



JULIE PHILLIPS

Readers Write

PLAYING WITH FIRE

AS A TEENAGER I LIKED TO POUR GAS on anthills and set them ablaze, or spray burning charcoal with lighter fluid. I always assured onlookers that I knew what I was doing.

As an adult I owned land where I burned brush. I built one-man bonfires hot enough to melt old glass jars. In the spring I'd pour the "old gas" from my gas can on the fire. I wasn't being careless, I reasoned: I was just emptying the can.

My first job after nursing school was in a hospital burn unit. I met a lot of patients who supposedly had known what they were doing. They'd smoked cigarettes while stripping wood floors with a flammable chemical, or stuck their head inside a gas grill to see why it wasn't lighting, or put gasoline in a kerosene heater. I spent

many hours scrubbing dead tissue from their excruciating wounds before dressing them again. I administered gallons of morphine. I placed wash basins and blankets beneath their beds to catch the fluids pouring from their bodies. I listened to their screams.

Now I live in the city, where I dispose of old gas by taking it to the recycling facility and neatly pile brush at the curb to be hauled off by city workers. It's not very convenient, but I don't mind.

Bruce F.

Winston-Salem, North Carolina

THE SAME YEAR THE SERIAL KILLER Son of Sam was murdering young women, I ran away from home with a drifter named Kenny. He was heading to Alas-

ka to work the pipeline. The pay was so great, he said, that the dime stores there charged ten bucks for a Hershey bar. I was sixteen.

We hit the road outside of Bayonne, New Jersey, holding our thumbs out to the passing traffic. We caught our first ride with a truck driver whose CB-radio handle was "Midnight Rider." He winked and hinted that he'd like some time alone with me. The third time he hinted, Kenny cut our ride short.

The trucker left us by the roadside in southern New Jersey late at night. Before long, a swamp-colored sedan pulled up, its muffler threatening to fall off. The female passenger greeted us with a beery, toothless grin. "Where you headed?" she asked. The bearded driver wore a leather

vest that showed off his tattooed chest. We climbed into the back seat.

Their names were Sally and Dan, and they offered us a bed for the night in Dan's trailer. We hesitantly accepted. The trailer's paneled walls were decorated with paintings of a sad-eyed puppy and a Jesus with a flaming heart. A child of about seven was messily constructing a peanut-butter sandwich at the kitchen table. We watched while Dan cooked up speed in a spoon held over a lighter, a rubber tube tied around his arm and a syringe waiting nearby. Dan barked at Sally to get the kid the hell out. The boy darted out the door. In the morning we left.

Our next ride was in a pickup that stank of wet dog. The cigar-chomping driver told us he needed to make a stop out in the country; then we'd get back on the highway.

We pulled into a patch of dirt, where a beat-up Airstream trailer sat surrounded by lawn chairs, tires, and overgrown grass. A dog lay leashed to a pipe driven into the ground, her tail slowly beating the dust.

"I got something I believe you two'll be interested in," the driver said to us. Beyond the trailer a lightly trod path led into the woods. "You're from New York, right?" the driver asked, running his hands over his bib overalls. "Well, this'll interest you, I'll bet." The dog barked as if in warning as we followed him into the woods.

In a tight clearing stood five or six large cages, raised on posts. Deep reds and flashes of gold stirred behind the wire mesh. Shrieks arose from the cages.

"Meet my fighters!" the driver hooted. "My cocks!"

The agitated roosters snapped their cracked beaks against the wires.

A week later Kenny and I were busted near Denver, Colorado. He was taken away in a cop car while I was ferried to juvenile hall and eventually flown home. Five years after that, I was driving back to college with a load of groceries when I saw Kenny standing beneath a highway overpass, taking shelter from a late-summer rain. I didn't stop.

Holly W. Manley
New York, New York

HIS DAUGHTER AND MINE WENT TO

preschool together, and he and I talked twice a day as we dropped off and picked up our children. By spring we were planning play dates that started at the park at 10 A.M. and ended over afternoon cocktails before our spouses came home from work. I told myself that he was just a friend. After all, he and my husband went to ball-games together. So why had I suddenly lost ten pounds and started putting on makeup every morning?

One night when his wife and children were away and my husband was on a business trip, he asked if he could come over for dinner. He arrived after my kids had gone to bed. Five hours and two bottles of wine later, we were sitting side by side on the couch, talking but not touching. I went to the kitchen for something and stood gripping the sink and staring out the window. I sent two prayers heavenward: "Please, God, let something happen," and "Please, God, don't let anything happen."

That night I learned I have the will but not the courage to stray.

Name Withheld

MY MIDWESTERN BROTHER-IN-LAW was a charismatic fundamentalist and a Boy Scout troop leader. One summer he brought his troop east to camp out in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Because many of the boys had never seen the ocean, I insisted that they continue on to the coast and camp for two days on the Chesapeake Bay. My daughter Claire and I joined them.

As soon as we arrived, a scout named Jimmy began gathering sticks. A smaller-than-average twelve-year-old, Jimmy didn't want to go swimming with the other boys. He wanted to build the fire. My brother-in-law offered to stay with Jimmy while Claire and I took the rest of the scouts to the beach.

When we returned to the campsite, the fire was roaring, and Jimmy was running around it in circles, tossing in pine cones while my brother-in-law stood watch. Later that night Jimmy sat with a stick, stirring the embers. He said he'd stay with his fire until it had gone out.

Before we left the next morning, Jimmy

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Because of space limitations, we're unable to print all the submissions we receive. We edit pieces, often quite heavily, but contributors have the opportunity to approve or disapprove of editorial changes prior to publication. (If you don't want to be contacted regarding the editing of your work, please let us know.)

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Waking Up	February 1	July 2006
Temptation	March 1	August 2006
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006
Falling	May 1	October 2006
Nine To Five	June 1	November 2006
Gambling	July 1	December 2006

asked if I thought he'd made a good fire. I told him I did, but I asked him to promise that he'd make fires only in safe situations, when there were adults around. He nodded. Claire and I talked on the way home about how the scouts provided an outlet for Jimmy to build fires in a controlled environment.

A decade later my brother-in-law was convicted and imprisoned for downloading child pornography from the Internet. "I've always had an obsession with young boys," he admitted.

All these years we'd thought Jimmy had been the only one playing with fire that hot August day.

Name Withheld

AT MY HIGH SCHOOL, THE LAST DAY of classes before final exams was known as "Cut Day." According to tradition, the entire student body left school after third period that day. Anticipating this annual walkout, the school administrators posted guards at all the exits. But I was an accomplished truant. After third period I went through the doors marked **FACULTY ONLY** and made my way to an unguarded fire exit with a built-in alarm.

I'd pulled false alarms in the past. Afterward I'd wait for the building to be evacuated; then I'd pee in the teachers' coffee makers, write obscenities on the blackboards, and pilfer office supplies. For ten minutes in the empty school, I was king.

This time I had a bad feeling, but I closed my eyes and pushed open the door anyway. The alarm went off, the students walked out, and I went home, confident I'd gotten away with it.

The next day, a Saturday, I was crossing the street when a minivan pulled up at the corner. The driver was a security guard from school. "You're in big trouble, bro," he said. "They caught you on camera. On Monday you're going down!"

The following Monday hundreds of students stood in front of the school, waiting to be called in for exams. Several security guards and two policemen flanked the entrance, looking for me. I decided to turn myself in.

I took my exam seated between the two police officers. When I'd finished, they handcuffed me and led me out the

front door. Students waiting for their next exam applauded as the officers ushered me into a waiting squad car.

My acts of rebellion seemed carefree but were motivated by pain. From grammar school on, I'd sought from authorities the attention and discipline I didn't get at home. Some kids like me are lucky: a caring teacher or counselor takes them by the hand and steers them in the right direction. I never found anyone to take me by the hand, so I settled for the next best thing: someone to take me away in handcuffs.

Rich G.

Providence, Rhode Island

I MET JEFF THROUGH MY JOB WORK-ing with foster children. At fourteen, he had lived in the same residential treatment program for six years. His mother was in jail, and his father's whereabouts were unknown. The program offered stability in a world where there was little Jeff could count on: agency policies changed, caseworkers left or got promoted, and foster parents retired or threw kids out.

Jeff did well in school. His teachers and house parents liked him. His house father was even teaching him to play golf. Then one day, probably out of boredom or curiosity, Jeff took apart a fan in his room. He reassembled it with a pair of wires crossed, and when he plugged it back in, it started a small fire.

Though there was no significant property damage and no one had gotten hurt, the fire set off a chain of events in the foster-care bureaucracy: The program staff met with Jeff's caseworker. Jeff was evaluated by a fire marshal and a psychologist. There was disagreement about whether the fire had been intentionally set, but one thing was for sure: no one could guarantee that Jeff would never set a fire again. I argued unsuccessfully for keeping Jeff in the only home he'd known for the past six years, but it was too little, too late.

After weeks of reports and discussion, the program staff concluded that Jeff presented a liability and could not return to the program — not even to pack up his things or to say goodbye to his friends. The staff members who had worked closely with Jeff were saddened,

but they couldn't object; their jobs required them to be team players. Jeff was moved to a rural community where he knew no one and would see his caseworker only every few months.

Jeff's case reminded me of an experience I'd had growing up in the inner city. My friends and I would gather in a vacant lot to smoke cigarettes and experiment with lighting small brush fires. We'd let the fire go until one of us got nervous and stomped on it to put it out. Then we'd all jump in to help. One time a fire got out of hand, and we couldn't stamp it out. We ran back home and told a friend's mother about "a fire we just saw." She called the fire department, and we rushed back to the scene to watch them put the fire out. Nobody ever discovered that we had started it.

Watching Jeff's fate unfold, I felt as helpless as I had watching that brush fire roar out of control decades before. In both cases I wished I'd jumped in sooner.

K.C. Murphy

Portland, Maine

MACEO WAS PART NATIVE AMERICAN, part African, maybe some Puerto Rican or Mexican or Spanish thrown in. He was a friend of the sandal maker who worked in back of my trendy clothing shop in Berkeley, California. Though I saw Maceo a lot, usually around closing time, I never learned his last name.

"Can you help me move?" he asked one day as I was locking up. He needed a van, and I had one I used for business.

"Sure," I replied. "Just give me fifteen minutes to close out the books and the register for the day."

While I added up the invoices and counted the money, Maceo removed a pack of cigarettes from his pocket.

"No smoking in the shop," I reminded him.

"I'm not going to smoke," he said. He took a small foil packet from the box, unfolded it, and snorted some of the white powder within. Then he offered some to me.

"I don't do drugs," I said.

After I'd finished closing up, we left in my van. As we approached the street Maceo lived on, he noticed two police cars parked at the end of the block.

"Don't turn," he said. "Just go on

around the block.”

I looked at him in surprise, but he said nothing, so I approached his block from the other end.

“I guess it’s OK,” he said. “Pull up to that house.”

While I loaded boxes, Maceo was inside the house packing. On my third trip to the van, two policemen walked up to me. They mentioned a name I had never heard before and asked me if it belonged to the man inside. I said no. Then they followed me into the house. Maceo was standing on a chair unhooking curtains. The police said the name again and asked if it was his.

“Some people call me that.”

“We have a warrant for your arrest for overdue parking tickets.”

As they walked him outside, I remembered the cocaine in Maceo’s pocket. It would surely be found, and he’d go to jail. I tried to think of a way to get the drugs away from him without arousing suspicion.

When the police went to put Maceo in the police car, I shouted, “Give me back my cigarettes!”

Maceo reached into his pocket, withdrew the pack of cigarettes, and handed them to me right under the officers’ noses. Shaking, I turned on my heel and walked quickly to the van without looking back.

When Maceo reappeared at the store a few days later, he fell to his knees in front of me and said, “Susie, you saved my life.”

But I had not saved his life. Several years later I saw a story in the newspaper about a man who had died of an overdose. His name was not Maceo. It was the name the police had asked me about.

*Sioux Hart
Clearwater, Florida*

I’D ALWAYS BEEN FAITHFUL TO MY husband, but I had many sexual fantasies about women, fantasies I’d never acted on.

One night someone kidded my friend Kathryn about how affectionate she and I were with one another. Kathryn replied, “I was just acting on a little crush I have on Allison.” Suddenly it occurred to me that we could become lovers. Our flirting

became more daring. We even kissed as we left a bar. I took a day off from work, and we spent the afternoon in bed.

I had told my husband about my attraction to women, and because I loved him, I now confessed my interest in Kathryn. Somehow the conversation led to the idea of a threesome. We tried it a few times, but it felt odd. I didn’t want to share Kathryn, and she felt the same way about me. I was torn between wanting to keep my marriage together and wanting to spend more time with her.

Finally, both Kathryn and my husband told me they couldn’t go on this way. Kathryn didn’t want to be a part-time lover. My husband, understandably, felt threatened. He was trying to let me explore this new side of myself, but it was becoming obvious that Kathryn and I were more than just occasional bed partners.

I had planned to grow old with my husband and loved the life we had together. I was blinded by my feelings for Kathryn, but I knew our relationship was bound to end. Breaking up with her was a long and devastating process. As my exciting new life disappeared, I began the arduous process of repairing my old one.

Over time and with work, my marriage has settled back into its routine, but it will never be the same. Though I try to bury my feelings, the fire still burns.

Name Withheld

I WAS ONLY SIX WHEN DANNY AND I burned down three acres of woods in our suburban neighborhood. We had built a labyrinthine fort out of discarded matchstick blinds and camouflaged it with pine straw. It was dark inside the fort, so we filched candles and matches from our homes. The rest was detailed in the incident report.

After the two fire engines and one hook-and-ladder truck had pulled away, my father gave me “a good talking-to,” as he called it. I tried to listen, but was distracted by the sound of Danny’s wails from five houses away.

Danny had once told me how his parents handled “scoldings.” I knew that his father was beating the hell out of him. I was flooded with conflicting feelings: sadness for Danny, relief that I wasn’t in his shoes, and extreme guilt.

I have the same feelings decades later whenever I’m confronted with injustice.

*S.C. Snowden
Hendersonville, North Carolina*

(end of excerpt)