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Your girlfriend hadn't lived in the house very long, less than a week, when the restaurant next door burned down. The house was on the corner of 18th Street and Shotwell, and her bedroom faced a power station that was surrounded by a sturdy iron fence and a dirty, stunted row of trees under which homeless people slept in a ragged and shifting encampment.

Beyond the power plant was a fire station outfitted with a handsome, tall brick building made expressly for the purpose of practicing to put out fires. More than any other building in the city, you loved this building, so sturdy and flame retardant and inhospitable. Sometimes, riding by it on your bicycle, you observed firefighters aiming a dry hose at the building's implacable façade. Through windows and doorways you glimpsed staircases, concrete landings. Something about the way the building squarely invited and controlled disaster provoked an almost unbearable combination of feelings in your stomach — warm exterior, cold interior, catastrophe, protection.

You could see the top of the building from her bedroom window, but you didn't like to look at it too much. Just knowing it was out there imbued the room with a brickly swirl of chaos mixed with ordered warmth.

On the night she moved in to her house, you had seen what you believed to be an omen of some kind, though you didn't know if it portended good luck or bad. Near midnight, just getting off from work, trudging down 18th Street across Valencia, Mission, South Van Ness — and why were you at work that late anyway, no wonder she was mad, it was true, you did work too much — you saw Santa Claus riding the Mission 14 bus, southbound. The unwieldy bus lumbered to the corner just as you walked up, and you caught a flash of pulled red velvet and there was Santa, ruddy face and snowy beard, clutching a teeming plastic grocery bag, and then the bus lurched off and you stood, dazed, in a plume of exhaust, wondering what to make of this late August vision.

And not a week later you were dreaming about Santa, a comical dream featuring pink reindeer which turned sinister when smoke crept from the edge of Santa's beard and his coat burst into flame. It was the middle of the night and your hand was tangled in her hair, her long, brown hair, and you were sleeping, and you had been fighting. There was a soft, quick suck as her body pulled

away from yours, a small warmth demolished, and for a confused moment you thought *she's leaving me* but then a strangely gentle voice, her roommate's, cascaded through the door calling *fire get up there's a fire*.

She was at her door in a flash and when she opened it smoke billowed into the room and she screamed *come on, baby*. She was the first one ever to call you baby and even now it sent a thrill through the middle of the panic. She grabbed her camera and you grabbed her hand and you ran down the narrow stairs and onto the sidewalk and there were firefighters in yellow jackets aiming hoses at Chava's, the Mexican restaurant next door. Yellow and blue plastic tables on the sidewalk listed in the heat and flames flapped like dry paper. The building emitted a roar.

Your girlfriend's face looked soft and grave and a little bossy, and it was jarring to see this private, sleepy look thrust onto the sidewalk. You felt the leftover fighting swirl between you like a bit of hot ash, and you wondered if it would spark again or go out. You had the sudden urge to gather her hair into your mouth and swallow it all the way to the roots, and you emitted a little involuntary gag of pleasure at the thought of her long, rough hairs anchoring in your throat.

Your girlfriend looked at you with an expression you couldn't read. She wore a thin robe and you worried that she was cold, and still angry, and below this rippled the deeper worry that she was going to leave you because you were too full of compulsion and inexplicable sadness, and mixed in with this was the cold, constant idea that you were meant to be alone anyway, all alone, like Santa on the bus. She moved her camera to her face, and the shutter made the sound of a small, sharp tear. The hose surged, water blasted the roasting edifice of Chava's, the firefighters stumbled backward. Glass broke somewhere.

The camera shutter sliced again, and suddenly the smoky heat split open and you fell forward into the rent air. You saw your girlfriend, the firefighters, the flames coming out of the building, the Salvadorian grandmother who lived in the house next door — all blurred and grey, as if through a sheet of smoke, then it seemed as if they were made of smoke, faint and wavering, rubbing away into air, as you drifted backwards into the slit of space.

And then you were somewhere cold and dark and silent. Street lamp light came in through little windows and doorways without doors, and you caught a flash of brick beyond the window ledge. The shadows in the corner thickened and then breathed, and then you saw him, all ruddy cheeks and scuffed black boots, and he said "We brought you here in order to prepare for the disaster."