

## BALL OF FIRE

*Linda Carela*

Darlene leaves without her jacket. There is a chill in the air, but perhaps cold is what she needs to keep moving. *Just drive*, she tells herself, *pretend that you are on a forced march, a prisoner of war trudging to the final destination*. If she thinks about her brother, Kyle, for one second, she will turn around. She must go, go, go. She has already crossed the border into Pennsylvania. She has never made it this far before.

She vows to keep driving until there are no more roads. That will be the Pacific Ocean. And when she reaches that far-flung shore, she will sit on the beach (she imagines palm trees and sunburned surfers) and scan the horizon. She will wait for sunrise or sunset, feel the sun either rise and warm her back or set and drop off the edge of the earth. And yet somehow—that part is still a mystery—that ball of fire will tell her whether she has to return to New Jersey or whether her life is about to start.

The headlights probe the darkness. There are no cars ahead. She looks in the rearview mirror; only one behind. She imagines a magnet is pulling her. Her spine shudders, an involuntary spasm, which she takes as a sign, superstition being the nearest thing to religion she has ever had, that she will make it this time. But then three deer bound across the road, missing the car by what appears to be mere inches.

“For fuck’s sake,” she mutters, which is one of Kyle’s expressions. *Enough.* She pulls the car to the side of the road and sobs. And of course, with the utterance of his words, visions of Kyle sneak into her mind. He is falling and hitting his head on the driveway, blood seeping out onto the black tar. Or one of those bastard highway cops has pulled him over and is beating him unconscious.

And so, somewhere east of Pittsburgh, her escapade ends. No new life, no new start, no California beach. Kyle, after all, is the only thing that matters, the only thing she has ever had. Their mother, who never much cared for Darlene, died ten years ago. Their father, whom Darlene barely remembers, took up with another woman when Kyle was just a baby and was never heard from again. Darlene pulls off at the next exit, turns around, and heads home, half-proud, half-ashamed at how far she has gotten this time.

She eases the car into the driveway with the headlights off, enters the house, and lies down on the couch. She feels a drowsiness that moves from her limbs into her head. Random images pass through her mind: a pile of yellowing papers, a red plastic bucket, a derelict car in a lot of overgrown weeds, a severed arm lying on the sidewalk. She struggles to rise to the surface, back to consciousness, but it is as if she has taken some powerful sleeping potion. She is falling through endless space. She flails out with her arms and rolls off the couch with a thud.

She listens to the rumblings of the house, the ticking of the heat, the creak of the loose windowpane. Opening the back door of the house, she stares at the camper in the yard, the abode of her 22-year-old brother for the past two years. When she walks down the back steps and onto the grass, she hears nothing from the camper—neither the low rumble of the television nor the scratching noises, the source of which Darlene has never been able to fathom, a squirrel burrowing underneath the contraption or furniture being dragged across the floor. Kyle is asleep, then...or...

Darlene raps softly on the camper door. No answer. She tries again, her heart thumping harder than her knock.

“What?” Kyle calls out in a groggy voice.

Darlene is so relieved by the proof of his continued existence that she can't speak. It is as if her attempt to escape had killed him, and now he has been revived.

He opens the door a crack. Darlene still doesn't speak, just stands in the backyard, arms wrapped around herself, shivering. Kyle's face betrays his annoyance, and Darlene drops her arms and walks away. She is sobbing but he doesn't see her tears. For that, at least, she can give herself credit.

In some ways she is glad that Kyle lives in his lair. Too much time with him wears her down and makes her think that she should be doing something, telling him something, but Darlene has no idea what that is, and she fears that anything she says or does will make him angry or depressed. Tonight he seems more spaced out than usual. She wonders if he's taking drugs, some pernicious substance that she's too old to know about.

She remembers the way she used to tote him on her hip when he was a baby and she was just a girl. *I wish I could carry him now*, she thinks. *Transport him over the raging river of late boy adolescence. Feel the strong current sucking at her thighs as she held him over her head.* The water would be cold and the rocks slimy and slick, but she would make it across because she had to. She would deposit him on the far shore; she would help him reach

the path that led to a safe and happy life. But she fears that she no longer has any carrying ability. She can only jump into the rushing water along with him and flail in the white rapids with nothing to grasp, no dry land in sight.

Technically Darlene is still a young woman, just thirty this past spring. She has held one job her entire adult life thus far, and she has never traveled anywhere except to the Jersey Shore for one miserable, rainy weekend on her twenty-fifth birthday. But still, despite her youth and inexperience, there is a world-weariness that greets her as soon as she rises from the bed. It is as if she has lived a long life traveling from port to port seeing myriad sights, tasting exotic food, listening to unusual music, and come to the realization that it is all a crock of shit. Different-color crock, same shit.

She works as a receptionist at a law firm. Her job is not demanding—there are only three lawyers in the practice—and so Darlene passes much of the day, every day, absorbed in Cinderella fantasies of mysterious strangers who take one look at her and whisk her away to a life of ease and intrigue. However, rather than finding this an easy way to get through working hours, she finds it exhausting. She drags herself home every evening as if she has been swinging a pickax or chasing feral cats. She usually picks up some pre-made salad at the deli, which she picks at slumped in front of the television. Darlene watches

the news; its tone of urgent gravity, no matter the topic, its barely concealed excitement at tales of tragedy and disaster soothes her. Dire weather forecasts are one of her favorites.

But neither hurricanes, deadly heat waves, nor obliterating blizzards are enough, because what Darlene secretly wants is balls of fire falling out of the sky, random implosions of streets and sidewalks revealing black, bottomless holes, unaccountable disappearances of humans, their cars found abandoned in remote locations, perhaps attributable to kidnapping by aliens.

Sometimes, as an antidote to this desire for the apocalypse, Darlene will flip through women's magazines. She hopes she might learn something from the relationship advice or beauty tips. However, almost every page has photos of women with their heads tilted back and mouths open. Darlene doesn't understand what this means. *Why are these women so delighted about feminine hygiene products or breast cancer awareness?* She can't imagine such joy, such sisterly camaraderie, such outright giddiness. She tosses the magazine to the corner of the room and falls asleep by 9 p.m., only to wake three hours later with a headache and a need to pace the house.

But that Monday night, as Darlene comes home with her paper bag from the deli in hand. Kyle is in the house, which is surprising, and he is speaking

to her, which is so astonishing that Darlene can't understand what he is saying. He takes her arm and they go into the bathroom. The toilet is flushing itself, a continuous roar and gush of water. Kyle has the tank open, but no matter how much they adjust and jiggle, they only manage to make the bowl overflow. Kyle goes into the kitchen for a beer, and they notice that the refrigerator is making a continuous hum, as if the motor can't stop running. But nothing is cold. A quart of sour milk sits on the bottom, next to the lukewarm beer. Kyle opens the freezer and water sloshes out onto his bare feet. She goes into the living room for her dose of bad television, but when the ON button is pressed, there is a flash of blue light and then nothing—no sound, no picture, not even static.

Darlene tosses her salad into the garbage and goes into her darkened bedroom and lies on top of the bedspread, fully clothed. She thinks that perhaps she can trick herself into sleeping by pretending that she has no intention of sleeping. But after twenty minutes of keeping herself as immobile as possible, she knows that her scheme is not going to work. *Tricks are for kids, you silly rabbit.* She groans as bits of the past, inane irrelevant bits, march through her brain.

After Kyle retreats to his camper, Darlene paces through the house. It has

been ten years since her mother died, and yet her mother's words still accompany Darlene, an endless loop of dire predictions bound together with accusations. "There's not enough food in the world. We are all going to die of starvation. The Americans will go first because we won't eat each other. Your hair looks a mess." Darlene grew up thinking that if she could just look attractive, the world might be saved. She chews on a hangnail and thinks that maybe her mother was right. If her hair wasn't so stringy, her body so lumpy and shapeless, her skin so prone to breakouts and rashes, well then, who knows, perhaps an aura of goodness would radiate out from her, and it would protect Kyle, even save herself.

In addition to her words, Darlene is surrounded by her mother's stuff. Almost every day Darlene throws something out—an old gingham tablecloth, a yellowed rope of a bra—but still there are boxes and closets filled with items, things that Darlene has never seen before, as if her mother spent her fifty-odd years acquiring objects and stowing them away, as if some acute shortage of cheap consumer goods were predicted for the near future, as if all the discount stores and superstores and bargain outlet stores were going to shut down, and they would be forced to make their own stuff, like prairie women weaving and

mending and cobbling bits and pieces together. Darlene is encased in a mausoleum, everything rotting and dissolving into particles that float through the air and which she inhales until Darlene imagines she no longer has to eat, her body sustained by bits of her mother's detritus.

Perhaps the broken appliances are auguries. No more than that; they are messages. She should burn the whole house down. Fire is the element. It shouldn't take much, as chock-full of dried-out crap as it is. A can of gasoline spread over the floor, a couple of Molotov cocktails tossed in the open windows. She will make her own ball of fire. That is what they need. Then out of the ashes will arise something hopeful and human, something that she and Kyle can stand on and feel the thrum of the living earth.

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**Linda Carela** lives in The Bronx, NYC and works at a humanitarian relief organization where she analyzes donor data and provides customer service. You can either find her at her desk or in the deepest wilds of the Adirondacks. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Jelly Bucket*, *Crack the Spine*, *WordRiot*, *Midway Journal* and *Limestone Journal*. She attended The Writers Studio for four years and studied with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Philip Schultz.