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Water and Fire

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Larissa Stathakes is a senior at Gettysburg College. "A special thanks to Sheila Mulligan, Team Love Ferns, and Eryn B. for all their support and encouragement."

Water and Fire

We all have our days where things just go wrong. The goal was easy; simply switch the apparatus from the condensing position to a distilling position. In layman's terms, move the glass pole from vertical to horizontal and attach another beaker to the end. I had removed the pole and added the beaker and secured it with a plastic ring. The next step was to cleanly attach the empty end into the boiling organic solvent Tetrahydrofuran, yet as I went to add the end of the pole into the beaker there was a distinct sound, the sound you hear when lighting a gas grill for the first time. It was unmistakable; nonetheless there wasn't time to react. Suddenly I felt like I was trapped in an inferno. I couldn't control the heat. The next moment I looked down and my world became chaotic.

The fire burned, a hot, fast snake searing my skin. It raced along my arms yellow and angry, and biting on its way. It blazed like a thousand angry birthday candles. It attacked me in sheets. Hot, hot sheets that were so intense that I was chilled. I wondered if skin could melt... The smell reminded me that skin was not fire-proof, and as pain pulsed through my body like lightning on the playground of my flesh, I wished for nothing more than to stand, with nothing touching me, no fire licking me, on a cool spring day complete with breeze. No, the fire continued to dance its hated dance on me. I could not escape its pace, nor its blaze. I wanted to free my eyes yet they were contained behind my goggles. I ripped off my gloves and tried reaching to remove the goggles, but the heat was too intense; I couldn't—it just caused too much pain. Finally, I succeeded, but the sight of fire so close scared me and I just screamed. I was so petrified that I could not even move. Abruptly there was a hand on my back pushing me; I heard voices all around screaming, however I could not make sense of the noise. The noises were overcome by the rumbling sound of a wave during a violent crash upon the seashore. The sensations were too strong. I wanted to run away but I was being held against my wishes. I took a deep breath and suddenly became conscious that the burning sensation had deteriorated and the cold water was very soothing. I came to the realization that Professor Damon and Cornelius were holding me under the emergency shower. I could not seem to breathe. I kept coughing and the room filled with smoke. The room was nothing but a haze, the haze you would find on a foggy morning after a torrential downpour in the heat of the summer. I was moved to another room.

As I was walked down the hall I could only hear the squish of my wet shoes against the tiled floor; the force of the water dripping all over my body was too heavy for me to hold myself up or look at the damage caused by the fire. I found myself frazzled and extraordinarily afraid. It was not the afraid you feel when you have gotten a detention in school and you have to face your parents, but the fear that you have just faced your worst nightmare. Inside the new room, Cornelius turned on the water so that I could continue to stop the burning by placing my arms and face under the running faucet.

There was a voice behind me. "The ambulance was on its way. Where was the fire?" I didn't have to respond. Cornelius stated that the fire was in room 142 and the professor was currently in there attempting to control it. Meanwhile the medics walked into the room. They instructed me to have a seat. I didn't want to have a seat. I had too many questions to ask Cornelius. How burnt was my face? Were my eyebrows gone? Did I have any hair left? What happened? Did anyone else get hurt? I could not bring myself to look into a mirror. I was too afraid of what I might or might not see. The medics began poking and prodding at me like I was a guinea pig they were experimenting on. Not to mention, now they wanted all kinds of information. The next thing I knew I had an oxygen mask on my face and my sneakers were coming off. Behind me Professor Damon was showing me a box of oatmeal. I didn't fucking care about oatmeal. My arms were hotter than lava; the medics had put a stop to my water supply and now they were attempting to stick a huge needle into my foot and this stupid man was trying to show me the importance of oatmeal and I couldn't give two flying pigs about food right now! Argg! I screamed. There was this burning sensation traveling up my foot and into my ankle and it would not go away. The medics told me to stop screaming and take a deep breath, that they had just given me some pain medication. I replied "It would have been nice if you have given me some kind of warning!" The one medic talked into his radio asking on the estimated arrival of the helicopter. Red flags went up in my head! *Helicopter? Why did they care about a helicopter when I was sitting in a building and my arms were burning?* The next words out of the medic's mouth were to me "We are waiting on the ambulance's arrival. As soon as it arrives we will load you into the back of the ambulance and transport you to the hospital where the helicopter is awaiting your arrival to transport you to a burn center." Well, at this point I had nothing left to do but wait.

I looked at my arms and I could not get over the sight. My left arm looked like I took an entire bottle of Silly String and covered my skin with it. Everywhere thin long pieces were hanging off. I did not dare touch it because I never knew what my skin might stick to. I didn't realize that your skin melted the way cheddar cheese melts. My skin was definitely melted and in some places it seemed to have vanished. I was convinced that my bone and tissue were sticking out in some parts. The right arm didn't look much different; the pattern of the burning was unique but it had an identical appearance.

What seemed like ten hours later, the ambulance finally arrived. In came this humongous stretcher. Once again I was given instructions to lie down on the stretcher. Although this time, instead of walking to the stretcher, I was picked up and gently placed down on top of this yellow paper blanket. I requested water once again because the burning sensation was back in my arms, but I was denied. Their reasoning was that I would not be allowed to have it in the helicopter so I might as well get used to the pain now. The medics assured me that when we got into the ambulance they would call the hospital and see if they could administer more pain medication. So I finally made it onto the stretcher and I yelled back to Cornelius to call some family. He asked for my boyfriend's number and so I gave it to him.

We left the room and headed toward the end of the hall, but we had to turn around because there was no way for the stretcher to make it down the set of stairs. It gave me one more opportunity to brace myself before heading outside all alone with no friends or family at my side. As we reached the outdoors, I was overcome with pain and discomfort. The heat of the sun was unbearable. I could not decide what to do. My first instinct was to remove all of the sheets from my body. It seemed like the appropriate reaction, that's what you do when you are hot in the middle of the night, yet that seemed to make everything worse. The other option was to try and hide beneath the yellow blankets, however I encountered another problem. As I tried to hide my arms and face beneath the blanket, it began to stick to my arms. I tried repositioning my body and I just felt the tearing of my skin, the same painful stick you get when pulling a band-aid off your hairy leg when you are eight years old. Finally I was shielded by the inside of the ambulance. The ambulance crew were kind enough to open up a bottle of saline and pour it over the portions of my body that were melted to the sheets of the stretcher. Slowly my arms began to absorb the water and the crew was able to gradually remove the blankets.

The helicopter was awaiting my arrival three short blocks away, however those three blocks seemed to have created a mountain of anxiety inside me about the helicopter ride. I knew that I was going into the helicopter, but until now I had no clue which hospital the helicopter was going to take me to. We finally arrived at the landing pad of the helicopter behind the hospital. The ambulance parked and the back doors of the ambulance were opened. In stepped one of the flight nurses. He introduced himself to me. Yet I could not remember his name for the life of me. Knowing someone's name is something I was always taught to value. Now, I am in a situation and I can't even address the only person who can help me. He told me that they would pull me out of the back of the ambulance and transfer me to the special stretcher designed to fit inside the helicopter. I was instructed to lie extraordinarily still and they would do all the movement. I braced myself for exposure to the heat of the afternoon.

Rapidly both teams transferred me onto the new stretcher and prepared to load me into the back of the helicopter. I was told to close my eyes because the propeller was running and they were afraid that dust particles would be sprayed into my eyes. I was loaded headfirst. Luckily once I was loaded into the helicopter another flight nurse greeted me. She introduced herself and asked if I needed anything. I requested to have some water placed on my body. She said that she would provide me with water as soon as she had the opportunity.

The rest of the crew climbed into the helicopter, shut the doors and we were ready for take-off. After we were in the air, one of the flight nurses attempted to put another IV into my hand, since my feet were inaccessible and they were authorized to administer more pain medication. It was at this point when I became extraordinarily violent. As soon as the needle touched my right hand I swung my fist toward the flight nurse. This was

the most excruciating pain I had ever felt. I thought I had seen stars. I was placed in restraints to prevent injury to the flight team while placing the new IV. The flight nurse was able to get the IV into my arm. Immediately afterwards the restraints were removed. A headset was placed onto my ears so that I could communicate with the flight team during the duration of the flight. The team informed me that we would be landing at John Hopkins Burn Center in approximately one hour and fifteen minutes. Shortly thereafter the headset began to irritate my burnt ears to the point where I threw it across the helicopter. To ease my pain some more the flight nurse began dripping water over my burnt arms and legs. They continued to shout and ask where I wanted the water, I simply pointed. After pointing to so many different locations they simply handed me the bag of water and allowed me to spray myself.

The next thing I remember was waking up to the noise of a generator and bright sunlight pouring into the back of the helicopter. Apparently, I had arrived at the hospital and was being transferring into the Emergency Center for further medical attention. I wish I had realized this was only the beginning.

Note: Names of faculty members and employees have been changed for reasons of privacy.