

Pilot Light

Part I

There was an American flag fold-out in the center of the newspaper. I taped it to my front window facing out. It seemed like the right thing to do. My new kitten eyed it immediately. I watched her sniff it and then look at me for permission to rip it apart. None given.

It had been hailing and I feared the roof on my 1987 Cadillac may be damaged. It wasn't, but it was stolen a month later. Now I drive a copper-colored Saturn from Dallas. When I opened my front door to assess the damage, there was no need for a blue tarp. Yet the cold air was wet with danger, the aftermath of last month's tornado.

I could hear both of my neighbors yelling about two different matters:

Left side neighbor— Get the hell out of my house Julie.

Right side neighbor—Maggie, for God's sake, shut that dog up.

My walls were paper-thin. But this townhouse was better than my last one where the person on the other side of my bedroom wall taught piano. I didn't get much sleep that year but I did learn the keys to *I Did It My Way*.

When the doorbell rang, I got up from the futon. I didn't think she'd show up because I had just met her and found out she was from California. She seemed a little too groovy—you know the type. She was wearing a Blue Jean Jacket with rhinestones and black cowboy boots. Around her

neck was a collection of gold chains, none of them crosses. She was tall and blonde with luscious lips and a cover girl smile. Her big salon-styled hair was protected by hairspray which smelled like Beverly Hills.

She was there to do me a big favor. So she came in quickly so my new kitten wouldn't run out. The house was really cold by this time and I could hear the hail bombarding my roof. She said "So, where is it," and I pointed the way to my heater which had gone dark. The brown metal door slid open when she moved it the correct way, a way I hadn't determined in a half hour.

She had a fancy thin flashlight that spit out a laser beam inside the heater. I asked, "So what's wrong with it?"

She stood up, turned off the fancy flashlight, and with all the confidence of Perry Mason said, "It's the pilot light."

Part II

It was a gas, not electric, heater. That much I knew. If I'd known that before I'd moved in, I would've moved somewhere else because I learned my dad that one false move with anything running on gas and you could kiss your ass goodbye. This is why I called Blondie to fix it. I only known her for a few weeks and was not entirely sure of her name. I did know she was a farmer's daughter and a high school cheerleader, and what else do you need.

I offered her a cup of microwaved Maxwell House which she accepted and then walked by to the heater. She said she smelled gas and that's when I backed up into the kitchen pretending I wanted

a coffee too. When she looked inside the heater door I said, “be careful now” and she gave me a look that I would see many times in the future that said, I know what I’m doing and don’t need your help.

Then she brought out from her brown designer purse a box of wooden match sticks, the kind with the blue tip. “Step back”, she said comically. She struck the match hard on the side of the heater and stuck it in the brains of the heater and a dark blue flame jumped up. She closed the heater door and pushed and turned a knob that shrank the pilot light to a tiny blue and orange flame. She looked me dead in the eyes and proudly announced, “It’s fixed.”

Part III

I thought I’d better wait a week to ask her to marry me, but I knew right then and there she was the one. After three years of premarital counseling I did ask her to marry me overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge and she graciously accepted. Nowadays I call her my Fixer and bought her a sign for her desk saying,

“Fixer of Everything.”

Below are some of things she’s fixed since we got together:

Air-conditioner

Ceiling

Both our cars

Torn carpet

Internet connection

Restaurant charges

All stains on all fabrics

Bad coffee

Toilets

Sinks

Cooking mistakes

Cat misbehavior

Broken jewelry

Cell phones

Printers

Cable box

Sunflowers

Little red wagons

Vocabulary errors

And there's much more.

And so, that is the story of how one tiny flame not only warmed the paper-thin walls of an old townhouse in a Georgia winter, but also warmed and brightened the shy heart of a boy who really needed some fixing.