

## 1: The Fire

MY FAMILY HAS always used just two words to describe what happened: the fire. The fire was an event that divided time into before and after, and every emotion and endeavor we experienced fell on one side or the other. But those two words came to mean more than one event. They could mean a certain day. They implied a lifetime of problems and adjustments, of explanations and acceptances. And they marked a change in my family's routine, although not their priorities, that would last for years.

I was born January 22, 1954, thirty-five minutes after midnight on a typical, freezing, snowy night in Buffalo, New York. The doctor pronounced me a normal, healthy baby boy with all my fingers and toes. My parents had already decided to name me David and, since my birth occurred in a year of Catholic devotion to Saint Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, they chose Marion for my middle name.

My parents, Joe and Rita, were a hard-working young couple from Buffalo's east side. Both were children of Polish immigrants and our extended family was large, noisy, ever-present and interesting. Mom was a popular beautician who, at twenty-

three, was already a stay-at-home mother with two older sons. Dad, a twenty-five year old skilled mechanic, worked for an automobile parts manufacturer in Buffalo.

For six weeks I was a perfect little baby, the youngest of my parents' three sons. Grandparents doted on me, aunts and uncles cooed at me, and my brothers Joey and Larry tried to figure out what to do with me.

My baptism, the first important event of my life, was celebrated at Saint Mary Magdalene Church in mid-February with all the Borowskis and many friends present. My cousin John Budzinski and my Aunt Florence Rybarczyk, my father's sister, stood as my godparents. John was studying to be a doctor. A party back at our house on East Utica Street followed the christening. Of course I was the center of attention and, as usual at such events, everyone speculated on how I would grow up, what I would become. Looking at a picture of me in my christening gown, I may have grown to look like my brothers. We'll never really know.

Three weeks later the damp March weather left me with a cold. Mom tried to make me comfortable. One afternoon she placed a humidifier by my bassinet in the den to clear my stuffy nose. Inky, our puppy, padded into the room to keep me company. With Larry and Joey playing in the living room, and Uncle Art and Dad working in the basement, Mom began to prepare the evening meal in the kitchen.

For a time Inky lay quietly curled up under my crib, until the wire dangling from the humidifier caught his eye. What a delightful rope to play with! He caught it between his growing

little teeth and rubbed it back and forth over his itching gums for all he was worth. He happened to be teething, and it must have felt good. His chewing eventually shredded the protective coating separating the wires and they came together, generating a strong electrical current. When Inky dropped the wire, the sparks that flew from it landed on my bassinet. The bassinet consisted of very dry wicker and caught fire quickly, with me in it.

Back in the kitchen, my parents, my grandmother (or Babcia, as we called her), Uncle Art, and my brothers had just sat down to dinner. A bright reflection in the marble pillars between the living room and the den caught Mom's eye. It was a strange light, one she had never seen before. Then a sickening realization gripped her. The reflection was actually the flicker of firelight.

Mom jumped up from her chair, her heart pounding in her chest like a jackhammer. Then she saw the smoke. Inky ran barking into the kitchen toward my brothers, leaving behind the flames that were now roaring from my bassinet. By the time Mom ran into the den fire engulfed the bassinet. She tore away the flaming hood, then reached in and scooped me up in her hands, rescuing me from the smoke and flames curling through the wicker. She arrived almost too late. Fire engulfed my head and little arms and legs, burning right through my thin, delicate skin.

Mom must have been terrified. Anybody would be. But with a mother's courage, she smothered the flames covering my burning little body on her own chest. I've done a lot of things in my

life and a lot of people have called me brave many times, but I've never done anything as brave as what my mother did that night.

By now the entire household was engaged. The fire blocked the path to the telephone, so Dad ran to a nearby drugstore to call the fire department. Meanwhile a neighbor who heard the commotion flagged down a passing motorist who lived up the street and explained to him what happened. Mom ran straight out of the house with me and into his car. He raced us to the hospital, just a few blocks away. Mom never forgot the kindness of this good man, and kept in touch with him for years afterward.

Joey and Larry, though chased out of the room by Babcia, understood something very bad was happening to me. Perhaps in an effort to calm their nerves, or to hide from whatever dark force had entered our home, they grabbed a box of Cheerios and hid under a bed in their room, watching the rushing feet of the grownups and waiting for the fear to recede.

When Dad returned to the house, Uncle Art told him that Mom and I were already on the way to the hospital. Before Dad left the house to follow us, Uncle Art put his hand on Dad's shoulder and said softly, "Gee, Joe, I never saw anything like what's happened to David. To tell you the truth, I don't think he's going to make it."

He only meant to prepare Dad for the worst, but Dad looked hard into Uncle Art's sorrowful eyes. He grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him, angrily shouting, "David will make it, Art, he will!"

Heartsick, Dad raced to follow us to the hospital while Uncle Art and my grandmother stayed with Joey and Larry. My brothers were very scared and couldn't help but wonder what was happening to me when I disappeared from their sight. Finally Dad arrived at the hospital where the fight for my life had already begun. Small as I was, and despite Uncle Art's fears, I had no intention of losing.