
Fir Na Tine

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Greg Schweinfurth was her first Fir Na Tine. Fourth grade, June of 1973, and the morning was so hot that after just fifteen minutes of recess Lisa Sheldon's pink polyester pants clung to her damp skin and made her thighs itch. She was retrieving a soccer ball from the corner of the playground when she saw Greg vomit fire into a trash barrel.

"It's okay," Greg said, wiping his lips with the back of his hand. "It happens--"

Flames shot from his mouth again. Lisa sprinted toward the school, her sandals slapping against the asphalt. She dodged crowds of boys and girls and skidded to a stop at the picnic bench set aside for teachers.

"Miss Flaherty! You have to come see!"

Miss Flaherty frowned. "What did we say about loud voices, Lisa?"

"Greg's throwing up fire. I saw him!"

"Fire? Where, child?"

Lisa led her back to the spot, but Greg was nowhere to be seen. Miss Flaherty poked around the inside of the barrel and asked, "What fire? I don't see anything."

"It was coming out of his mouth!"

Mrs. Flaherty folded her arms. "Little girls shouldn't tell fanciful stories."

Lisa stomped her foot. "I'm not making it up!" But when she told her parents and sisters they didn't believe her either. A few days later school ended for the year and the Schweinfurth family moved away from Massachusetts. Lisa never saw Greg again.

###

"Smell that?" Lisa whispered. Six years had passed since that day on the playground. She had grown breasts and started her period. She liked disco dancing and glittery nail polish and hadn't been enjoying the family trip to Florida until this particular evening in Key West. "That's pot."

"You're too young for that," her sister Meg whispered back. Meg was only a year older than Lisa but thought she was the queen of knowing everything because she'd already kissed three different boys.

Their older sister Jill, her face protected by a wide-brimmed hat, leaned close. "What are you two whispering about?"

"Girls, look." Lisa's father pointed down the seaside pier to a man juggling fire. "Remember, don't try that at home."

Lisa asked, "Can I go watch, Mom?"

"Don't get lost," her mother said.

She jostled her way through the crowd to stand closer to the juggler. Tall, sinewy and bare-chested, he had a bald head and wore a silver hoop in his left ear. Heat poured off his torches along with the smell of burning gas.

"People ask me how I learned to do this," the juggler said to the crowd. "One third-degree burn at a time."

He pretended to almost drop one. The people around Lisa let out a nervous sound and backed away, but she stood her ground. The juggler caught two

of the torches in his left hand and then deftly plunged the third down his throat. When he pulled it out the flame was extinguished. He blew out a long stream of air and fire shot up into the sky.

Lisa joined the crowd in loud applause. "Don't be too impressed," said a barefoot teenager at her elbow. His pooka shell necklace gleamed against his tan, and his blond hair had been bleached nearly white by the sun. "If he was really good, why work down here at the end of nowhere for crappy tips?"

Lisa cocked her head as the audience moved on to other performers. "What do you know about it?"

The boy smirked. "There are people who do tricks, and people who really have fire inside them. See?"

He snapped his fingers and produced a small blue flame. Lisa reached toward it, felt genuine heat, and pulled her hand away.

"It's a trick," she said. "You coated your fingers with gas and used a hidden lighter."

"Maybe. But isn't it more fun to believe in magic?"

He leaned forward and kissed her. Heat shot from her lips to her hips. He was burning hot--drenched by sun, baked by it, burned by it all the way to his bones, and for a few fevered seconds she thought maybe he was made of the same fiery atoms as the sun itself. Something unfamiliar stirred deep inside her, a wild and wonderful spasm that shook her insides and then faded, leaving her weak-kneed and off balance.

The teenage boy searched Lisa's expression as if hoping to find something. She could only gape at him, dumbfounded, as an aftershock made her shudder.

"Mom," she heard Meg say, "Lisa's kissing strange boys."

He melted away into the crowd. Lisa never saw him again, but that kiss--ah, that kiss! She sought a repeat of it throughout high school, aching to find another boy with the sun in his bones. By the middle of her freshman year at

Boston University she had kissed dozens of boys, none of whom held a candle to Key West Boy. By day she concentrated on staying on the Dean's List. By night she combed the bars on Commonwealth Ave, looking for someone with sparks in his eyes and fire between his fingertips.

"You sure this guy in Key West was really that good?" her roommate Beth asked one night after they'd both drunk too much.

Dizzy, Lisa leaned her forehead against the window of their high-rise dorm room. The lights across the river in Cambridge looked like stars, always twinkling out of reach. "You can't possibly imagine."

Beth burped. "And what if you never find someone like him again?"

"Not an option," Lisa said.

Sophomore year she dated a fellow history major who seemed so enthralled by the Great Boston Fire of 1872 that she let him take her to bed. For years she would remember him grunting, "Here? Are you sure?" between sheets that smelled like potato chips. Not the experience she'd hoped for, certainly. Maybe Key West Boy had been an illusion brought on by the tropical heat or pot fumes. She almost began to lose faith. Then, in the autumn, she took a Modern European History seminar and met Steven Hogan. Tall, dark-haired and intensely serious, he came late the first day, tried to slip into the seat beside her and accidentally brushed her arm.

Warmth flashed up her arm to the base of her skull. Lisa immediately lost track of the professor's lecture and swiveled in her chair. Steven had ducked his head over his notebook but when he finally looked up she gave him a smile full of promise and innuendo. He blushed and turned away. Not easily deterred, she was ready for him when class ended.

"Aren't you Phil Guarneri's roommate?" Lisa asked.

He shook his head and stuffed his notebook into a frayed green backpack.

"Maybe we met last Christmas. The History Department social?"

Steven headed for the door. "I'm a Spanish major."

On Thursday he came late again. After class she asked, "Didn't we meet at the Student Union? You borrowed money for the vending machine."

He gave her a sideways look. "That wasn't me."

The weekend dragged by. She dreamed of Key West Boy's kisses and woke in damp sheets with an ache her fingers couldn't satisfy. At the end of class on Tuesday she asked, "Didn't we meet at the movies last month? That new Michael J. Fox one?"

Steven looked perplexed. "We haven't met."

She offered her hand. "I'm Lisa."

After a moment he took it. Heat poured down her hand into her whole body, and she smiled.

###

Their first date was pizza and soda at a little campus cubbyhole. Steven was busy with the track team and a part-time job, but she wrangled a second date out of him and then a third. He walked her back to her dorm, both of them perspiring in the heat of Indian summer. Students crowded the sidewalk under the not-so-dark sky and cars were double-parked up and down Bay State Road. The aroma of grilling hamburgers hung heavy in the air, along with auto exhaust and the muddy smell of the river.

She asked, "Would you like to come up? My roommate's staying with a friend."

"I shouldn't." Steven studied his shoes. "There's stuff you don't know about me."

"We can just talk," she said.

Once upstairs, Lisa put Fleetwood Mac on the turntable and lit the rose-

scented candle on her dresser. She draped a red scarf over the table lamp. Steven sat stiffly on the edge of her bed and tried to move away when she put a hand on his knee.

"I know what's inside you," she said.

Steven's voice cracked. "I don't know what you mean."

She told him about Greg Schweinfurth and Key West Boy, the latter not in lurid detail. Steven's gaze remained fixed on her face, relieved but still wary.

"You're like them, aren't you?" she asked.

"You tell me," he said, and kissed her, and pleasure sang through her body. She had found the sun again.

###

By Halloween she was spending weekends at the small apartment Steven shared with nerdy Alan, an engineering major who was usually hunched over the green and black screen of an Apple IIe computer. Steven had slept with girls before, he told her, but in bed he was tentative, almost unsure.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said.

"You won't," Lisa told him.

She bought a copy of the Kama Sutra, ignoring the wide-eyed interest of the bookstore clerk. They leafed through the pages together, tried a few positions, and ended up nearly breaking the old springs of Steven's bed. More than once the neighbors pounded on the walls. Lisa walked around campus in a permanent afterglow, daydreaming about the bright flares of Steven's kisses, the heat in his hands, the way he made her simmer with pleasure. Orgasms made her see explosions of red and blue so fierce that her eyes felt damaged afterward.

"When did you first know you had this thing inside you?" she asked one Sunday morning as they shared bagels and the Sunday newspaper.

Steven was sitting up in bed, profiled by the gray daylight falling through the room's only window. "When I was two years old, I burned down our house in Newport."

Lisa blinked. "You did? How do you know?"

"My parents told me. The fire started in the nursery, they didn't smoke, and there were no electrical problems. We lost Grandma's piano, Dad's war collection, things that couldn't be replaced."

"But no one saw it happen, did they?"

"They knew it was me." He put the sports section aside. "There'd been fires before--little ones when I didn't get what I wanted or I was hungry or something. When my brother was born they said if there were any more, I'd have to go live in an orphanage."

Lisa imagined a small boy trembling as his parents threatened to take away all he knew and loved. "That was wrong."

"It didn't stop the fires, but it stopped me from telling anyone about them." Steven gazed out the window. "I used to collect stories about people who burned up in their armchairs for no good reason. You ever read those stories? Maybe the fire got out of them. They all of a sudden lost control."

"You don't lose control," she said.

Steven snagged the travel pages. "Not usually."

He planned to take a year off after graduation in the spring, perhaps to tour and live in Spain, and then return to Boston to get his master's degree. Though Lisa told herself they were awfully young to wed, she thought maybe they could live together when he came back. Through the holidays she made secret plans for their future, but one evening at the beginning of March she was sitting by the library windows when Steven crossed the quad holding another girl's hand. Lisa rose to her feet, her notes sliding to the

floor, and watched as the blonde hooked her hand around Steven's head and pulled him into a passionate kiss.

For several moments she could do nothing but stand in shock, her limbs like ice. Blindly she gathered her notes and ran back to her dorm, arriving breathless and teary-eyed.

"He wouldn't do that to me, would he?" she asked Beth.

Beth's face showed a curious mix of compassion and relief. "All those nights you spent apart, and you didn't get suspicious?"

After an hour's worth of tears Lisa grabbed her coat. The night was bitterly cold, the campus hushed as students crammed for mid-terms. Lisa kept her head down against the wind and reached Steven and Alan's apartment just after ten o'clock. She saw the three of them, Steven and Alan and the girl, drinking beer in the kitchen. She pushed their buzzer so hard her finger ached.

"Yeah, who's there?" Alan asked over the intercom.

"It's Lisa. I know Steven's there."

Silence. She tried to imagine what lies they were concocting.

"Lisa, he's kinda busy--"

"He's a fucking asshole! Tell him to get down here."

More silence. She kicked at the ice-encrusted phone books that had been left in the doorway and pushed the buzzer again. She would stand there all night if she had to, keep them awake, wake the neighbors, cause the police to come, it didn't matter--

Steven appeared on the stairs, nearly stumbling in a pair of unlaced boots. His hands shook as he unlatched the door. "Lisa, what's wrong?"

"What am I, the idiot girlfriend? The one for when you have nothing better to do?"

"It's not that bad--"

"It's not that bad? You fuck her and it's not that bad?" Lisa punched him in the arm and stalked away. Steven dogged her footsteps, his voice high and quick.

"Will you please stop--" Steven pulled her to a stop. "I can explain!"

"I hate you," she said, her face wet and cold.

"I have to do it." He hadn't put on a coat, and she could see him shiver. "It's too much inside me. It builds and it builds, and I get scared that I can't control it. If I'm only with you, you'd get hurt."

"You are so full of shit." Lisa broke his grasp and dashed across the street. A driver beeped at her and she gave him the finger. Steven didn't follow her, but she felt his gaze burning into her back as she hurried away.

Back at the dorm, her phone rang every ten minutes until Beth yanked it out of the wall. The next day Lisa walked around raw and wounded, sure that everyone on campus could see her humiliation. She started crying in Philosophy class and had to excuse herself. She cried again while eating lunch and abandoned a whole tray of food. When she returned to her dorm a dozen roses were waiting for her. She threw the bouquet into the trash.

"Come on," Beth said. "Let's drown your sorrows."

Three bars and eight beers later Lisa vomited on a grimy restroom floor and let Beth haul her into the cold night air. A trolley chugged by, the noise of it making Lisa's head throb. When they stumbled back to the dorm Steven was waiting outside.

"Stay away," Lisa said.

"She's in no condition to talk to you," Beth said.

"I just--" Steven's voice caught. "I want to make it right."

Lisa said, "Liar." To Beth she added, "Best sex you'll ever have, and then they break your heart."

She might have said more, maybe even thrown in Key West Boy, but in the morning, hungover with bile in her throat, the memories escaped her. She stumbled to the shower and tried to eat, but finally curled up in bed with a cold cloth draped over her head.

"You look pathetic," Beth said when she returned in the late afternoon.
"How do you feel?"

"Lukewarm dead. Did I totally humiliate myself last night?"

"I don't know if you humiliated yourself, but you did a number on him. You shouted up and down the street that he burned down his parents' house. Is that true?"

Lisa pulled her pillow over her head. "Shit."

On Sunday she took a campus shuttle to the athletic center for the last big event of the indoor track season, where almost fifty teams had gathered to compete. Whether Steven sensed her presence or was simply scanning the large audience, she didn't know, but his gaze locked on her and she forced herself not to squirm. He looked away, his lips tight, and then took his position. When the race started he took off down his lane faster than she had ever seen him run. He was a blur as he circled round the far end of the track, and when he crossed the finish line he'd shattered the school record.

The crowd was still applauding when Lisa noticed smoke rising from his sneakers, fine gray wisps of burning rubber.

Someone by the judge's bench pointed his finger. Lisa heard a shout and then a yell, and someone dumping a cooler of water over Steven's feet. She went down to the railing but a guard asked her to stand back and she could only chew on her thumbnail while the competition paused and confusion reigned. When the races ended for the day she intercepted Steven in the parking lot. He came out with a few friends, all of them ribbing him about setting the track world on fire. When they were gone Steven stood awkwardly beside her and fidgeted with the strap of his bag. The sun had finally come out, weak and small in the spring sky.

"I'm sorry for what I said," she told him. "I was out of line."

Steven only shrugged.

Lisa looked down at his feet. "Did you burn yourself?"

"No. Not even blistered." He stared across the street. "Lisa..."

"You only need me," she blurted out. "No other girls."

"It won't work."

"If it gets too much you can take care of it yourself," she said. "Masturbate."

His ears turned red. "It's not the same."

"If I mean anything to you, you can at least try."

Try they did, for the rest of that month. Steven didn't stray, as far as she could tell. Sex became better than ever, so good it almost hurt to simply gaze on him, but a curious lassitude began to steal over her. She did poorly on two papers. Despite the cold spring weather she slept with the windows wide open and the blankets tossed aside. Her concentration fragmented into little sparkling bits and her skin tight and hot, as if she had an invisible sunburn.

"Lisa, it's me that's doing this," Steven said one afternoon as she lay listlessly on his sofa. He put a cold cloth on her forehead. "We can't stay together this way."

"Don't be silly," she said. "It's just the flu."

The physicians at the student clinic couldn't find make a diagnosis. She took cold showers, sucked on cups full of ice cubes and ate pint after pint of vanilla ice cream. She craved Steven's touch more than ever, but one evening he entered her and the heat was so intense she got lost in the fire. She woke with two paramedics standing over the bed.

"You had a seizure," they told her.

At the hospital they ran tests that revealed nothing. "Fever of unknown

origin," the E.R. doctor decided, and after a couple hours of observation discharged her with instructions to follow up with the campus clinic. Steven arranged for a cab to take them back to his apartment. She got out first and saw a man standing in the doorway of Steven's building as if waiting for someone. He was in his late thirties, dark-haired, with a square face and square jaw.

"Who's that?" she asked.

Steven finished paying the cab driver. "Who?"

Lisa nodded her head but the man was already moving away down the sidewalk, in a hurry to be somewhere else. In the doorway Steven bent to pick up a piece of folded newspaper.

"I think he dropped this." Steven unfolded it and blanched. "It's about what happened at the track meet last month. My sneakers."

Lisa gazed down the sidewalk, but the man had disappeared. "Maybe he's a reporter."

"Coming around at midnight?" Steven shook his head but said no more. He ushered her upstairs and sat her in an armchair while he changed the bed sheets. Alan was tapping away on his keyboard in the other room, tap-tap-tap, and she wondered what was so damn engrossing about computers.

"Come on, get some rest." Steven pulled her into his bedroom. She lay with the window open, streetlight substituting for moonlight, and he sat in the corner with his knees drawn to his chest.

"It's not you," she murmured, but they both knew it was a lie. The next day she went back to her dorm room and crawled into bed. On their third day apart her fever broke.

"We have to find a way to be together," she said to Steven on the phone.

"You think you love me, Lisa, but there's more to love than just sex," he said.

"It's not the sex!" she protested. It was the fire. It was touching the sun, and

being touched in return.

"Goodbye, Lisa," he said. Three weeks later he graduated, and four months after that she got a letter postmarked from New London, Connecticut. He had dropped plans of graduate school and become a firefighter instead.

"Fighting fire with fire," he wrote, and signed it, "Love always, Steven."

###

After her own graduation Lisa took a job working for her aunt in the Elders Affairs department at Melrose City Hall. Her job consisted of fielding complaints from senior citizens and connecting them to various city or state resources. The work was rewarding and sometimes interesting, and within a few years she took over her aunt's position. A few years after that she became the director of a small non-profit that serviced seniors across the county.

She lived alone in the second-floor apartment of an old Victorian with a Scottish terrier and rooms crammed full of heavy cherry furniture inherited from her grandmother. The men she took to her four-poster bed often admired the woodwork and craftsmanship. She dated no one longer than a month or so, but considered her romantic life no worse than that of her sisters. Meg married at twenty-six and divorced three years later with a toddler and a newborn to care for. Jill moved to San Francisco and announced she was a lesbian.

"Still," she confided to Lisa, "even out here, it's hard to find someone to really connect to, you know?"

Lisa knew. Lisa had memories of the sun embedded in her brain, and no lover after Steven came close to triggering that same melting response in her bones and muscles. Although she knew no good could come of it, she began looking for that heat again. She dated local firemen, but though all of them had soot under their fingernails, none of them had fire in their souls. She dated the local newspaperman who covered fires, but he was an uninspired

lover who muttered dirty words to himself while she did most of the work. She even dated a firebug, a tall, well-mannered insurance executive who listened obsessively to emergency scanners and showed up at every three-alarm and higher.

"Professional curiosity?" Lisa asked.

"I just like fires," he said, and there was no arguing with that.

Beth, who'd taken a job as a corporate attorney in Manhattan, offered unsolicited advice. "You're never going to find someone who makes you feel the same way Steven did. Move on, okay? Enjoy yourself."

Lisa tried. By the time she was thirty she had dated a doctor with a commitment problem, a car mechanic with money woes, a professional poker player who never seemed to win and a car salesman who liked her to wear high-heels to bed. Nice men, most of them, but easy to forget. When she was thirty-one she and Beth took a Caribbean cruise. There were only ten single women on the entire ship, and the dining room maitre'd seated them all at the same table as objects of either admiration or pity. She turned thirty-two and donned a maid of honor dress for her sister Meg's second marriage. She turned thirty-three and met an electrician named Joe, who walked his terrier Oswald in the same park where she walked Hephaistos.

"Nice furniture," he said when she invited him home.

One hot summer day one of Lisa's case workers called in sick, and she took it upon herself to keep an appointment with a pair of elderly Irish sisters. The inside of their small cottage was immaculate, not a single lace doily out of place. Mabel Flaherty was seventy-nine years old and suffering from macular degeneration. Alice Flaherty, slightly younger and wheeling an oxygen tank behind her, had a familiar mole on her cheek.

"You used to teach at the Mary Ronan school, Miss Flaherty," Lisa said. "I was in your fourth-grade class."

Alice peered over the rims of her glasses. "That was many years ago, child."

"I told you once that a boy was throwing up fire, and you told me I was making it up."

"Fir na Tine." Mabel fumbled at the plate in the center of the kitchen table.
"Would you like another cookie?"

"Fir na Tine?" Lisa asked.

"Myths and fables," Alice said.

Lisa's pulse sped up. "There are myths of men made of fire?"

Alice rolled her eyes but Mabel leaned forward, her face intently serious.
"The villagers back home used to tell stories about men forged from fire.
The Fir Na Tine. They could burn down a field with the tips of their fingers,
or set a forest afire with one cross look."

"But I looked in libraries--"

"They're not a people who want to be known," Mabel said. "Like you and
me, they are, but very careful about who they marry."

"Poppycock and lies," Alice said. "Don't fill the child's head with
nonsense."

Lisa went back to the library. The only references she could find to Fir Na
Tine were in the logos of American fire departments with strong Irish ties.
She contacted one of her old professors, a man who specialized in Irish and
Celtic myths.

"Heard of them," he said. "Oral bits here and there, nothing written down,
not enough for a paper or journal. The French have their own version, if I
remember right. Hommes de feu? Something like that."

Fir Na Tine, Hommes de Feu, Men of Fire. Lisa dreamt of Steven standing
calmly in a sea of flames, reaching for her with a sad look on his face. The
next morning her phone rang and the caller identified himself as Captain
David Baresse of the New London Fire Department in Connecticut.

"I'm very sorry to have to tell you," he said. "But Steven left a list of people
to call in case anything happened to him."

Joe the electrician offered to come to Steven's funeral with her. Lisa told him she would be fine. She drove down to Connecticut and a family-run funeral home near the Thames River. The wake began at four o'clock in a whitewashed front parlor and by four-fifteen the room was crammed full of firemen in somber blue uniforms. Two air conditioners hummed in the windows but so many mourners made it almost as sweltering inside as the August evening outside. Lisa knew only Alan, Steven's old roommate, who had gone almost completely bald and had done well for himself with Microsoft stock. They stood near the closed white and gold casket, staring at Steven's official portrait on an easel.

"I don't believe it," Alan said. "Drowning while rescuing a kid from the river. He never did like to swim, but who expects that? Who dies at fucking thirty-four years old?"

Lisa didn't answer. She didn't know if she had any tears left in her. The thought of his body in the closed casket only a few feet away made her nearly sick to her stomach. She had loved that body, had lain with it, had held and made love to it, and now it would go to the ground for only worms to enjoy. And what of the man himself, his intelligence, his dreams and hopes? Gone, she thought, all gone.

"Lisa," Alan said, "this is Captain Baresse. The fire chief."

Lisa looked at Baresse's face and felt as if she'd stepped back in time to a cold winter street.

"Miss Sheldon," the square-jawed captain said. If he remembered her from the night Steven brought her home from the hospital, he gave no indication. "Steven spoke of you fondly."

Perfunctorily she shook his hand. "Thank you --" she said, and then broke off as a tiny bit of heat shot up her arm. Just a flicker, barely perceptible, but there wasn't the slightest acknowledgment in his eyes, not a single slip of control. He was steel, she thought, welded and strong under his jacket and medals. He might have been an inferno, a red-hot furnace so hot it glowed white, steam boiling past the pressure point, but his palms were cool and callused, the fire tightly self-contained.

Lisa stayed in a motel that night, sleepless with grief and a shameless

fantasy of Baresse and the heat in his hands. She sat stoically through the funeral mass the next morning, ignoring Jesus on the cross and the saints in their stained glass windows. The burial itself, in a well-tended cemetery overlooking the river, was picture-perfect.

"See you in the afterlife, pal," Alan said, and dropped a handful of dirt into the open grave.

Lisa let a red rose fall down to the coffin and whispered, "It wasn't just the sex."

Baresse had invited everyone back to his house after the funeral. Lisa followed Alan's Lexus to a small white Colonial on a quiet cul-de-sac. The dim, cool house was full of photos of Baresse and his friends hiking across winter ridges. No frills, flowers or lace for this bachelor, she decided. On the back lawn, buffet tables bowed under the weight of hamburgers, fried chicken, ribs and fudge brownies. Baresse held court at the grill, drinking beer alongside other men from the department. She couldn't imagine confronting him with her questions. And what was the point, really? What good did it do to know that men of fire existed if they were unattainable to those who most desired them?

Instead of going out to the lawn she drifted to a framed photo of Baresse, Steven and three other men. Judging from the soot and grime on their faces, they had recently put out some raging inferno. They looked tired but proud, and Steven was grinning ear-to-ear. Fresh grief tried to wake inside her, but all she could manage was a little sniff.

"Were you a friend of Steven's?" a dark-haired woman asked. She was pretty and petite, and despite the hot summer day wore a dark blue cardigan over her sundress.

"We knew each other at college." Lisa offered her hand. "Lisa Sheldon."

"Maria Lopez." The woman's fingers were icy cold. "Everyone's going to miss Steven terribly."

"You knew him?"

"I know all of David's men. Steven was the one everyone trusted and liked.

He was that kind of guy, you know?"

"I know."

Lisa stayed only for a few more minutes. Before she left, she saw Maria go to Baresse's side by the grill and slide under his arm. Baresse kissed the top of her head and smiled fondly at her. Lisa shook her head. The relationship would never last, of course. It had been doomed long before it ever started.

###

"Marry me," said the note in Lisa's fortune cookie.

"Joe," she said, looking across the restaurant table, "we've been through this before. Why ruin a perfectly good relationship with a ring?"

He smiled nervously. Chinese music played in the background and an immense koi fish swam in a tank beside their booth. "Because we've been seeing each other for four years and I'm tired of commuting between your place and mine, Lisa. Because the dogs miss each other when we're apart. Because I want to wake up every morning next to your smiling face."

"You hate my morning breath," she reminded him.

"And if we're going to have children, we'd better start now."

She bristled at the implication. "I'm not forty yet."

"I am. I'll be on Social Security by the time our first kid gets out of high school."

"We'll talk about it when I get back from my sister's, how's that?" Lisa signaled for the check. "I can't concentrate on anything until I know she's better."

She tried not to think of Joe's proposal on the flight out to San Francisco. She knew her parents would be delighted if she married him. "He's a good man," her father had said, right after Joe helped him replace a circuit breaker box. "Handsome, too," Lisa's mother added, "and always so neat." Lisa

could list his many fine attributes all day long but she still didn't know if she wanted to spend her whole life with him.

"Why does everyone think you have to be married to be happy?" she had once asked Meg, who'd divorced for the second time.

"They don't," Meg replied. "But at least when you're a couple, you get to share the misery."

By the time the plane landed in San Francisco, Lisa was no closer to an answer than she'd been at take-off. Jill and Jill's lover Naomi met her at the gate. Dark-haired Naomi was carefree and quick to laugh. Jill didn't look sick at all. She had made herself fashionably thin, spent far too much money on chic haircuts and blonde dye jobs and was fussy with everything from the cut of her business suits to the position of a small vase on an end table.

"I worry about everything," Jill said over dinner in their large, sculpture-filled condominium near the Castro. "Every little detail."

Naomi patted her hand. "That's why you have me, sweetheart. To remind you about the big picture."

Two days later the nurses wheeled Jill into an operating room. Lisa sat and read the same magazine for six hours. Naomi phoned friends, paced the halls, went home to feed the cat and returned with a box of gourmet cookies for the nursing staff. Jill's oncologist and surgeon came out to report that the tumor had been large and unwieldy but, in the final analysis, benign.

"That's one fucking important detail," Naomi said, and broke down in tears.

While Jill recovered, Naomi showed Lisa around the city. They took a walking tour of Nob Hill, spent several hours at the maritime museum, had dinner in Chinatown and then made the rounds of upscale gay and straight clubs. At one crowded, very loud place near Fisherman's Wharf, Lisa downed two margaritas in quick succession, relishing the bite of salt and lime.

"You better hold your booze better than your sister," Naomi warned.

"I hold it very well." Lisa let her gaze travel over gyrating dancers with bare

midriffs and six-pack abs. "How old do I look?"

Naomi threw back a shot of bourbon. "That's a terrible question to ask."

"My boyfriend wants to get married. How do I know he's the right one?"

Naomi ordered more drinks. "How does anyone?"

Lisa leaned back in her chair and watched a man in a black turtleneck and leather jacket take a seat at the bar. He looked tight and unhappy, one of those brooding types, and showed no interest in the pretty young Tammies and Michelles flitting about in their tight pants. If cigarette smoking hadn't been outlawed in all San Francisco bars she imagined he'd be smoking something long and European. Not gay, she decided, though she'd been mistaken before.

"Do you love him?" Naomi asked.

The man at the bar toyed with his napkin. It burst into flame, but he scrunched it into the palm of his hand before anyone could notice.

"Oh, Christ." Lisa lurched to her feet.

"What's wrong--"

"I know that guy," she said, a lie, but she didn't have time for explanations. The stranger was standing and finishing the last of his beer. She pushed through the crowd of dancers and almost toppled a waitress's tray. Hot, damp bodies blocked her way and conspired against her. Lisa caught the man halfway to the door and grabbed his jacket.

"Wait!" Lisa said. "I can help you!"

Up close, she could see he was much younger than she--mid-twenties, perhaps, certainly not much older. Anger poured out of him in all directions like dark, toxic smoke.

"Who the hell are you?" he asked.

"I know what you are!" Lisa tried to grab his hand but he shrugged her off.

"I know about the fire!"

"Fuck off," he said, and went outside.

Lisa followed. The chill night air reeked of fish and diesel as she teetered after him on her clumsy high heels. "There are others! You're not alone!"

He paused in the act of mounting a Harley. A muscle in his cheek twitched. A Ferrari zoomed by, its radio pounding out a bass line.

"You're not alone," she said.

"Tell me," he demanded.

Lisa rubbed her arms. "Take me to your place."

She had never ridden a motorcycle before. He helped her climb on, gave her his helmet to wear and then, without warning, they were off, the engine deafeningly loud and vibrating between her legs, the streets slipping under the wheels like magic. He took her up a steep hill and down the other side of it to a converted factory and his studio apartment, which was filled with half-finished paintings and fire extinguishers. His only furniture was a mattress, a battered old kitchen set and a TV sitting on a milk crate. The refrigerator in the kitchen rattled and whined.

"I'm Mark Chang," he said.

"I'm Lisa." The loft was cold and dark, with street light spilling in through the towering windows. Going off with a strange man in an unfamiliar city suddenly didn't look like such a smart idea. Mark Chang pulled two green bottles from the dying refrigerator and handed her one.

He gulped down half of his and asked, "What did you mean? Others?"

"Fir Na Tine." She stepped closer to him, aching for the heat of his touch. "You're like them. Maybe you burned your house down by accident when you were a kid. Maybe you set things on fire all the time, and don't know why."

His dark eyes bored into her. "Who else?"

Lisa touched his arm. Blessed warmth tingled through her fingers. "Make love to me."

"I don't even know you."

No doubt he'd had women his own age, pretty girls with smooth, unlined faces. Insecurity washed through her at the thought she could no longer seduce at will, that her moment in the sun had passed.

"How long have you been alone, thinking you were the only one?" she asked. His breathing hitched but he didn't move a muscle. "How long have you been afraid and angry?"

"You don't want me," he said. "I can't control it."

Lisa stroked his dark hair. "I can help."

His mouth closed on hers. Heat roared down her throat and she cried out in welcome. Mark Chang fumbled at her blouse and bra but she ripped them off for him, finesse forgotten, and they tumbled onto cold cotton sheets. When his hands cupped her breasts, pleasure ignited all the way to the base of her spine. He pulled at her jeans as she dug at his back, desperate for more. He slid between her thighs and she arched up, nearly consumed, the supernova inside her now, scorching her, scalding her vagina, too much, too much, like a welding torch to her loins, she was roasting from the inside out, screams torn from her throat as she tried to push him away, god, away, and when he collapsed beside her she crawled off the mattress and curled up on the cold wooden floor.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and didn't touch her. Lisa didn't know how long she lay there, hurting in the darkness. Tears stung her cheeks and the back of her throat. When the sky outside the windows turned gray she pulled herself to her feet. Her thighs felt blistered and seared, but the skin was smooth and white, untouched. She pulled on her clothes and fumbled for the telephone.

"Directory assistance for New London, Connecticut," she said to the operator. "Steven Baresse."

"I have no listing for Steven Baresse," the operator said. "I have a David and Maria Baresse on Lincoln Street, will that do?"

She realized her mistake. "I'm sorry. Yes, that's fine."

Although it was three a.m. on the East Coast, David Baresse answered sounding alert and ready for disaster.

"Fir Na Tine," Lisa said. "I have someone who needs your help."

She handed the phone to Mark Chang and went out into the cold morning rain to find her way home.

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Lisa stayed in San Francisco for two more weeks on the pretense of helping Naomi care for Jill. When she finally did return home, she said yes to Joe's proposal. They eloped to Hawaii, where their hotel room overlooked the nightly luau show and men juggling fire sticks.

"Let's go watch," Joe said.

Lisa pulled the curtain. "Let's not."

She didn't think of Mark Chang if she could help it, but one detail from that unfortunate night stayed with her long past the point when she should have let it go. She checked the phone listings for New London again and yes, she'd heard it correctly, David and Maria Baresse. They had married. On the anniversary of Steven's death she went down there for the dedication of a firefighters' memorial and decided to ask the question. David Baresse, his hair gone silver and a new scar on his cheek, was as unapproachable as ever during the ceremony on the lawn of the town library. Instead Lisa cornered Maria in the small ladies room in the library basement.

"You're Steven's friend," Maria said, and Lisa nodded.

"I have to ask you something, and I'm sorry if it's personal." Her voice came out louder than she'd intended and she lowered it. "I know David's like

Steven was. I know about the Fir Na Tine."

Maria gazed solemnly at her. Hot air wafted in through the window, bringing with it the sound of children playing. Lisa thought of a long ago playground and a little boy bent over a barrel.

"I tried all my life, and I could never--they were too much. I learned my lesson. But how do you do it? How do you stand the heat?"

Maria didn't answer.

"Please," Lisa said. "I have to know."

Another long moment passed. Finally Maria reached over and touched Lisa's arm with icy fingers. "In my mother's village, the old folks spoke about men with fire boiling in their blood. *Los hombres del fuego*. They could only marry a special kind of woman, *las mujeres del hielo*. All their lives these men and women would look for one another, trying to find a perfect balance. Maybe your mother or grandmother was like that, maybe you have a little of their blood. You recognize these men when you see them, but you don't have enough hielo in you to match their fire. Do you understand?"

Steven had been the Spanish major. Lisa knew only English, and the language of loss and longing. She shook her head.

"*Las mujeres del hielo*," Maria said. "Women of ice."

The End

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