

THE MAGNOLIA REVIEW

Volume 4, Issue 1

by Suzanna Anderson Creates March 6, 2018



Volume 4 Issue 1 is available here as a PDF: [The Magnolia Review Volume 4 Issue 1.](#)

Burning

Yesterday I burned 2004-2006.

I ripped up dozens of bank statements, fed the fire with handfuls of canceled checks, each carefully inscribed with the amount followed by “and 00/100’s.” As I placed page after page of tax returns into the hungry flames of my wood stove, I admired the elaborate calculations of tuition, mortgages and cross-state obligations, the commemorated complications of a life, mid-stream when totals were difficult to tally.

I disposed of phone bills with detailed lists of long distance calls to numbers I no longer recognized, incinerated canceled birthday checks given to my son Aaron who now had a son of his own and a demanding career that converted days into months and months into visit-less years. I paused only a moment to study Aaron’s signature as a college student before it was quickly consumed by the flames.

By the end of the day, my wood stove was filled with layers of ashen sheets. Their bulk maintained the illusion of paper until you touched the mirage, at which point it dissolved into a pile of ash.

I shoveled the remnants into my compost bin on top of carrot peels and potato skins and stems of kale left over from the winter soup which boiled on top of the stove as the papers burned. When the snow stopped, I intended to dig a hole and bury the refuse under two feet of snow in a spot I knew would be part of the vegetable garden come spring.

There was a time when I would have seen my husband Noah's face in every hotel receipt, his deception in the rental car agreements, the itemized business expenses that I had totaled meticulously. But by now I knew it was not easy to disappear without a trace.

Every winter I read about fires fueled by the ashes discarded from wood stoves. Horrible fires that consumed whole houses in the dead of winter. Firemen who battled blazes in subzero cold, icicles forming in their beards.

Monday night, Noah called at 7, just as he did every evening while I was away. “Hey, sweetheart. How’s it going?”

I reported on the condition of the cabin. Which trees had come down under the weight of the winter snow? I told him that I had made stew for dinner.

“Mac and I went out for a beer after work. Thanks for leaving the lasagna in the fridge.”

“Don’t forget to drop the car off in the morning for inspection,” I reminded him.

“I won’t,” he said. “Miss you.”

“Miss you,” I echoed, watching the flames of my fire flare up as if cauterizing a wound, minimizing damage.

“We’ll talk tomorrow?”

“Of course,” I said, knowing he was anxious to hang up.

“I might be home late. I’ll call you?” he said.

The day I purchased a GPS tracker from the detective store online, I took control of my destiny. The night I snuck out of our suburban bedroom by moonlight, in slippers and my well-worn bathrobe, and attached the tracker to the bottom of Noah's truck, I opened my eyes.

I still had ten years to go, 2007 onward. The cardboard boxes were piled up in a sequential row next to the stove. With so much burning, the cabin warmed almost unbearably, nearing eighty degrees despite the frigid weather outside. I shed my fleece jacket, opened a window for fresh air despite the cold night outside.

The news media predicted that the electricity might go out with the storm. The weathermen were positively titillated at the possibility of thundersnow, that rare rumble of summer thunder beneath a cascade of winter snow. They forecast bombogenesis with wind gusts that would approach the strength of tornadoes. After months of detailing the monotony of nightly lows which seldom broke the records that they tracked so assiduously, the meteorologists trumpeted the possibility of calamity, widespread destruction, homes threatened by rising tides.

I was fortunate, they assured me. The full moon was waning.

When the wind blew, snow shifted on the metal roof with a groan. In the morning, birds skittered in a frenzy on the front porch, leaving arrowhead-shaped prints in the snow as they rooted for birdseed that had scattered from the feeders. The woodpeckers demanded more suet and a red squirrel tried to climb up the storm door, looking for a way in.

I was willing to feed them all, but no one got in. Mine was a solitary vigil.

For months, night after night perched in front of my computer, I had following the blinking red arrow of the GPS, always on Noah's tail when he was away on “business.” I recorded the addresses he visited in a separate file. I graphed the frequency of his out-of-town trips, the patterns that re-occurred. Cold data that told his story which was, in the end, my story. I never told Noah about my research, I never visited those addresses or tried to look at the faces of the women with whom he betrayed me.

Now I burned 2007 methodically, ignoring the details. I shoved sheaves of paper into the stove so quickly that acrid smoke began to fill the cabin, triggering a violent coughing attack. My nostrils burned and my eyes watered. I opened the windows even further, cold air mixing with the overheated, smoky air in layers so that, as I crossed the room, my legs were cold even when sweat beaded on my brow. My

fingers were numb but the back of my neck baked and I tied up my hair to let the air circulate just as I would on a summer's evening sitting on the back porch waiting for the sun to set.

Tuesday night, Noah did not call until 10. I could hear the beer in his voice.

"Sorry, I know it it's late. Things went longer than I had expected. I just wanted to say good night."

His call was unnecessary.

No problem. I'm just heading to bed."

"Sleep tight, my love," he said.

"You too," I answered.

"Don't forget to make your list, he said.

"I won't," I answered, releasing him.

The tracking device that I had attached to the bottom of Noah's truck fell off last fall. I didn't bother to replace it. I no longer cared where the bastard went when he wasn't at home. The lie of his thinly veiled tales of overnight meetings and travel to distant cities had been thoroughly disproved by that point. Vindicated, I lost interest.

I burned up 2007, 2008, and 2009 in one day. By the time I was done, the ash in the stove was nearly six inches high and threatened to block the vents and burn the whole house down. When I went to bed, I had no idea if I would wake. The coals continued to smolder. In the morning I shoveled the ash out into a metal bucket, disposed of it in a hole beneath the snow. Over my head, the clouds began to clear, but a blast of arctic cold had settled into the region, threatening temperatures below zero by nightfall.

Aaron called just as I began 2010. "Are you okay, Mom?" When I stayed alone in the cabin, Aaron checked in once a week just to be sure I was still kicking.

"The electricity never even went out. Everything here is fine," I told him. "How are the kids?"

Outside, the plow guy arrived. He pushed enormous mounds of snow to the side of the driveway, carving out an escape route. I was free to go. Aaron described his son's newest fascination. Last year's trains had been replaced by the planets. My grandson, he told me, could now describe our galaxy in great detail: each planet's size, age, and distinct characteristics. When asked about Pluto, the five-year-old replied that it was not a planet, but was, instead, a dwarf. When he wanted to stress the enormity of a number, the five-year-old strung together random digits and "illions" one after another until he ran out of breath.

"Are you coming to our anniversary party?" I asked my son. Noah and I had been married thirty years. The bastard had rented a party room at a local Italian restaurant so that we could celebrate the occasion. Repeatedly, he had reminded me to make a list of our friends and relatives. "Invite everybody," he told me. "Let's do this one up big."

"Of course," Aaron answered, "I wouldn't miss it."

That settled, my son said that he was ready for spring to arrive but needed to get back to work.

"It's only a matter of weeks," I said. Already, the time had changed. The clocks had sprung forward. Although mornings were still dark, the sun valiantly stood guard until nearly 7 p.m. "I love you," I said.

"Love you too," he said and hung up.

Whatever that meant, I had certainly tried.

I went back to 2010. By that time, I was accustomed to the unspoken pact that was my marriage. The excruciating banality of time passing. Despite the bitter cold, the March sun burned bright, its reflections on the snow almost blinding outside my window, the shadows of the tree limbs so black they looked like negatives of the real thing, strong grasping branches cracking the frozen earth.

Wednesday night, I decided to go outside and look at the planets. In their light, I cast a longer, darker shadow, a definitive black slash more permanent than the ashes I had buried under the snow to nurture the gardens of spring. Like the dwarf planet I had become, I was prepared to stand there as long as it took to be recognized. Until my frozen limbs became strong enough to support me, I would not move. I felt warm even in the frigid night and shed my winter coat. A comforting darkness embraced me.

Inside the airless cabin, the phone rang and rang, unanswered.

K.B. Holzman