

What You Choose to Take

by Kelli Trapnell

You first hear about the wildfire on the old kitchen radio, the serious “district warning” messages sounding too similar to the old *War of the Worlds* broadcast you listened to in Alternative Forms of American Literature, the class at Penn where you first met your husband six years ago, to truly hold your attention. The warnings become a peaceful white noise, like the sound of the Texas flag ripping in the wind outside the front door of your one story Colonial-style three-bedroom house out in Conroe, the one with the view of the suburb's man-made creek that you had been hoping you and your husband would be able to afford a year ago when you made your first down-payment.

You're standing in the kitchen, finishing the dishes from dinner. You've got the window over the sink open—you like to feel the hot, dry breeze flick your bangs away from your sticky forehead. You like how the sweet, summer smell of drying grass blends with the tang of the lemon dishwashing soap you use. In the other room, your husband sprawls across the impossibly comfortable red linen couch you've had since your freshman year of college, watching the beginning of an Astros home game and drinking his nightly bottle of Rolling Rock. Your baby boy is already down for the night; your husband tucked him into his crib at seven, and no unusual noises are coming from the baby monitor you wear clipped to the pocket of your favorite low-rise jeans.

You walk barefoot into the hallway, where your husband's most recent bucks stare at you from the walls, then you cross into the living room, where he is grumbling at the TV.

“What's the matter? ‘Stros losing?” you ask.

“No, we're actually winning for once,” says your husband. “It's these damn wildfire announcements. Keep interrupting the game.”

He reaches out to you and smiles, and you slide into his arms. You don't have to tell each other—your husband's I Love You is

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in the way he holds you close, so that you can feel him breathing. Your I Love You is the fact that you don't have to move away; with anyone other than your husband, you are uncomfortable with too much physical contact. Together, you sit and listen absently to the fire report.

"...twenty home evacuations already taking place in east Conroe, fires moving at reported speeds of 10 miles per hour. Anyone in the Conroe area should consider possibility of home evacuation. Stay tuned for more updates. Now back to our regular programming."

You watch as a slick black sedan cruises along a curving highway somewhere hilly and picturesque.

"Commercials. Of course," says your husband. You kiss him on the temple and get up from the couch. Something about the fire warning feels urgent, relevant to you, but you tell yourself this is that anxiety that the therapist has been warning you about since you had your son.

That's when you notice the crackling noise, almost as faint as the radio, almost as violent as the snap of the flag out front. You take a deep breath. Smoke.

You yell for your husband, and he leaps up from the couch. The house is getting warmer, yes, and the smoke is building, but your husband insists that you have enough time to get everything you need in order before you have to evacuate. You immediately call 911 and you rush to your son's room.

As you run down the hallway, you realize the smoke is getting thicker, the closer you get to the door. Your heart speeds up and stops all at once: the crackling, you realize is also coming from the baby monitor on your hip. Smoke is trailing out from beneath the door. You instinctively grab for the doorknob, but it burns your skin and you cry out. Your husband comes running.

"Watch out!" he yells at you, and pushes you aside. You listen as your husband tries to kick down the door, but the only noises coming from the nursery are the laughing flames. Oddly, you think of your husband's work papers in the office, of your favorite

books and photos. The things you know you can still save, if you get to them in time. You fight the urge to run and scoop them up, to cradle them in your arms.

Your husband breaks down the door and is immediately swallowed in a gasp of flame. He screams and you run for the blanket in the living room. Past him, you can see that the entire room is alive with flames, stifled in black smoke. You have to drag your burning husband away from the nursery, out into the back yard, across the small creek. Together, you watch as your future collapses in on itself, groaning with the wooden support beams of the house, with your husband's shaking sobs. You do not cry. In your arms, you clutch a copy of your favorite book, and your first family photo album. You look at your husband, who is too hot to touch, his skin rubbed and pink and shiny and taut, his eyebrows and hair singed off, and you wonder *why* you do not cry. The faint crackle of the flames still comes through the baby monitor that is still attached to your hip, then there's a noise like a pop, and you know the other monitor, the receiver has melted. You sit and watch the smoldering mass of flames that was your house buckle and splinter into a pile of firewood, even as the firefighters arrive to rescue you from yourselves.

