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To the Boy in My Second Grade Class

by Sarah Jane Myers

I know you were just joking, back in our classroom, about our Fruit-Roll-Ups burning where we left them in the gymnasium lunchroom. Because of the fire drill. I know you probably weren't thinking about your father at all when you said the joke, even though it was your first day back at school. After everything happened. Were you? Were you thinking of your father when you joked about our Fruit-Roll-Ups burning? I couldn't think of anything else after our teacher told us—the horribleness of a father burning—the horribleness of a father sleeping and burning. I know I should have thought before. But I didn't. "Our Fruit-Roll-Ups won't burn because it's just a drill. . . but your dad did. He burned." I know I shouldn't have said it.

Your father burning didn't seem real to me. I couldn't believe that could happen. I said it as a question. *He burned?* I wonder if it seemed real to you. I wonder if you hated me for making it more real with my words. Those words have burned me for years with acid guilt. I wish I would have known not to say them.

I know we haven't had a class or even the same city in common since second grade, before you moved away. That year in elementary school was the last time I saw you. I'm writing you this now even though I don't know where to send it. When our teacher told us you weren't in school because your father died in a fire, in his trailer, asleep and alone, I know she told us so we would be extra nice. I didn't realize that "extra nice" meant I shouldn't remind you of your father burning. I wasn't extra nice. I know I deserved it when you kicked me in the shins.

I don't blame you at all for yelling, "Shut up!" I don't blame you for running away. And when the silent watchers finally spoke up and said, "You're in so much trouble," I knew they were right. I stared down at the green hard-packed carpet of the classroom, and my words burned in my throat. And when our tall, gray-haired teacher came back after lunch and took you and me into the yellow linoleum hallway and looked at us with tears leaking in the corners of her eyes, I knew I deserved to be punished. I knew she was right when she told me with a hitch in her voice how horribly I needed to apologize. Do you remember that? I stood across from you and our crying teacher and I could think only of the burning—flames and smoke filled my mind. I wanted frantically to figure out how it could be real that your father burned. Was mine going to burn too? Would everyone's? I somehow managed an "I'm sorry," and you just looked at me. Then you walked back into our classroom, and the metal door clanged behind you. I couldn't look at our teacher alone in the hallway with me. I looked at the cracked yellow linoleum under my feet, and everywhere inside, I burned.

We never said a thing to each other again. Sometimes you walked past my desk to the pencil sharpener in your old white tennis shoes, and I opened my mouth to try. But I always felt a rock at the back of my mouth, and you walked past before I could ever swallow it and speak. Then you moved away to another city.

The words I shouldn't have said and the words of apology that I should have said that day in the hallway drift back to me now like smoke down an empty strip of yellow linoleum. I am not writing this letter to try and apologize better. I still don't know how. There are rocks in my throat. In my second-grade mind all the fathers are sleeping and burning and I can't understand. In my second-grade mind you are still walking endlessly past my desk to the pencil sharpener in your old white tennis shoes. I hope my words don't still burn in your memory, too. I hope you have found a way to forgive me; I hope because I think this letter is my way of trying to forgive myself.

Sarah Jane Myers is an essayist, whale watcher, mother, and sourdough bread lover. She lives in Provo with her husband and daughter where she enjoys walking in the mountains, reading C.S. Lewis and listening to classic Russian composers like Shostakovich.