

Nemesis

by Jo Deurbrouck

She was my third grade nemesis. I was hers. But that wasn't why it happened. It happened because we each periodically needed a place to hide and had discovered the same thing: The boiler room window at our elementary school didn't lock. Kids said the boiler room was haunted. I don't know if it was true then but it sure is now.

No, picking the same hiding place was just bad luck. Needing that hiding place on the same night, me because my big brother was 'babysitting' me and she because her mother had to work late, that was bad luck too.

It happened because of what we did not know.

She didn't know about my brother, how he liked to open the gas valve on the bathroom wall heater and slam the door with me inside. Listen to me puking, but not let me out until I said it: "I'm a baby." Always three times.

Other times he'd hoist me out the attic window and close it, him inside laughing, me huddled on the steep little cone of roof, back braced against the glass. Same deal. Three times.

Me, I didn't know what her mom called her the day she finally fisted up her courage to tell about her stepdad, how his eyes prickled on her skin and then that time in her bedroom. He said not to tell, it would never happen again. After the third time, she told.

What my brother made me call myself.

What her mother called her.

What we didn't know.

"Don't be a baby. We can share it," she said.

"I'm not a baby." I muttered at the girl-sized shadow whose body blocked the light from the window, whose face caught it and sent it to me like moonlight, whose hand was outstretched, as was mine. Something about the way her face shone in that dim light made me so angry I had to scream. "You're a liar! You won't do it. Liar, liar, liar."

I spun open the gas valve. It hissed triumphantly. She was going to puke before me. I'd had practice, after all. She'd run out puking and I'd be alone again.

She stared at me. Her eyes turned into dull pebbles. Then she flicked the lighter.

Which has given us a lot to talk about, down here in the dark, year after year. One thing we like to talk about is words -- how it's true they aren't sticks and stones. They can't kill. What they can do is make it impossible to live.

