

# Night of Fire

by

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—twenty-eight years old—

Out went the canvases and brushes, the turpentine and linseed oil, the paints. Kate dragged the green, plastic garbage bags down the apartment stairs, along the New York sidewalk, and threw them into a dumpster at the construction site on the corner. A new high-rise was going up. Some real estate mogul was going to become richer -- or poorer. What did she care? This was New York swirling around her, money, big deals, risk in the air. That wind rushed by without even touching her. Back in the dark apartment, she surveyed the hole that had been a jumble of artist's supplies. She smiled. So she'd finally gotten rid of the shit. She went to the kitchen and fixed herself a glass of water with lemon juice, turned on the overhead light, and sat down to read the newspaper. The apartment (like most New York apartments) was always dark. It was in the shadow of other taller monster-buildings. Good, the baby could grow in the night of her womb, while she smothered in the city's morbid darkness. She had just found out she was pregnant.

She rose, leaving the newspaper opened to the story about the childless, white couple who had paid fifty thousand dollars to a baby broker—people were insane. She walked into the bedroom, sat down on the bed and removed her clothes. Naked, she stared at herself in the full length mirror. She was more beautiful than she used to be. She was only two months pregnant; it didn't show. Her body was hard from running and lifting weights, but her face had lost its youthful fullness, had grown more angular, like the faces of those chic women in the fashion magazines. Here she was: twenty eight years old still dressing in the same type of clothes she had worn when she was eighteen. It isn't my fault, she thought—there isn't enough money—New York was expensive. She looked at the eight by ten foot bedroom—eleven hundred dollars a month to live in this hole. Mike wanted her to get an office job to improve their standard of living. She told him she would leave him first. She was perfectly willing to work, but she was not going to work merely so he could remain employed by a bank that underpaid him. She wanted to live where she could be with her dog. She didn't

care about expensive clothes anyway. She enjoyed dressing like an impoverished waif. People wondered why the wife of a successful bank executive looked like she'd come from a home for the poor. They speculated. The most widely held conclusion was that she was eccentric. Everyone knew she was trying to make it as an artist. They felt sorry for her husband. "No second income? When is she going to grow up," they asked him. "Can't you make her come down to earth?" Hah! Kate thought. I want to travel. She was itching to get out of the States, itching to be on the road again. Her wanderlust made Mike angry; he considered it a sign of immaturity. "You're going to have to grow up sometime," he always said to her. Yes, she thought, but not yet. She wasn't convinced, as he was, that giving up your dreams meant growing up. Dreams wouldn't exist if they weren't important? She looked at herself in the mirror again. It really did surprise her how beautiful she was, and yet for all her physical beauty, she had lost something, what the fashion magazines called "that youthful glow." She stared at her pupils, black surrounded by blue irises, blue the color of ice. She no longer believed. And why should she? She might as well be an old woman now: men were no longer frightened of her; they ignored her, seeing the wedding band on her finger. Why not just stamp my forehead with: PRIVATE PROPERTY, NO TRESPASSING? she wondered. Why the gold ring, the pretense of love? Mike didn't love her; he owned her. And now that I'm pregnant, she thought, I'm doomed.

But wakening the next morning in the dark, little apartment, Mike already gone to work, she saw the situation in a different light. She packed her suitcase and left a note:

Darling,  
Please forgive me, but I must escape  
the city. Gone to the farm.

XOX  
Kate

She tipped the garage man five dollars when he brought her the car, threw her suitcase in back, then calmly negotiated the city's traffic and the Lincoln Tunnel. Within an hour she was heading south on the New Jersey Turnpike, running a gauntlet of industrial smokestacks—she had escaped. She felt like a falcon whose hood had been removed. She was leaving her master's leather-clad arm, rising in gyres up into the sky. She had decided to abort.

So easy —she went to the clinic, set up an appointment, returned in two days, and lay down on the white sheet. The nurse held her hand. The doctor didn't look at her. In minutes it was over. They led her to another cot. She rested for fifteen minutes. The bleeding would last for several days; the cramps, for one or two. It was no big deal. She wondered why people tried to make an issue of it, why some women felt guilty. All she felt was relief. Lying there with the other women around her, she

tried to get up the nerve to leave Mike, to take off on her own. She remembered how easy it used to be: she'd climb in the car and go, speed off toward some place where she believed people would finally love her, toward a place where she'd be able to paint and sell her paintings. Over the years she'd moved a lot but never found that magical spot. And now she was a coward. Now she was afraid the place didn't exist. She didn't have the enthusiasm and energy she used to have. She had even begun to believe that it was a fantasy, a dream, that she wasn't meant to be a success -- she was meant to be a victim, a wife. Leave, she told herself, this is probably your last chance, leave. But she didn't. Instead she waited for Mike to call.

He rang on Friday and told her he would take the train down that evening. He hadn't seen her for four days. He would probably want to make love, she thought. But she couldn't, not yet. "No sex for two weeks," the nurse had told her. She would have to play the role of bitch, push him away, be disinterested. Maybe he wouldn't want her. There had been signs he had a mistress. She had told him over and over again that if he were to have an affair, it was fine as long as he used condoms. "New York. AIDS," she'd said, raising her eyebrows. "Condoms are too uncomfortable. It wouldn't be worth it," he'd answered, meaning to reassure her, but the words had had the opposite effect. No point in thinking about that now, she told herself. "Come on Sasha." She clapped her hands. The dog rolled over and stood up, shaking herself. "Let's go for a walk."

It was September; the trees' leaves were colorful against the white-grey sky. Kate thought of England. That was where she had made the wrong decision. That was where she had decided to marry. What a coward she'd been, opting for money and security in exchange for her soul. No point in crying about it now. Friends had warned her. If only -- if only what? she asked herself. If only someone would fall in love with me. Her body was like a torch, always burning. How she wanted someone to press his hands against her breasts; to kiss her passionately, push her back against a wall, and say, "I love making love to you." She would lose control. A wave would sweep over her. She would fall in a pile of golden leaves. Naked. Outdoors. Shivering. The dog shot off chasing a rabbit. If life was dull, at least she had her dog Sasha, she thought. As long as Sasha was there, she was somehow connected with passion. Passion! how she craved it. Love -- love was easy. Love was caring for someone. But passion—passion was an all-consuming storm. Sasha, wolf-like, descended from it. Nights howling at the moon. Empty expanses of snow. Hunting. Starvation. Bounteousness.

The train arrived at eight o'clock.

"How have you been?" Mike picked her up and hugged her.

"Great."

When they reached the farm, Sasha ran around him in circles.

"Come inside. Mum and I made stew for dinner and, catch this, I made fresh, homemade bread. It's actually edible."

He hugged her again. Why does he do this? she wondered. He ignores me for weeks on end, insists I live in a dark hole in New York City, doesn't touch me in

bed, and then whoosh I'm his favorite girl. It's as if he senses exactly when I might leave and jumps in to stop me. Once I'm safely back under his wing, he'll start up with the bullshit again. Despite herself, she was glad to see him, and this made her angry. You're such a pansy, she lectured, one crumb from the master's table and you run back to him again. She was like a dog that had been kicked all its life—one kind word and she slunk back to the man who had beaten her.

She served the stew and bread.

"So when am I going to have grandchildren?" Mum asked.

"M-u-m, we're broke. Anyway I'd never bring children up in the city."

Mike looked at her angrily.

"I mean," she added quickly to appease him, "Mike makes a good salary, but it seems to be up to me to make the money that'll get us out of New York. As you know, my paintings aren't exactly selling like wildfire." She looked over at him to see if she'd said the right thing. She wasn't up to a fight. "Anyway," she paused, "I've made a decision. That's why I left New York for awhile. I had to be sure—"

"What?" Mum asked.

"I've decided to give up painting, give up art all together. I want to go straight. I'm going to go to law school. I already applied." She expected a round of applause, pats on the back, happiness that she had finally decided to be like everyone else in the world. She was met with stony silence.

"Who's going to pay for law school?" Mike asked.

"Maybe I can get a scholarship."

"That's three years, then work. You'll never have children," Mum insisted.

"What's so goddamned important about children? There are too many in the world already." She turned to Mike. "And you, I thought all that counted with you was making money so we could have the newest in stereo equipment. I thought you'd want me to go to law school."

"Hold on," he answered. "It's a good idea, but I'd rather you just take any old job. You don't have to go to law school."

"I want to be a painter, but that seems irrelevant, doesn't it? My paintings don't sell. I gather this group doesn't think much of them. It's not as if you're exactly supportive of my struggle, so I pick law, but that's too good for me. All you want is a wife who brings in a little extra cash."

"Wait a minute, I haven't made you work."

"No, you've made me live where I can't paint. And you don't have the right to make me work. Get it, that's my decision."

Mum was putting dishes in the dishwasher. "Anyone want ice cream?" she asked, as if she hadn't heard a word. "I've got coffee, chocolate, butter pecan."

"Butter pecan."

"Butter pecan," Kate mimicked, rolling her eyes. "Is there any time you don't eat?"

"Go to hell."

If Mother hadn't been there, she was sure Mike would have bellowed at her. That was his approach: if you couldn't reason with someone, scream at her. The room was thick with hot silence. See what you get when you try to please them, Kate told herself.

They watched television. Slowly, the hot bitterness in the room dissipated. At ten Mum went to bed. Mike fixed himself another bowl of ice cream. The news came on. POP. POP. POP. At first, Kate thought the sound was a problem with the t.v. "Do you hear that, Mike?"

He cocked his head and listened. "It sounds like fireworks. That's strange."

Kate listened. "Who could be setting off fireworks around here?" They lived a good distance from any other farm. Everyone's children in the area had grown up and gone off. "What is that noise?" She walked to the front door and opened it. The sky was orange. Brilliant. Glowing like hell. Flames burst through the barn roof. She screamed, "The barn's on fire," ran to her bedroom to get shoes, opening Mother's door on the way. "Get up, the barn's on fire. Call the fire department."

"What?" Mum mumbled sleepily.

"The barn's on fire."

Kate ran back down the hall, untied tennis shoes on her feet.

"There's a horse in there," Mum shouted, wide awake.

"No!" The horses should have still been on the summer schedule when they were turned out at night.

"One of the boarders is in."

"Which stall? Which stall?"

Kate ran to the front door. "Call the fire department," she shouted to Mike.

It was blazing now. She ran up the hill to the barn. The fire's red tongue climbed, crackling, from the loft into the well-lit sky. Kate peered in. It was dark. She tried the lights. They didn't work. The ceiling at the end of the barn was aglow. Fire dripped down, lighting straw. She cautiously entered the barn. It was hot like a furnace. She heard the roaring of flames above her head. Where's the horse? He wasn't neighing. She couldn't see him. She was afraid to go back to the far stalls. Then she saw him, in the second stall on the left, a grey horse. He was still like a ghost. Quiet. She grabbed a shank, ran in the stall. He wouldn't budge. "Come on, goddamnit." She looked around for a towel to throw over his head, found one, and wrapped it tight around his eyes. "Come on now. Whoa there, sweetie. Let's go." He gingerly took a step forward. Smoke filled the barn. The fire had spread to her stall. In the corners were puddles of flame. "There now." He took another few steps forward, tried to pull back. She yanked hard on the shank. "Listen, you bastard." She thought about leaving him. The roof above her head crackled, moaned. One more tug. He followed her out.

Mother was there, panting. She had just run up. A white nightgown flowed out around her, buffeted by hot wind.

"Don't catch on fire," Kate warned her.

"You've got him," she said.

"He's half-crazy. I'm taking him down around the house."

She passed Mike coming up. "I called the fire department," he told her. In the distance they heard sirens.

"I'm going to see what we can save," he added.

"Tack's gone. The van, the tractor—you can probably save."

She walked the horse down toward the pond. It was cool there and misty. Up on the hill a red glow spread across the sky. Where's Sasha? she wondered. She must be in the house. The fire engines came. They ran a hose to the pond and pumped out water. Sparks and cinders floated downhill toward the house. The horse had relaxed and was cropping grass. The barn was burning, all of it. It seemed as if everything in her life was burning, all of it going so fast. That's how it happened. As a child she had watched geese fly in, then several lay dead, floating in the water. Father had been around, then POO—he was gone. Anne had been alive; a truck smashed into her. The junkie in that jail in Phoenix, what had happened to her? The wildlife in Africa? —Vanishing, declining. All those many men she had loved—gone into thin air -- no word, no letters from any of them. And Margaux—Margaux had finally shot herself in the head, finished off what she had started years ago, the only smart one in the bunch, the only one to look at the world, see it for what it was, and then do something about it. And the last thing, perhaps the most important thing: Kate had sold her own soul. She had taken it off like an undershirt, draped it over Sasha, forced a mere dog to wear it. She hadn't even admitted that she'd done it all alone with no help. No, she'd blamed it on Mike. Yes, perhaps if he'd really loved her, he wouldn't have let her throw her soul away, but it was unfair to blame him. How could he help her when he'd already thrown away his own soul? It was the blind leading the blind. Over the years she'd covered her eyes as she had covered this horse's, thinking that if she were blindfolded, she could walk through fire, but that only worked when there was someone to lead you. There had been no one to lead her. That man, that animal, that place that was meant to guide her safely among the world's nefarious paths hadn't materialized. She had painted empty pictures.

Two hours passed. On the hillside the glow of light was shrinking. Kate led the horse to a pasture through a gate down by the stream. She led him through briar bushes, which ripped at her arms and legs, walked the horse across a stream, then followed a path deep with mud and fallen leaves, until they reached a clearing. He neighed and was answered. Hooves thudded away into the night. She crossed the field, climbed over a fence, and looked at the remains of the smoldering barn. Life was a bitter ritual, she thought. It seemed as if she had been born to recreate the same pattern over and over again. She knew that rising tomorrow, smelling acrid smoke, envisioning change, she would continue with her weaving like a spider caught in its own web: she wouldn't leave Mike—she wouldn't move to the country—her paintings wouldn't be recognized—she wouldn't even go to law school—nothing would change. Change could not be forced. It could not be created by moving locations, by switching lovers, by staring into mirrors, by praying, by swearing, by

crying. Change was slow. It came of its own accord from out of nowhere -- swiftly, she had once imagined, but now she knew better.

The firemen left at four thirty in the morning. The fire still smoldered.

"Arson," the fire detective had said.

"That's impossible!" Mum had replied.

"No way," Mike had said.

"Why?" Kate had asked them. "If he says arson, it probably is." How little they knew, she thought, of secret things, of strange wishes and pleasures, of getting rid of things, of fire, of revenge.

They went in the house to go to sleep. Sasha usually slept beneath Kate's bed, but she wasn't there. Kate would reach her hand down and feel the dog's cold nose, then drift off. But since the fire had started, she hadn't seen Sasha. She'd assumed the dog had been frightened and run off. Sasha wouldn't be gone for long. She and Sasha were like sisters—they were soul mates. Sasha was freedom. Sasha was that part of herself which hadn't been trapped and ruined. The dog had to come back home. She had to.

Sunday evening. Sasha hadn't returned. Kate didn't worry. She remembered the time in Santa Fe when Sasha had been gone for five days and had finally returned home, hungry and thirsty, covered with heavy motor oil. She couldn't imagine life without her. She didn't want to imagine life without her. It would be the last straw. Sasha had to come back. Right now life seemed to be a giant steel trap. Kate struggled to be released. Then she realized that, like a trapped wolf, she would have to gnaw through her own leg to get free. Maim herself. No, Sasha would return. She didn't care about that idiot child of hers or the abortion. It wasn't her child; it was his, so she got rid of it. No, she cared about Sasha, her real child.

Weeks passed. Then months. Sasha never appeared. A year later Kate had her first art show. Looking closely—among the patterns of grey and black and white -- one could make out a wolf coursing across frozen snow. The wolf was alone, barely visible among dark swirls of color. "Ah," Kate overheard a critic say, "you see the wolf. Think of Little Red Riding Hood. Think of the statement, the importance of the wolf in myth." Kate kept quiet. The man didn't understand a thing. The wolf was not a statement. The wolf wasn't myth. The wolf was real. The wolf had kept her alive.

—The End—