

Kate Smith swung the creaky fireplace gates open. Kneeling on the brick hearth, she used the small iron shovel to scrape the top layer of ash from the coals beneath. Alan crouched, hugging his knees. It was mid-November and chilly. It had rained during the night and turned cold. Alan felt the warmth of the live coals.

“There, see?” Kate spoke softly as she skillfully uncovered row after row of glowing embers. “We’re pulling the blanket back to wake the little children. See how they blink their sleepy eyes?”

“Yes ma’am.” Alan whispered.

“They’re happy to be awake. That heavy back log is the good parent who watches over them.” Kate built a teepee of kindling over the coals; holding her hair back, she blew on the tiny, yellow flames. With the fire going, she carefully positioned a few logs across the heavy andirons. Brushing her hands together, she closed the gate and hooked the latch. “Do you miss your daddy?”

Alan stared at the burning logs. Several years had passed since his father had died. “Mrs. Gardner told me he was in heaven and someday I’d see him.”

“Ah.” Kate nodded.

“Violet heard you crying one morning. Dwayne said it was because you missed Daddy, and Renee thinks that’s why you don’t laugh as much as you used to.”

Kate latched the fire gate. She turned to her youngest son who, she couldn’t help but note, resembled his father in every detail. Reaching over to smooth his hair, she noticed a small grass stain on his shirt sleeve. How many times had she told him not to wear that shirt outside to play?