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## After the Fire

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## AFTER THE FIRE

Her eyes blinked and twitched. Her hands flew to cover them in reflex. Slowly she opened her eyes, struck by the shaft of early morning light which had reached through the window to gently nudge her awake and warmly welcome her to this new day.

She gazed around the room to get her bearings and her eyes came to rest on a tiny cone of light glowing on her desk. She fumbled for her glasses on the nightstand. She put them on and pulled herself up to rest on one arm.

Now she could see that the glimmer was the remains of a candle she had lit the night before.

Funny how dim and pathetic it seemed in this pure morning light, she thought. In the darkness of the night it had seemed such a force, so full of life. It had danced, flickered, and lit the whole room, defining with its intricate pattern of illumination and shadow the shape and character of every object in it. The glow of that candle had fascinated her so. It had seemed so mysterious, so intense.

But somehow this morning it was not the same. It was overwhelmed by the light of the sun. Its brilliance had dimmed in its revealing floodlighting. It just burned slowly and meekly in the bottom of its holder.

She was surprised it had kept burning through the night. Perhaps that had tapped its energy.

Then she came to a realization. It might have set fire to something and burned down the whole house. Oh, wouldn't Mother be furious if she knew! She had always taught her to think of safety first. Mother was always saying to blow out a candle when leaving a room because next time you turn around, before you realize it has happened, your whole life could go up in smoke.

She jumped out of bed and ran to blow it out. That was better. There was no danger now and Mother would never know. Besides, it had been such a sorry sight that she was beginning to feel a little depressed, despite the pleasant morning light.

This childhood memory was what flashed through her mind at that moment when she was again awakened by the morning

sun and rolled over to see the great fleshy mass beside her.

She fumbled for her glasses in the drawer of her nightstand so as to get a better look at this souvenir of the evening before. There he lay, his body rising and falling with every snoring breath.

Somehow, basking in this shaft of early morning light, his stubble-covered face half-buried in the pillow, he seemed a dim remnant of the thrilling man she had gone to bed with the night before. That night he had seemed such an electric presence, so fascinating in both body and mind. Her whole world, for a time, had seemed to revolve around this man. But this morning he was nothing more than an ordinary guy sleeping off a drunk. She hardly knew him and all of a sudden it seemed there wasn't much to know.

She was intrigued that he had stayed all night. A lot of times that never happened. It must be a rough experience, she thought, because they always look drained and dull like this.

This had happened many times before and every time she had been quick to end it in the morning. Entanglements like this can really mess up one's life. She always snuffed it out before it became a problem.

Safety first, you know. Mother had taught her well.

Now she had to decide if she was going to snuff this one out, too. She stared at his sorry state for a moment. It would be a load off her mind.

Perhaps, however, this time she would take a chance. Maybe it was time she was disobedient – no, independent – and took some risks. Maybe she should let this thing burn. Let it burn with all it's got until it burned out completely.

She just didn't know. She wished there were someone to tell her.

And she rolled out of bed and trudged toward the kitchen to start the coffee.

*Laura Grace Pattillo*