

The Confession

Five-year-old Kent Conley sprinted through the backyard at top speed, tore across the patio, nearly overshot the walkway to the door, burst through the door into the garage, made a turn-on-a-dime spin to the left, hopped the step, flung open the kitchen door, and raced across the white linoleum, sliding to his knees in front of the sitting-room couch. Propping his forearms on the cushion, he closed his eyes tight, folded his hands, and frantically began praying the first of the only two prayers he knew by heart. “Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed by thy name,” he stammered, out of breath. When he reached “deliver us from evil. Amen,” he shot a glance over his shoulder through the sliding glass door to the patio and backyard. The grassfire was still burning!

Closing his eyes tighter and clasping his hands harder, he prayed more fervently. “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee . . .” Just as he was sputtering, “Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen,” Kent sprang to his feet and wheeled around, only to see the fire spreading. He bolted out of the house even faster than he had rushed in, screaming, “Fire! Fire!”

Fifteen minutes ago the thought of fire fascinated Kent as much as it terrified him now. When his mother went next door for a moment, Kent saw his chance. He pulled open one of the lower kitchen cabinet doors, stepped up on the inside shelf, and clambered onto the counter. From there he opened the door to the upper cabinet, where his mother kept the matches. Unfortunately, not the long fireplace matches, which were by far the best. Not even the wooden kitchen stove matches, which were still pretty good. But just the ordinary matchbook matches, which would have to do. Kent sprang down from the counter without even bothering to close the incriminating open cabinet doors and called his three-year-old sister.

Tired of board games inside and limited to the driveway on his bicycle outside, Kent was left to his own devices. He had just invented a humdinger of a game: “Stomp Out the Lighted Match.” Eager to teach his little sister how to play, he led her outside to where his family’s yard met the neighbor’s in back of them.

“I light the match and throw it on the ground,” Kent explained, “and then you stomp it out, okay?”

Nodding, his little sister indicated her comprehension and consent.

Taking pride in his own inventiveness, the big brother in Kent delighted in teaching his little sister. The individualist in him relished asserting his independence from his parents, while the naughty child derived pleasure from doing something prohibited and the little sneak reveled in escaping his mother’s detection. Likewise, the questioner in him wondered what would happen, and the budding scientist would perform an experiment to find out. The superhero in him would unleash and attempt to control an elemental force of nature, and the daredevil face the danger. Although he was holding the matchbook in his left hand and about to tear out the first match with his right, inwardly Kent was rubbing his hands together in sheer delight.

It was August, and the North Texas sky yielded no more water than a well run dry. No one could remember the last time it rained, and the temperature had broken a hundred every day for weeks on end. What's more, the wind blew hotter air than the hair dryer hoods at Betty Jo's Beauty Salon, where Kent's mother could not afford to get a perm. Nothing outdoors could survive August in North Texas, except perhaps rattlesnakes and cactus, and the grass was no exception. While Kent and his sister were tramping their way to the edge of the backyard, the Bermuda, which looked more like straw than grass, crunched under their Keds. The whole yard was a tinderbox if there ever was one.

When the torrid wind died down for a moment, Kent tore out the first safety match from the matchbook, scraped its head against the striking pad, and dropped it lit on the ground.

"Stomp it out! Stomp it out!" he cried to his little sister.

But his sister didn't stomp it out. She just stood there, looking down at her feet, where the brown grass was beginning to crinkle into black as the flames skimmed over the dry blades.

"Stomp it out!" Kent yelled louder, but she still stood there, motionless.

Right then the wind gusted, and the fire leapt across three or four feet of dead grass. Kent began stomping wildly himself, contrary to the rules of the game, but the flames spread faster than he could crush them out. Clearly, his "Stomp Out the Lighted Match" game was over.

"Stomp Out the Grassfire" was no longer child's play, and Kent knew it.

As long as he'd still had a prayer, Kent had hoped somehow to hide the fire from his mother. But he no longer had a prayer, now that his recourse to divine intervention had failed. In his eyes his mother still retained her godlike aura as all-knowing and all-powerful, and she could put out the fire (even if it meant she would find out who had started it), so he cried all the louder,

“Fire! Fire!” But his mother did not materialize. Unequal to the situation, Kent ran back indoors to hide. Out sight, out of existence, at least in the five-year-old mind.

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“Did you hear that?” Cora Conley asked, alarmed.

“What?” the neighbor lady said.

“It sounds like Kent . . . screaming.” Cora jumped up, hurried out the back door to the patio, but froze when she saw the flames in her backyard creeping in her direction. Panic. Her children! Where were her children? She left them just for a moment playing quietly in the den when the neighbor called asking to borrow some cough syrup for her sick child. How could this have happened? She was just going to drop off the medicine and come right back, but then the neighbor wanted to chat. If only her husband were here! He would know what to do.

“Is everything okay?” the neighbor asked, sticking her head out the backdoor.

“Call the fire department!” Cora yelled, shaken out of her immobility.

She dashed to her yard, heading towards the garden hose, coiled on a rack at the rear of the house. Maybe she could put out the blaze. But the line of fire blocked her way, and, as soon as she stood close enough, she saw that the flames had already destroyed the hose.

If only she had a wet towel to beat out the fire. She started tromping the ground madly, but when the flames nipped at her ankles, she fled back to the neighbor’s yard. Still coughing from the smoke, she didn’t know whether her tears came from eye irritation or sheer helplessness as she stood and watched the fire spread.

Sirens blaring, lights flashing, the fire truck screeched around the corner. The three-block trip from the neighborhood firehouse had just taken a couple of minutes. Soon the firemen, in bright yellow turnout gear and helmets, wielding massive hoses, extinguished the blaze, though not until it had scorched four backyards.

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“Kent, come here,” his mother said when all the commotion had died down.

Uh-oh. He froze for a minute, not knowing what to do, like a cornered animal looking for a way of escape.

“Kent,” she repeated.

With no way out, he went and stood silently before her.

“Do you know how the fire started?” she asked.

“N-no,” he said, looking down at the floor, unable to bear her gaze.

She eyed him more intently. “You weren’t playing outside when it began?”

“No.” He kept his head lowered.

“So you didn’t see how it started?”

“No.” He had already traveled too far down the path of deception and couldn’t turn back now.

“Hmm.” She stood in silence for a moment, peering at him.

If only he could turn and run away, but there was no where to run.

“And the cabinet doors in the kitchen? They were open when I came back in.”

Kent stared at the floor and said nothing.

“You didn’t climb up on the counter and get Mommy’s matches?”

“No,” he said, still not daring to look up. His heart was racing.

“And you weren’t playing with the matches outside?”

“No.” Now his palms were sweating too.

“So, how did the fire start?”

Kent shrugged his shoulders, almost on the verge of tears.

“Well, fires don’t just start all by themselves.” She turned and walked away.

Did she believe him? Either way, the interrogation was over, and he had escaped detection. What a relief, though an uneasy one at that.

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Of his own accord Kent spent the remainder of the day in his room with the door closed, coming out only for dinner and returning there as soon as he had finished eating in silence. His mother sometimes sent him to his room to punish him. Perhaps he knew he deserved a punishment and exiled himself to his room so his mother wouldn't have to send him there.

Kent lay on his bed, face down. Stupid sister, he thought. She didn't even stomp out the match. Rotten luck. The wind blew the fire faster than he could stomp it out. And mean God, who didn't put out the fire, even though he said two whole prayers on his knees.

Kent's stomach hurt. Yet he knew that he was sick not in his body but in his soul. He didn't know exactly where his soul was, but he knew it was inside of him somewhere.

For the first time in his life he had lied to his mother. What he showed on the outside hid what he knew on the inside. Last Halloween, when he was still an honest boy, he wore a little devil's mask and costume. Now that he had turned into a liar, he was hiding behind a little angel's mask. By donning it, he had tricked his mother, but there was no treat for him. A single word, "no," had changed everything, forever. And Kent knew it in his gut.

Not that he had broken a rule and feared punishment. Kent had been punished often enough before and knew he could again take being deprived of his favorite toy, not being allowed outside to play, or even getting spanked. It wasn't the closed bedroom door that kept him from going out to his mother and her from coming in to him. Rather, it was the lie. Kent felt sick, and the only medicine that could heal him would taste bitter indeed.

At last Kent got up from his bed. He knew exactly what he had to do.

Glossary of Names

Kent: born of fire (a contraction of the Scandinavian “Kennet”)

Conley: purifying fire (Gaelic). Kent Conley’s purification is born of fire.

Cora: maiden, young woman (Greek). “Cora” was another name for Persephone, the goddess of vegetation. Cora tries to save the grass from the flames.