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Maddison Colvin

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ON DISCOVERING A FIRE

by

Maddison Colvin

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE in the kitchen, flap your hands. Open a window, turn on the stove fan, and hold the burning object under running water until extinguished. Flap your hands some more. If the burnt object was formerly edible, pretend it is still so. If inedible, pretend the fire never happened.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE in the bathroom, do not, on no account or under any circumstances, let anyone know that you burned your hair in a curling iron because you got distracted dancing around in your underwear to Daft Punk.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE in a wastebasket, try to discern what is being burned. If the envelopes appear to contain government secrets or evidence of corporate espionage, weigh your options (potential blackmail payout vs. likelihood of ending up in a Serbian prison). During the deliberation process, absentmindedly watch the documents turn black and curl in on themselves until useless. Later, ask the owner of the wastebasket what the letters contained. Discover they were love notes. Immediately lose interest.
ON DISCOVERING A FIRE raging wildly in a clearing in the woods behind your house, assume that your brothers have built it for reasons of their own. Take the opportunity to roast marshmallows and Starburst candies. Watch it until you become sleepy and all of your clothes smell like woodsmoke.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE escape ladder tucked into the corner of your closet, obsess over it for days. Lose sleep for weeks thinking that the existence of the ladder means that a) a fire could potentially burn down your house, trapping you on the second floor, and b) this will definitely happen, probably tonight, and you will be one-hundred percent dead. When your parents notice your phobia, they will run fire drills so that you can feel more safe and prepared. These drills make you even more certain that you will die in a fire. Eventually, forget about the ladder. Move on to more serious fears, like wasps and brightly colored wigs.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE that your burgeoningly bipolar sister has set in your Barbie house in the closet, put it out with a bottle of water. Hide the smell with nail polish. Hide all the lighters your sister keeps buying at gas stations. Rebuild the house with more cardboard boxes and origami wallpaper. Don't mention anything to your parents—they would only worry.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE has burned down your favorite hometown diner, do not think about all the times you went there with your grandmother. Don't think about Benny and Joon being filmed there in the '90s. Don't think about the cast of Norman Rockwell characters that made up its regulars. Mourn for a while. Find another place to buy your weekly French dip and stare at sandwich boys the next time you visit Spokane. It will be fine.
ON DISCOVERING A FIRE in a dream, do not run away. You’ll be unable to escape. Instead, sit a while with the fire. Talk to it. Discover its secrets and its personality. If you are lucky, it will quiet. When it becomes reasonable, you won’t be burned at all.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE that burns with an unearthly spectrum of colors, do not panic. It is probably a combination of chemical chlorides, carbonates, sulfates, and household cleaners. NOT magic.

ON DISCOVERING A FIRE that has never before been seen by human eyes, don’t be surprised. Do not plant a flag. Do not proclaim your discovery from the rooftops. Do not name it after your favorite middle school science teacher. Remember this: all fires are new.