

## Gone

By Leonie Murdoch

*Burning, burning, burning. Running, running, running. Faster, faster, faster. My legs and lungs burned, but I frantically fled from the fire that had started so suddenly. From my family. I stopped short, looking back at the smoldering house behind me. The blaring sirens. I felt as though I had tripped over a stair and just kept tumbling. Down, down, down. Down because I knew I would never be the same. Down because I knew life would never be the same. And down because I knew that my parents were in there. A freakish image of them burning, their faces blistering, drifted into my mind. No matter how hard I tried to rid myself of the image- the feeling- it stuck. It clung onto me like tape stuck to my fingers. I knew I might never get my parents back. I knew that my family, my belongings, the house I'd spent my entire life in, they were all blazing. By the time morning came, they would be ashes. The grim thought of my family's ashes floated into my mind, another piece of tape. Soon, my fingers would be covered. I was losing everything I loved. My entire life was fading. The world tilted sideways.*

"Ah!" I awoke from the disturbing dream. I was jumbled in Aunt Edna's spare sheets, her blanket completely forgotten on the floor beside me. I was sweaty and chilled, and as I rolled over to retrieve the cover my aunt's inflatable mattress groaned. I spread it out on top of me so that only my eyes were uncovered, staring at the ceiling. Instinctively, I reached for Trunk, my stuffed elephant. He wasn't there. Another grim reminder of the fire in which he burned. Along with the two people I loved most, my parents. I could tell my vision was blurring even in the only darkness of the living room. My eyes became damp. Lately, I had gotten much too used to this feeling. Did I want to be here? No. Not here. I wished to be in the past, a happy girl whose gleeful obliviousness I longed to have back. I could feel an overwhelming wave of emotions reach me. I couldn't just sit here. I needed to do something with my life, for my parents, and now. Before I died. What if I burned, just like they did? I swung my legs off the edge of the inflatable mattress and wrapped Aunt Edna's housecoat around me. I crept into the mudroom, careful not to crash into something in the darkness of an unfamiliar house. I slipped on my new boots, not even caring about socks. I slid out the door.

Outside, it was quiet. The outdoor wind welcomed me and pushed along clouds that covered the stars and made the moon's light seem faded. I knew that they were still there, I just couldn't see them. What I could see, though, were houses that towered over the road, with their lights extinguished and their curtains drawn shut. A gust blew my hair out of my face and I shivered as the cool air sank into me, running down my spine and all the way to my toes. I crossed the road to the tree where two ropes were tied to a

branch and attached precariously to a wooden board. The tree swing. I sat down and it moaned. I slowly rocked back and forth, breathing in the cool night air. Here, there was room to think. I wasn't laying in my bed uselessly with my emotions packed in. Here, they seemed to float around, and it made them less overwhelming. I shivered again. *Out here is better than in there.* I told myself. *Here, you're free.* I sighed. *Free.* I wasn't inside a house that could burn down any second, I was safe. Just like Aunt Edna had said. Uncle Nick has been staying in his bedroom overall. His brother was my dad, so I don't blame him. I was an only child, but I can imagine that losing a sibling is difficult. When I arrived, he greeted me. That was the last time I saw him, and he looked out of sorts.

The cold finally started to get to me after about twenty minutes. I headed back inside and crawled into bed. I read until I fell asleep with my book on my chest.

Morning light seeped through the light drapes covering the windows. I glanced around to see whose footsteps had awoken me, Mom's or Dad's. When I spotted Aunt Edna's red slippers, I felt that *falling-down-the-stairs* feeling once again. I rubbed my eyes. She looked tired; she had dark shadows under her eyes and she seemed distant.

"Good morning, Reese. How did you sleep?" She croaked, obviously trying to sound cheerful.

"Not good," I replied honestly. She frowned, the crease between her light eyebrows deepening. She looked older lately, with wrinkles around her small, brown eyes. Her thin, pale lips dropped slightly. Her brown hair was streaked with gray. I pulled on her housecoat and walked over to the kitchen to see what she was preparing. My heart sank as I realized it was only toast. My mom had always made me omelettes on weekends. I felt my feelings filling me again and I had to do something.

"I'm going to the tree swing," I decided. "Aren't you gonna have breakfast?" "I'm not hungry," I explained.

"Reese, you've eaten barely anything since you got here. I want you to eat," Aunt Edna argued.

I reluctantly poured myself a small bowl of cereal. Each bite was hard to stuff down, and the food sank into my stomach and made it ache. I then got dressed because my aunt made me. The day seemed to pass by quickly, with Aunt Edna and I arguing. Really, though, the scene of the fire kept creeping into my head and more than once that day I found myself crying again. I thought I heard Aunt Edna sniffle a few times, too, but her eyes had been watery since she woke up so it was hard to tell if she was upset. As Aunt Edna and I ate frozen pizza together, (her son, or my cousin, was still at work) I thought of what my parents would say to me. About this whole disaster. I thought of my dad. *"When life gives you lemons, make lemon meringue pie!"* He would chuckle. Lemon meringue pie had been his favourite. My mom would tell me *"Sometimes things get hard, but life will go on."* That made me really sad because her life did *not* go on.

The next day, it was school. I wasn't registered for school near my aunt's house yet, so she decided she would teach me.

"...Reese? Are you listening?" She called suddenly.

"Oh, yeah...", I lied.

"So what happened around here in 1864 that caused a huge flood?"

"Um..."

"Just as I thought," she declared, "it was a dam that broke. It damaged more than two hundred houses." She dragged on for the rest of the afternoon, but mostly I thought of my parents. My dad used to take me on walks along the beach and the wind would whip our faces. We would come back frigid, and if we were lucky, Mom would have prepared hot chocolate for us. But that was on breaks from school, when dad didn't have to work. He was usually busy and sometimes he would go on trips for his job. He would always bring us something back. But all of that stuff was gone now. My great-grandma's hot chocolate recipe that was taped to our fridge, the one that mom always used. Dad's hat that he used to wear whenever we went walking together. My small, pink rain boots that I used to splash in puddles. The warm fireplace that we all huddled around one year when the power went out at Christmas time and came back the very morning of Christmas day. Dad always joked that Rudolph's nose restarted our power. Mom was just relieved that she could still make Christmas dinner. I was happy to see our tree glowing with the presents displayed below it. Suddenly, I felt a rush that I recognized as slight happiness, something I hadn't felt since the day of the fire. The feeling soon disappeared.

"Reese, I think maybe you should talk to someone about all of this. Like a therapist," Aunt Edna suggested later that evening.

"No, no, I'm fine," I immediately responded.

"Are you sure? You can at least talk to me. I miss them too, you know. I lost my grandma when I was young and I understand how you feel," sadness seeped through the cracks in her words.

*She missed them. She understood.* Those words comforted me. At least they were cared for. This made my eyes watery, because I loved them so much. Apparently, these words slipped out of my mouth because I found my aunt pulling me in for a hug.

*"I know you did. And you still do, because they aren't gone."* I sniffled.

"But- they are."

"Well, maybe you can't see them, but they're still there." She kissed me gently on the forehead, just the way my mom used to, and squeezed me the same way that Dad would have. It was at that moment that I realized. It hit me all at once. She's right. They're like those stars.

Even though the clouds were covering them, they were still there. My parents weren't gone.