out of the smoke. He walked in my mind just like Jesus from the clouds. He was a distant cousin of mine, many times removed, descended from an old Romani woman from Bohemia. Catherine has said to me many times, almost as a warning, "Whatever you do, don't tell the Fire Chief he is your cousin. He gets ugly. Don't say nothing. He hates us."

As I spied on him from the bed of the truck he looked bleary, with smudges of ash in his hair. His crew cut sat up like porcupine quills. A wide tear ran under the arm of his plain blue uniform.

"Joseph Stone!" he screamed, turning himself around in circles. Joseph stood on the dark side of the parking lot, looking inquisitively toward Ron Hadey. I tried to point my father out to Ron but it was not necessary because Ron, jerking around, caught sight of my father and shuddered, throwing something down hard on the ground, a charred strip of metal like a petrified snake. It skated along the parking lot. It nicked Joseph in the bare feet and he hopped over it.

"There you go buddy!" Ron screamed at my father's head. "That's all that's left of the Christian Science Church!" Ron shook. There was a bad twitch in his eye.

My father stared down and smiled. He shrugged and grinned stupidly. There was a childish delight in his embarrassment. With shy hesitation, he managed to speak for the first time in years. "Ron," he tried to say in a small, quiet voice, "I didn't have nothing to do..."

But Ron Hadey cut him off. "What kind of a jack-ass fool do you think I am, Mister? You're not so stupid you don't see that everybody, all these good people, are pointing right at you!" and he turned and swept his arm in the torn sleeve at the old people of Malibu, sitting in a row of

folding chairs on the beach.

"Give him hell, Ron!" somebody yelled, shaking his fist, and Ron started. He looked off toward the beach in a daze. Then he turned back to Joseph. He pointed his arm like a rifle at my father's head.

"I don't know how but I'm gonna get you, buddy. And when I do I hope they put you away for good. And if they don't I will personally come and I will snip off that fire-breathing prick of yours myself!"

"You tell him, Ron!" said an old woman, laughing and shaking her head, and Ron turned, catching me staring at him from the bed of the truck. For a moment he glared at me as if to say, "What the hell you looking at!" Then he climbed in his big fire truck and drove away.

I waited for my parents to collapse asleep on the sand. Then I crawled out of the truck. I joined the crowd of old people with their backs to the fire. The Old People of Malibu. They were a special breed, Mildred Shrapp was one of them, with soft scribbled faces and hands like twisted roots. They lived to be one hundred, one hundred and twenty, one hundred and fifty years old. They claimed it was something in the wind that blew constantly in the old days when Malibu still looked like an empty planet, grassy and windswept, not littered yet with palm trees and hideous mansions like beached, adobe whales.

Together we watched the black ocean and the white, thundering surf as the ash rained down all around us. I let myself be passed from one to another, old hands fixing my crooked hanging clothes, wiping smudges of ash off my face, pulling gum and hay out of my hair. Everyone having a little concern, I knew, for the child whose parents were not right in the head. Which was fine with me. Half asleep in Mildred's lap I listened as they spoke about the other fires they had

escaped. They would escape this one too, just as they had escaped the others. It was wrong to worry about the fire coming, or one's possessions. It showed you were made of straw. "You can't take it with you!" someone said, and they all laughed. And I joined them, feeling warmly embraced by strangers. Feeling briefly that my parents were just some riff raff on the beach; they would wash out with the tide and someone else, maybe a movie star, would take me in.