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The Ash

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The Ash

On the third day of the ash, the children grew quiet. Three-year-old Ira sat on the couch and sucked his thumb. Carrie, the baby, refused to stay in her walker. She whimpered softly, wanted me to hold her. It was hot too and the air in the house was stale and humid from keeping doors and windows closed. And though the sky began to look blue again, we still couldn't go out. A man from the health department interrupted television programs at half-hour intervals to tell us that.

"The urge now is to go outside," he said. "But there's still a lot of small stuff in the air, invisible stuff. It's the volcanic glass we're worried about. Once that glass is in your lungs, it's going to stay there."

The first morning, the town looked bled of color. A gray smog hung in the air and powdery ash coated the grass and sidewalks. The few ghostly cars that passed the house kicked up swirling, gritty clouds. The darkness and eerie silence excited us. We took pictures of the ash-coated garden. We made popcorn for breakfast and turned on the television.

The announcer said school had been cancelled and all but essential businesses were closed. Ted called his editor to see if a sports reporter's job was considered essential. The editor said Ted should come to work and write a story on all the track meets the schools were calling off.

I watched television those first three days. Experts from the university and community came on to discuss the situation. One said the pollution had been measured at twelve times the federal maximum, although pollution monitors were so clogged with ash

it was hard to tell. There were pessimists who warned of silicosis and other lung damage, and optimists who thought the minerals in the ash might be good for the crops.

Between experts, the local station showed a silent film clip of Mount St. Helens exploding. Over and over we watched that still, snow-capped cone come alive, mutate to a mushroom cloud, billowing and frothing. Then they showed maps and charts with little arrows marching across Washington and Idaho to Montana where a penciled storm of ash was falling down on us.

We were escaping to Billings where they'd moved the state track meet. We kept the children in the house until we were set to go so they wouldn't breathe too much of the volcanic glass. Ted put on his bandanna and took the dog to the Shaws' next door. He came back wearing a surgical mask and carrying three more for us. Arnie Shaw was a postal worker and they gave out extras at his office.

I put my mask on and we loaded our car, the grainy smog stinging my eyes. I thought I'd packed lightly but our luggage and baby gear completely filled the compartment behind the back seat. Ted didn't say anything, just sighed loudly and shoved at a paper sack I'd set on top of the load.

"Careful," I said. "There's food in there."

"What did you bring food for? We can stop to eat."

"It's crackers and juice for the kids—to keep them happy."

Ted picked up the sack and put it in another spot. "Now the hatchback won't close," he said.

"Give it to me," I said. "I'll put it on the floor."

My voice sounded hollow and strange to me inside the mask. I glanced at Ted's eyebrows, knitted over his mask, and had a

sudden vision of surgeons bent over a body, arguing about the placement of a clamp. I laughed. Ted didn't ask me what was funny. He shook his head again and walked back to the house.

Ted had been quiet all morning, I chatty and determinedly cheerful. I'd outmaneuvered him the night before when he announced he was going to Billings with a photographer, just the two of them. Pure panic at being left in our clammy house—as well as resentment that he seemed to want to leave us—gave me the edge. I felt so suffocated that the eight-hour drive Ted dreaded seemed almost appealing to me. We could take our car; it was bigger than the photographer's. We could stay with my aunt and uncle in Billings—they'd been asking us to visit them for years—and the newspaper would only have to pay for a single room. When I began looking up my uncle's phone number, Ted gave up.

Denise, the photographer, was ready to go when we got to her duplex. Before Ted could get out of the car, she stood on the porch wearing a ski mask and carrying two bags.

"Oh Christ!" Ted said. "Where are we going to put those?"

"We can put one under Ira's feet," I said from the back seat. "Ira can hold his toys."

"No I can't," Ira said.

Denise got into the car and took off her mask, then twisted around in the seat to say hello to the children and me.

"Here, give me a bag," I said.

"That's okay, Anna," she said, smiling. "I can put them both under my feet. It looks like you're full-up back there." She had a sweet, large-toothed grin and dark hair that fell in a gleaming sheet to the middle of her back.

We drove through the university district where grayed cars edged tree-lined streets. On some windshields, “nuke” had been written in the ash. As soon as we left the canyon east of town, the sky grew clearer.

“The sun!” Denise said. “It’s still there.”

I gave each child a graham cracker. Carrie chewed the corner off hers then mashed the rest on the side of her car seat. When her head started to loll, I wedged a blanket in the window to shade her. By the time we stopped in Drummond to have the ash cleaned out of the air filter, she was asleep.

The car ran smoothly after the stop. Ted rolled down his window. “Air,” he shouted into the wind. “Fresh air!” He glanced in the mirror and grinned at Ira who’d put the Walkman on and silently mouthed the words of a story tape. When I scooted forward between the seats to ask Denise a question, Ted put a hand on my knee and gave it an apologetic squeeze.

“Where are you from, Denise?” I asked.

“Seattle. I just got out of school there.”

“Oh well then,” I said. “You’re not used to sunshine anyway. You probably didn’t even notice that ash cloud.”

She gave me another of those smiles then turned around again.

“Are you married?” I asked, though I was quite sure she wasn’t. She looked too young. And there was something else—a prick of interest when she looked at Ted, a subtle change in her voice when she spoke to him that said she was unattached, looking.

“Not me,” Denise said.

“Smart gal,” Ted said. He’d kept his hand on my knee and gave it another squeeze.

“Oh you’ll get married,” I said. “It’ll sneak up on you.”

Ted and I were going into our married couple act. We seemed to do it most often with my younger brother and other singles. We made ourselves out to be these wildly original people—these characters—who had somehow, inexplicably, been trapped into a cartoon life of convention.

“I don’t know, Denise,” Ted was saying, shaking his head. “We’ve got the boy. We’ve got the girl. We’ve got the mortgage. We’ve got the dog . . .”

“We have no cat!” I interrupted, holding up one finger as if making an important discovery.

“That’s right!” Ted said, as if excited by my revelation. “We do not have a cat.” He said it grandly, with a sigh of relief. As if, for now, we’d been saved.

Ted and Denise began discussing their strategy for covering the track meet and I sat back and looked out the window at the greening hillsides that flanked the highway. Ira had fallen asleep in the corner of the seat. I settled him under my arm and covered him with Ted’s jacket.

I listened to Denise talk. She had an odd voice, low with a throaty catch to it and a trace of some regional accent I couldn’t place. But there was something I recognized in it too. I’d sounded like that when I was her age, especially when I talked about my job the way she did now. Pleased, full of self-satisfied power. I couldn’t seem to muster that voice when I talked about the children, my home, the other things I did now. Instead I used an exasperated, ironic voice. The cartoon mother.

The day grew unseasonably hot for May. We stopped for lunch in Butte, then Ira began to whine and made us stop at every rest area. He had to go to the bathroom. He was dying of thirst. Ted turned on the radio to drown out Ira’s complaints. The chairman

of the chemistry department was discussing the ash. "It's very abrasive and slightly basic," he said. The night before, an expert on TV had described it as slightly acidic. "More acidic than a pumpkin, less acidic than a banana," he'd said.

We didn't reach Billings until after six. At Denise's motel, Ted and I watched enviously as she got out of the car and walked to the door of what was surely a silent, air-conditioned room.

On the way to my aunt and uncle's, I began to worry about our decision to stay with them, especially since Ira was still whining and Carrie too had grown fussy. They had children, three girls, but theirs were in high school now. I really didn't know any of them very well. I'd known my uncle Andrew best when he was single and in law school and spent all his holidays with my family. He was handsome and funny then, and more than a little wild. I'd had a child's crush on him. I hadn't seen him or his wife Sarah since our wedding when they'd given us a Belleek cream and sugar set they'd bought in Dublin. Ted had picked up the delicate pitcher, pearly white inside with raised figures and flowers on the outside. "I could break this just by looking at it," he said.

"Oh, use it," Sarah said with a little wave of her hand. "We have a whole set of Belleek and we use it all the time."

Both Sarah and Andrew came out to greet us when we finally found their house and began unloading ourselves from the car. Sarah looked marvelous, slimmer than she'd been during her child-bearing years. Her honey-colored hair was pulled back in a smooth roll behind her head. Andrew held a newspaper in one hand as if he expected to go back to reading it momentarily. Middle age hadn't been as kind to him. He'd grown thick around the waist and his cheeks were sagging into jowls.

They were gracious and enthusiastic hosts. They showed us to comfortable rooms, fed us a good dinner while we caught up on family news and told them about the ash.

“You poor dears,” Sarah said.

Ted told them about the pumpkin and the banana and made it funnier than it had first sounded on television. All of us laughed. Andrew disappeared to his study immediately after we’d eaten. We didn’t see him again until the next morning.

In fact, in the three days we stayed with them, everyone seemed to disappear regularly. Andrew was at work or in his study most of the time. Ted spent all his time at the track meet, more often than not calling to say he’d find a meal downtown. I think I’d had some kind of hope that the cousins, even if they were too old to play with my children, might want to babysit. But they were busy with their own things—school, dances, friends, endless hairwashing and dressing. Their play amounted to stopping briefly to tickle Ira, or picking up Carrie and saying she was “the cutest little thing.” Sarah was home more than the rest and she was always gracious, always pleasant. But she too seemed to be on the run all the time—to her class, errands, volunteer work.

I began to feel that I’d traded one prison for another, only this one was more difficult than the ash-suffocated house we’d left. Carrie was fascinated by the stairs, which we didn’t have at home. Over and over I’d follow her as she crawled up them, then catch her as she tried to go down. At the same time, I had to keep Ira from touching things. The house was beautifully decorated and filled with precious objects—vases and tiny cups from China, bones and artifacts collected by Sarah’s archaeologist brother. Ira tried to be good, but he couldn’t resist handling the bones, looking at their undersides. We took long walks when I’d scan the

clear western sky, looking for signs of ash, worrying that my garden was suffocated, the lawn dead.

Our last evening, I followed Sarah into the kitchen after dinner. We were discussing a class she was taking, 19th Century British Lit., which had been my field in college, and I was enjoying myself. I couldn't remember when I'd last talked about Yeats and Hardy. We bandied about other names until Sarah interrupted me to show me how she filled her new espresso machine.

I realized then that I'd lost track of the baby. I could see Ira seated at the dining table eating a bowl of ice cream, but I hadn't seen Carrie since I put her down on the floor right after dinner. At the same instant that it struck me she had probably gone for the stairs, the sounds came—a series of soft thumps, then a wail that dissolved into silence as Carrie ran out of breath.

When I got to her, she still hadn't breathed. She lay on the floor at the foot of the carpeted stairway, her face bright red and her mouth open in a silent cry. Danielle, the middle cousin, stood over her wringing her hands. I put a hand behind Carrie's head and gently picked her up. When she was upright, she caught her breath with a great ragged gasp, then began to howl.

"I saw her fall," Danielle said, dancing nervously from foot to foot. "I mean, I was just walking by and she was, you know, falling before I could do anything." She had to shout over Carrie's racket. She watched me feel the baby's head all over for bumps. "I don't think she hit her head on anything. She just sort of slid down the stairs on her back."

I tried to smile at Danielle. Carrie continued to scream and I rubbed her back. "I don't think she could howl like this if she were really hurt," I said. "I think she's just scared."

All of them were there then—Sarah wiping her hands on a dish cloth, Andrew holding a file folder. Both of them studied Carrie and, I thought, carefully avoided looking at me. After all, I hadn't been doing my job. Ira stood beside me with one arm around my leg and tears standing in his eyes. He jiggled Carrie's foot. "Stop crying," he shouted.

"Should we call the doctor?" Andrew asked. "Just in case?"

Sarah had me hold Carrie's eyes open so she could look into them. "I think she's fine," she said. "Just scared, poor babe."

She led me to a rocking chair in the corner of the living room. "You sit here and rock her and I'll bring you your coffee and something for the baby to drink."

"And me to drink," Ira said. He crawled into the chair too.

"And you," Sarah smiled and winked at Ira.

Andrew patted my shoulder and said something about kids being tough. Then he escaped to his study. The girls drifted up the stairs. We sat and rocked until Carrie's wails became soft, shaky sobs. I glanced down at Ira, at his serious little face pinched tight with worry, then I buried my face in Carrie's damp neck. And then I was crying. It was as if something had broken open inside me, releasing unending sobs. I couldn't stop—not even when Ira, in tears himself, began shaking my shoulder saying "Mommy, you stop that!" Not even when Sarah came into the room carrying a tray.

"Oh my goodness!" she said.

"She's crying!" Ira shouted at her, his voice squeaky with panic.

I went to bed early, with the children. But the events of the evening had worked on me in such a way that I was stupid with exhaustion but unable to sleep. I tossed in bed then finally got up

to wait for Ted. He'd called earlier to say the meet was over and, if I didn't mind, he was going out for a beer with some other reporters. He called when I'd just managed to stop crying, but didn't notice anything was wrong—or, if he did, he ignored my shaky breath and thick voice. "Sure," I said. "Go ahead. I'm fine. We're all fine."

Sarah was in the room when he called and she frowned at me when I hung up the phone. "You should have told him you need him here," she said.

"Oh I'm not sure I do, right now," I said, forcing a smile. "I have you to talk to. And by the time he could get here, I'd probably be asleep. I'm beat."

We did talk then, after a fashion. Sarah did most of the talking. She told me about little accidents her children had had as babies, about another class she was planning to take, her plans for their house. I'm sure she went on and on about those things to help me relax, to calm me down. And I did grow calmer but I only half listened. When she stopped talking and took a sip of her coffee, I blurted out, "Is Uncle Andrew happy?"

I glanced at her and realized at once how rude I'd been, how accusatory that must have sounded.

"What do you mean, Anna?" she said, her fine features stiff.

I backpedaled immediately. "Oh I guess I don't mean happy. He just seems tired. Overworked or something," I added lamely.

"He's working on an important case right now," Sarah said slowly. "And he does work hard. We all work hard."

I'd made an awful mistake. Sarah wore the same forbidding look my mother had when, shortly after my marriage, I decided that—since we were both married women—we could discuss her relationship with my dad. The same little wall had gone up then.

The kitchen clock said one-thirty, later than I'd thought. The bars would be closing at two, then Ted would be home. I poured myself a glass of milk and went to a corner of the family room that adjoined the kitchen and sat in an armchair. I drank the milk but felt too tired to get up and look through the books lining one wall of the room. Instead, I sat there in the dark and watched the clock in the dimly-lit kitchen.

I heard someone coming down the stairs and realized I must have dozed. The clock read three-twenty. It struck me with a little jolt that Ted still wasn't back. He'd have had to walk right past me. I'd have heard him.

Andrew didn't see me when he shuffled into the kitchen. He wore a bathrobe and slippers and his thinning hair stuck out wildly in tufts. He opened the refrigerator and stood for a moment studying the contents. He found a glass and poured himself some milk. He drank it, still standing in front of the open refrigerator door, then poured more. He turned back toward the dining room and I sat very still in my shadowed corner of the family room. The moment for announcing myself had long passed and now I wanted only to avoid inevitable questions—what was I doing up? Where was my husband?

Andrew stopped and turned around suddenly and crossed the kitchen, setting his glass on the eating bar that separated the kitchen from the family room. He began digging in the cookie jar on the bar, then stopped and peered in my direction. I raised one hand in a silent salute and he squinted and leaned forward, his hand moving from the cookie jar to the knife block beside it. "Who's there?" he said.

"It's me, Uncle Andrew," I said. "Anna."

“Christ! You scared me.” He skirted the end of the bar and walked toward me. “Can’t see a darn thing without my glasses. What are you doing up? Didn’t those babies wear you out?”

I shrugged. “Couldn’t sleep.”

“I didn’t hear Ted come in,” he said.

“Well, he hasn’t yet.” I looked away. “He went out with some sportswriters and I guess they got carried away.”

Andrew rubbed his jaw thoughtfully. “He do this often?”

“No. Hardly ever this late.”

Andrew went on as if he hadn’t heard me, “You’ll have to put a stop to it. I used to do that. When Sarah and I were first married. I’d go out with a bunch of lawyers after work on Friday nights. This was in Helena. We used to go to this old bar downtown where all the legislators hung out—what the heck was the name of that place?” His face softened as he sank into the memory and he put a reflective hand over his mouth. “It’s on the tip of my tongue. Anyway, there was this great old Irish bartender.” He shook his head. “Can’t remember.” His eyes focused on me then. “Anyway, Sarah put a stop to that.” He leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. “Good night, little Annie.”

He turned and scuffed into the living room, a blurry, wavering shape that crossed the room and faded. I’d teared up when he kissed me, when I smelled on his cheek the combination of Old Spice and cigar smoke that had been his scent since he was in college. At least time, and Sarah, hadn’t changed that.

He came back a few minutes later carrying a book. He wore his glasses now but looked at me over the top of them. His head was tilted to the side and the humorous, ironic twist of his mouth was an expression I remembered well from my childhood. “If you’re

going to have a fight," he said, "do it in the living room. This room is right under ours. I don't think I want to hear it."

I sat in the dark another ten minutes after Andrew went back upstairs. Then I went to the telephone in the kitchen and looked through the directory for the number of the Billings sports editor. I'd thought about looking up Denise's motel but didn't have the nerve. I told myself I was worried about Ted's safety. That was all.

I woke the editor who told me Ted was at the Sheraton watching television with a bunch of newspaper people. "They're all in one room," he said, "having a few beers, watching a movie. It's all right . . ."

"No it's not," I said icily. I hung up the phone before he could say anything else.

When I called the room at the Sheraton, a woman answered. There was laughter in the background and television noise. I asked for Ted and she said, "Righto. Here he is. Oh Ted," she lilted. "It's for you, Ted." Somebody laughed. I could hear Denise's unmistakable voice. Then—as the receiver changed hands—I heard the woman hiss, "I think it's his wife." A man chuckled, "Or his mother."

There was another pause. I could picture the party. A cigarette haze, beer spilling on garish hotel bedspreads. The sudden weird nostalgia it gave me only fueled my anger.

"Who was that?" I asked when Ted said hello.

"Oh, crazy people, they're all crazy people here. Journalists, you know." He was performing for the people in the room. Then he spoke more quietly. "I'm sorry it's so late, Anna. They have cable here and we started watching this great movie. Why don't you go back to bed? I'll come right home as soon as it's over. I'll sneak in—quiet as a mouse."

"Listen to me," I said. "You be here in fifteen minutes or don't come at all. Ever. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

"Oh Anna, for God's sake . . ."

"I mean it, Ted." I kept my voice low and hard so I wouldn't cry. I slammed down the receiver before he could answer.

In the minutes that followed, I worked at my hurt and anger. Everything Ted had said and done in the last month began to seem suspect, fraught with meaning and menace. I kept seeing Denise's gleaming fall of hair, that wide carefree smile.

It was twelve minutes from the time of the phone call till he came in the back door. I'd gone into the living room and sat in a chair in the far corner. He was starting up the stairs when I called to him. He walked over to my chair, smiling drunkenly, hands out at his sides in a helpless gesture. He was ready to pacify me, to laugh it off.

"You make me sick," I said.

"Whoa," he said, throwing his arms up as if to shield himself.

"Who do you think you are—some kind of teenager? You think you'll come home a little late and charm Mom out of being mad?"

Ted squatted beside my chair and put a hand on my arm. He was still grinning. "I have never for one moment thought of you as my mom."

I pushed his hand away. "You're drunk and you smell like something dead." I knew that was weak but also knew it would make him stop grinning like that. It did. He stood up and turned back toward the stairs, shaking his head. "I'm going to bed."

"Sure. Go ahead. Go to sleep and then you won't have to think about how I feel—or what my relatives think of your staying out all night."

Ted turned around and walked back to my chair. "I'm sure," he hissed, leaning close, "if you weren't sitting here shouting at me, they wouldn't have to think about it at all."

"Andrew was down here a little while ago. He's probably still awake."

"Oh. Mr. Cheerful." Ted straightened when he said this and smiled slightly. But it was the little curl of his lip that set me off. I began spewing accusations and insults, anything I could think of that would wound, anything that would make him feel as alone and out of place as I'd felt for the past few days. I didn't stop until Ted grabbed my shoulders and began shaking me.

"Shut up, Anna," he said between clenched teeth. "Just shut up. Now."

I looked down at the cords in his arms as he grasped my shoulders, then back up at his face. For the first time in our marriage, I felt he wanted badly to hit me. And, for some reason, I was casting around in my head for something else to say that would make him do it.

But words didn't come to either of us. We stayed like that for long minutes, eyes locked together. Confounded. I had the dizzy sensation I was in the wrong place, eye to eye with a stranger. Then Ted turned his head as if he'd heard something. I heard it too a moment later. Carrie was crying.

"I'll go," I said, pushing him out of the way. I took the stairs two at a time. She was getting louder. They'd all be up.

I tried to quiet her in the bedroom, but she continued to cry. She seemed frightened, as if by a dream, and my presence didn't comfort her. I took her back downstairs so she wouldn't wake the others. Ted stood at the window with his back to the room, hands in his pockets, swaying side to side. Carrie had been quiet com-

ing down the stairs, but when I sat in the rocker and tried to nurse her, she pushed me away and started crying again.

In a few minutes, Ted walked over to us. "Let me try," he said. He picked her up and danced over to the window singing a little made-up song he always sang to the children—something about birdies and airplanes. Carrie quieted gradually and rested her head against his shoulder.

"I'm going to bed," I said.

Ted nodded and continued to jiggle and sing. I paused halfway up the stairs and looked down at them. Ted was seated in the rocker with Carrie stretched in the crook of his arm. He still sang softly, rocking the chair in time to his tune. Then the chair turned with his rocking and I could see Carrie staring at him, wide-eyed and calm in his beery breath.

When Ira woke me, I felt as if I hadn't slept at all. I'm not sure Ted had. He was packing bags when I opened my eyes. We said our farewells to my relatives who smiled and kissed us. If they'd heard us in the night, they didn't let on.

Denise wasn't ready when we stopped to pick her up. Ted drummed on the steering wheel as we waited, frowning. When she finally came out, she said a husky hello and gave me one furtive glance as she got into the car, then lapsed into silence. I didn't offer to drive, though, for our safety, I probably should have since both Denise and Ted obviously felt wretched. Denise looked pinched and pale and her hair was pulled back into a greasy ponytail that made her look about twelve.

I felt fragile—as if something in the delicate structure of our life together had shifted and now tilted dangerously out of whack. I didn't want to move or talk. Ira seemed to sense my mood and he

was quiet. Careful. I put an arm around him and we looked out the window together at the Yellowstone River that flowed beside the highway. Carrie fell asleep.

When we'd been on the road about an hour, I looked in the rear view mirror and saw Ted's red-rimmed eyes studying me. I met his gaze, held it, until Ted raised one eyebrow and looked back at the road.

In that meeting of our eyes, I had my first small inkling that some day this might become one of those stories we'd tell at parties. I'd describe the panic of the ash in hilarious detail. He'd exaggerate the heat, his drunkenness, my fatigue. But what would we say about the scene in Sarah and Andrew's living room? How would we deal with that moment, that trembling instant when our anger had felt too much like hate?

As we neared home, we began to see traces of ash beside the road and in the ditches, but it had rained hard while we were away and the air remained clear all the way into town. We would spend the next few days hosing ash off the grass and sidewalks and out of the rain gutters. We'd have to spray all the windows and the sides of the house. Still, for what seemed like years, we'd find bits of the gray powder in the oddest places—inside storm windows, on boxes in the basement, in the crevices of the Irish Belleek stored high in a kitchen cupboard.