

FLORENCE MACDONALD  
**HOUSE ON FIRE**

THE SUMMER I TURNED ELEVEN, the firemen in our town planned to burn a house down. The girl who lived next door, Gail, told me about it. We were the same age and appeared to be friends, but I didn't want to be friends with her at all. Thick and tight-fisted, I didn't know what to make of her. I only wanted to know things that she seemed to know.

"They're burning down the Bernard House," she said. I knew she was repeating what her mother had told her because we would never have said "the Bernard House." We'd say "Paul's house" or "Cheryl's house," and we'd struggle with the last name, embarrassed because it would look like we were getting ahead of ourselves.

At first I couldn't understand. Wouldn't the Bernards be homeless? But all I could think to ask was, "Why?"

"It's a fire demonstration," Gail said.

I had to ask my mother.

"It's practice for the firemen," my mother said. They would learn things from burning it, she told me.

I was determined to see this, and for some reason I was desperate to bring along my baby brother, who was two at the time and still in diapers with rubber pants, waddling sweetly and attracting attention with his beatific smile and his golden curly hair. The women on the street called them "locks" and scolded my mother that in no uncertain terms was she to cut it. My youngest brother was everyone's favourite.

"Your brother's got the sweetest disposition," my grandmother told me, meaning I didn't. I suppose I hoped that, in bringing him to the fire, admiration for him would reflect on me. I had eczema and scratched my arms raw. I was nervous and couldn't control it. "If you don't stop scratching, they'll cut your arms off," Gram told me.

The house to be burned was not far from where we lived, and one of the reasons I wanted to see it was because a boy in my class lived there—Des-

mond Bernard.

Gail said he would be at the fire. “He’ll be standing on his front lawn watching his life go up in flames.” *Life go up in flames*. I knew that was her mother talking again.

“How do you know he’ll be there?” I asked. I tried to sound like I didn’t care about the answer, the way Gail did.

“Because he’s destitute,” Gail said, her tone superior. “The whole family is.”

“No they’re not.” I didn’t know what destitute meant, but I had to argue. I needed an intellectual victory so I could lord it over her. School was the only place where I stood out.

Desmond’s house then, the house that was to be burned, was outside the town line, just beyond the school, in an open field. Beyond that, the houses were sparse and soon gave way to farms and forests. Our houses were just inside the town line, one of twenty houses all in a straight line and all full of kids, with dirt yards because we trampled the grass underfoot. They were referred to as “wartime houses.” We thought that was because they were all the same, regimented and uniform, but we later came to learn that it meant they were built after the war. They also had plumbing hooked up to the town sewer, which meant that our houses were better than the Bernards’.

I coerced Gail into coming with me to the burning. She let on that she wasn’t remotely interested and said she’d only come if I stole her some cigarettes from my mother. I agreed. I had the idea that it would strengthen my case if she were there.

I waited until my mother was in the basement, putting a load of washing through the ringer, before I asked her. Her dark hair looked electric, backlit by a bare bulb hanging over her head, the rest of her face moving about in a patchwork of shadow. I couldn’t make out her facial expressions, and that mystery led me to say more than I might have if I could have seen her reactions.

My mother refused, claiming that Gail had the Devil in her. And because it irritated her that I’d asked for something, she forced me to hold the basket and hand her the pegs as she hung out a monstrous load of washing, most of which was Danny’s diapers. Clothes pegs in her mouth, she said that the people who stopped in the street to fluff his hair did not understand how much work Danny entailed.

“I need you here, not up the road at that house full of . . .” I saw her press

her lips together before she turned her head away.

“Full of what?”

“Go check on Danny.” She jerked her head towards the cellar stairs.

We were Catholic, and by then I had four siblings—two older brothers, my younger sister, and Danny—and another on the way.

“Six is the limit,” my mother told my father, holding her belly with an impatient, distracted kind of love. I made a count of the mothers on our street and found that the Protestant mothers all had four children and the Catholic mothers all had six, so she appeared to be right.

“The pope can screw himself,” she added, which is something she would sometimes say to my father but never when we had company. I had it in my head that things would not go well for her if she made her feelings more widely known.

There are no photographs of my mother from that time, as she wouldn’t allow it. She would butt her cigarette and wave the camera away with just enough force to show she meant business. My one enduring image of her is focused on her perpetually swollen ankles and the network of blue veins trailing up her legs towards her big belly. That was my perspective because it was my job to get down on my hands and knees on Sunday mornings and crawl under her to do up her boots as she stood in the front hall getting ready for church. Her feet were packed into her shoes, and her shoes were packed into clear plastic overboots. I would slide the elastic loops over the buttons because she couldn’t reach her feet, and she would curse the fact that she could not do it herself.

I didn’t have to go to church with the family because Danny cried too much during the services and someone needed to stay home and babysit him. The priest spoke to my father and said that I would have to go back soon. He kept a special eye on us because we went to the regular school instead of the Catholic one, which was downtown and too far for us to walk.

The day Gail told me about the house burning, we’d been snooping in her parents’ bedroom and found a diaphragm and jelly in the drawer of her mother’s bedside table. Gail had found it before and wanted me to verify its repugnance.

“Your mother can’t have one because she’s Catholic.” She said “Catholic” like it was a punishment.

I took a wild guess and said it was something to use for her period so my mother did too use it.

“Liar,” Gail scoffed.

“What’s it for then?” I asked.

“Ask her.”

So I did.

My mother was mad because we’d snooped and found “the filthy thing.”

“I hope you didn’t touch it,” she said. I wiped my hands on my shorts and said no.

“That Gail, she’s adopted. That’s what comes of using those things.”

“She’s stupid,” I said. I wanted to align myself with my mother.

My mother gave me a strange look and said I was old enough to know, so she might as well tell me now.

As she hurriedly and distastefully laid out the mechanics of sex, I remembered the image of a boy I’d seen riding behind on the seat of a bike while his sister was in front pedaling.

“Look at Brian, he’s sticking it in his sister!” another boy had called out, and the shock of recognition, of certain knowledge that had been right before my eyes all along, made me weak at the knees. The other boys had hooted, and all the girls had blushed in silence, as if it was already our duty to uphold the moral code, to act out the prudery and decorum, and to let the boys laugh and enjoy it.

I was amazed that such a shocking thing was possible, doable, laughable, and pleasurable. I saw the diaphragm as a kind of shield to all of that—a shield that was forbidden to my mother.

I became more bold after that, as my childhood shyness fell from me like a scab off a wound. When it was gone, when my skin had toughened up, I could not see the use of it anymore.

“What religion are you?” I asked Gail’s mother, armed with the knowledge that Gail had come to her by some illicit means. I felt I had something to prove to her.

“We’re lapsed,” Gail’s mother flushed. My mother had told me that Protestants could lapse, but we never could. So instead of proving something, I was jealous. I wanted to be more like Gail’s mother than my own.

A week before the burning, a girl came to the schoolyard at recess carrying a tiny, pale baby wrapped in a white blanket. She wasn’t much older than us, and she wore a long blue dress like a nightie. The baby caused a small pandemonium among several girls my age, who crowded around ask-

ing questions.

“How old is it? Can we see him?” They tried to get the baby to squeeze their fingers with its tiny transparent ones, but the baby lay limp in the girl’s arms and stared beyond them.

The boys hung back, feigning disinterest, then departed when Desmond came and stood beside her, smiling.

“Desmond’s my brother,” the girl said.

Like everyone else at school, I avoided Desmond. He fell asleep at his desk almost every day. When the teacher woke him, he would raise his head, smile, and nod, but he never had any answers. None of us had ever heard him speak. Even when the bigger kids tried to tease it out of him, he just smiled and hung his large head. We were ashamed for him. He was often away, sometimes for a week or two, and that lack of regular attendance made it impossible for any of us to count on him. When the teachers insisted that we all be kind and make friends with boys and girls like Desmond, we took it for granted that they did not understand what we were up against. If he didn’t show up, he could not be trusted. But his sister, who was not much older than the senior girls in the yard, gave him credence.

“Please,” the smaller girls pressed. “Can we hold him?”

That’s when Desmond spoke for the first time. “No,” he said, his palm thrust out. “It’s her baby. You can’t.”

We stood in awe. Desmond had spoken, and his sister had a baby all her own. We wanted one, too. We wanted to be set apart like that.

His sister smiled, but I felt the smile drift past her. Everything about her reminded me of our last days at the beach before school started. Her light blue dress fluttered like the sky when you try to concentrate on it, and her skin was blue-white and transparent as skim milk. She was mother-of-pearl, like a seashell, with pink and coral colours at her ears, which is what I imagined cockleshells were like. She began to walk away, and a wake of little girls followed her to the edge of the yard before she drifted across the road and disappeared into the field. She was like the end of summer, fading away, and in the distance I could just make out their house, the Bernard house, like a mirage floating on the grass.

Desmond left school that day and never came back.

As soon as I got home I went to find my mother, who was on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. “Desmond’s sister had a baby,” I said. And then I told her something that I didn’t know but that seemed right.

“She’s not married. She can’t have a baby if she’s not married, can she?”

My mother stopped scrubbing, the rag suspended over her bucket. “Who told you that?”

“Desmond.” I lied. I was suddenly in a muddle of confusion. “What is it? What’s the matter?” I persisted until she told me to go play outside, and then she locked the door behind me.

After supper, my parents fought about babies. My two older brothers, Kenny and Steve, sat in front of the television and pretended not to hear, but I went to stand at the kitchen door to watch.

My mother was mad at the priest, who was suspicious that our family was so spaced out and who wanted to know what they were doing between babies. My father was trying to convince my mother to go along with him. “He just said that we should see it as a challenge—that’s all.”

“What is it, a contest?” My mother asked. “Because if it is, you can find someone else to do the lord’s work.” She scanned my father’s privates with disapproval.

“Oh, now,” my father protested.

“I got enough challenges,” my mother shot back at him. “For a start, who’s going to feed them?” She made a sweeping gesture that included the entire household and its contents, which was us. “Is he offering?”

“It’s the church.” This was all my father had to offer.

My mother grabbed a ladle and pointed it at him. “I’m going to get fixed. I’m having my tubes tied after this one, just like they do with the retards. I won’t let you stop me, and that damn priest sure as hell can’t.”

My father had told me before that I got my bad mouth from her. Now he placed a hand on her shoulder, but my mother twisted sideways, resting her big belly against the kitchen counter.

“You’ll have to leave me alone from now on.”

He picked up a tea towel as if to dry the dishes, but that was unheard of in a father. “I don’t know what Father McIvor would say about all this.”

“He can say what he likes.” She swiped the hair off her forehead with that familiar, fed-up gesture, her hand raw from all the washing. “He can screw the bishop for all I care.” She leaned over the sink and started to cry, her shoulders crumpled against her chest. “You tell him that,” she said into the sink. “You tell him or I will.”

“How could I tell him that?” My father’s voice trailed off.

My mother’s reddened hand dove into the dishwasher and pulled out a

plate. "You could if you had a backbone." She flung the plate against the wall, where it shattered. My father turned and saw me at the kitchen door. He gave me a look that made me ashamed to be a girl like my mother, with tubes and parts that needed to be fixed.

That night, my mother went into the hospital to have the baby. I heard them downstairs, and I saw the lights and sirens of the ambulance. We stood at the foot of the stairs as they carried her out on a stretcher, drops of blood soaking through onto the floor and down the front steps. She waved to us feebly.

My sister and I were not allowed to visit, but they let Steve go after a few days. "She almost died," he told us. "They took out all her parts so she could live."

"They did not," Kenny said. It made him cry to think that might be true. I had decided by then that it was my fault, which was why I was not allowed to see her. I had started it with all my talk of babies and diaphragms. That's what brought it on.

The next day was the burning. My mother was still in hospital, so I took Danny and went to Gail's with cigarettes I stole from the top of her bureau. Gail said we would light up when we got there. We left early because Danny was slow, so we were among the first ones there.

It was a huge clapboard house that had fallen into disrepair, its wood weathered to grey. We called those places century farmhouses. This one probably had ten or twelve rooms with gables, peaks, and tall, crumbling red brick chimneys. Gail and I went around back and climbed on the stone foundation of an old barn, taking turns carrying Danny. We looked for Desmond, but he was not there. Eventually there was quite a crowd.

The chief of police was in attendance—a great, fat man with a wattle like a Brahmin bull. He did not believe in patrolling; instead, he sat in his cruiser, Sydney Greenstreet fashion, and allowed the constabulary to come to him. Some time later, two fire trucks pulled up in the field behind us.

People in the crowd began talking about the house, which had been built by an Englishman decades ago. "Old miser," a woman with dried out, burnished-red hair said. "Richest man in the cemetery now." Everyone laughed. The Bernards, a man said, had been living in the house by virtue of squatter's rights. "Them and their horde of brats," another man said. "About time they smoked 'em out." The dried-up woman crossed her arms over her bosom. It made her bigger and her face, set hard and metallic under

the coppery hair, suggested nothing but innuendo would get past her. “That father ought to be strung up,” she said. “What he gets up to with that girl, since his wife died . . .” She looked around, soliciting approval, but the men moved off, dissociating themselves from that kind of talk. They each had a beer dangling at their sides and began surreptitiously sipping.

All of a sudden I wanted to go home. It was as if I’d been swimming at the beach and found myself out of my depth. I was cold and shivering as the sun set and dark clouds settled on the horizon like great black cats, ready to pounce. Voices rose around me, impatient with an irrational fear that a real fire would break out somewhere else and that the demonstration would be cancelled.

Then Gail pointed to an upstairs window. “Look!” she said. Thin, grey fingers of smoke played at one windowsill and then another, like hands at a series of pianos. The smoke feathered upwards, billowing innocently the way the holy incense plumes when the priest swings the censer at church, swaying and chanting hypnotically to send our prayers to heaven. Then all of a sudden several fires ignited inside the house with a series of soft-edged thuds, and the flames crowded hysterically at the windows. I imagined the Devil had entered the rooms and closed all the doors. The glass blew out, people applauded, and the police moved us further back. I could feel the heat on my face.

The fire broke through the roof, throwing off funnels of black smoke, and people shouted and cheered. Some had brought firecrackers, and I stopped my ears at the noise, ducking my head and tucking my elbows to my sides. The fire trucks lumbered forward over the rough ground, and the men advanced in their thick boots and gloves, rolling up to the house like boulders, their yellow hats bobbing and the hoses reeling after them like snakes. It was a hellish inferno with the crowd swaying and mouthing, all teeth and fistfuls of glory.

I looked up at the house and was certain I saw Desmond’s sister in an upper window. She was wearing the same blue dress and holding her baby, her father’s baby, which had seemed so blessed in the schoolyard and so shameful now. She was walking through the house, appearing in one window after another as she passed from room to room.

I started screaming. “She’s in there! She’s in the fire! She’s burning!” I thought she was there because the town was outraged and the burning was a punishment. She had disobeyed the rules, and now they were trying to get

their revenge or teach her a lesson.

I was frantic and screamed at Gail, but she thought I was screaming because I couldn't find my brother. "He's right here," she said, pointing to Danny, who was squatting at her feet in the grass.

The crowd surrounded us, and the heat made me faint. Gail was trying to keep me away from the house. The fire chief came and scooped Danny up, but my brother was not the problem—I was the one who couldn't stop screaming.

"Nobody in there, love," he said. "They're all gone."

The three of us were hustled into a squad car and driven home. As we left, great plumes of water rose out of the hoses and rained down on the house, which was now a cage of blackened timbers filled with orange light.

My father put me to bed when we got home, which he'd never done before, and Gram was there to give Danny his bath. I heard her downstairs, making herself loud and clear with words like "incest" and "hellfire," so I covered my head with my pillow. By then I had decided that it was my mother who had alerted the authorities about Desmond's father and sister and that I could no longer trust her.

My father came upstairs sometime later, after I'd gone quiet, and asked if I would like some cocoa.

"Who let them burn that house? Who said they could do it?"

My father said he didn't know.

"Was it Father McIvor?" I asked.

"No, no." He stroked my hair, but I could feel the resignation in his hand.

"Where will they go?" I asked. I was feeling meek by then and wanted answers.

"They've got places for families like that," he said.

It seemed to me, at that time, that all of the problems began after Gail and I touched the diaphragm. It was like a shield or a protection, which was both shameful and necessary. It was wrong to use it, but it had to be used. How could I ask my father? How could he know? How could he *not* know?

My mother came home with the new baby not long after, smiling and happier than I had ever seen her before. She looked both relieved and guilty, and I knew that look. I had felt it on my own face when I had gotten away with something. By then it was too late to ask her those questions. Such subjects could only be raised in a state of turmoil, as they had a hysterical edge

to them that was cutting, sharp, and not to be touched.

For months after that, I began having trouble sleeping, and I would lie awake in the evening convinced that my parents were going to burn down the house with their cigarettes. Sometimes I crept down the stairs to see if they were smoking, or I called to them if I thought I smelled smoke, because I knew the Devil was watching more closely than God. It irritated my mother to no end, as she just wanted to watch TV. I would listen for the music of the CBC news hour at eleven, and only then could I fall asleep.

It was in those hours of listening that I realized my concerns were childish and insignificant alongside those of Desmond and his sister. There was no fire at my house, no firemen, and no shame. It was then, too, that I realized the world was ordered in such a way as to confound me. Strangely, I had always suspected this but had denied knowing it.

We had laughed at Desmond because we didn't think he knew the answers, but it was me who was denied knowledge. Desmond knew about his sister, and he knew there was no escape, but all he could do about it was smile and sleep.

I avoided Gail for the rest of that summer and went into the woods with Kenny and his friends. We built forts and played cops and robbers. I saw myself as a matriarch of sorts, with a child's reasoning and logic, but I suspect that I was merely bossy.

That fall I had my first period. I was now irrevocably aligned with my mother, and our allegiance infuriated me, which became a problem. One day I had a tantrum on the front porch. I can't remember what it was about—maybe my mother didn't give me something I wanted, or she wouldn't let me go somewhere—but I rose myself up to a hysterical pitch, howling and pounding the porch rails in frustration.

"What's wrong with her?" Kenny asked.

"Her time of the month," was all my mother said.

After that I began complaining about menstrual cramps and headaches, and I wallowed in the entitlement. I even got out of gym class, which Gail noticed.

"You don't know everything," she said. She had a boyfriend that year.

Her family moved away not long after that. They rented downtown, where the houses were cheaper and the neighbourhoods were rougher. I ran into her the following summer, and she was carrying a purse by then. She was becoming a woman, and for her that meant taking pride in ignorance

and upholding witless authority. I saw her as a gatekeeper, as she knew things and guarded the information.

“Do you remember the burning house?” I asked.

“What house?” she said. “I don’t remember any burning house. You’re full of it.”

Our new baby was a little girl. It took my parents six weeks to name her. I watched my mother in the basement, doing the washing under the light bulb. Danny was holding her leg and whining, but she was singing, humming a tune, and smiling. I sat on the cellar steps and demanded, “What are you so happy about?”

My mother looked up from the washing and beamed. “These are the happiest days of my life.” I’d figured out by then that this was because of the missing parts. I also knew that my mother hadn’t told on the Bernards and that *the authorities had intervened*, which meant social services and children’s aid.

I had ascribed too much power to my mother. I had watched her flailing at her own powerlessness and fighting a battle she could not win; instead, she escaped. When we went to church now, she sat up proud. She was free and could not be blamed for her freedom. It was in God’s hands.

And there was my own coming battle, which I sensed that summer on the hillsides shimmering with anticipation, where always I saw Desmond’s sister walking away over the field and thought that she had been blessed with a baby and that she had the power to walk through fire.