From *The Glass Castle*, a memoir by Jeannette Walls

I was on fire.

It’s my earliest memory. I was three years old, and we were living in a trailer park in a southern Arizona town whose name I never knew. I was standing on a chair in front of the stove, wearing a pink dress my grandmother had bought for me. Pink was my favorite color. The dress’s skirt stuck out like a tutu, and I liked to spin around in front of the mirror, thinking I looked like a ballerina. But at that moment, I was wearing the dress to cook hot dogs, watching them swell and bob in the boiling water as the late-morning sunlight filtered in through the trailer’s small kitchenette window.

I could hear Mom in the next room singing while she worked on one of her paintings. Juju, our black mutt, was watching me. I stabbed one of the hot dogs with a fork and bent over and offered it to him. The wiener was hot, so Juju licked at it tentatively, but when I stood up and started stirring the hot dogs again, I felt a blaze of heat on my right side. I turned to see where it was coming from and realized my dress was on fire. Frozen with fear, I watched the yellow-white flames make a ragged brown line up the pink fabric of my skirt and climb my stomach. Then the flames leaped up, reaching my face.

I screamed. I smelled the burning and heard a horrible crackling as the fire singed my hair and eyelashes. Juju was barking. I screamed again.

Mom ran into the room.

“Mommy, help me!” I shrieked. I was still standing on the chair, swatting at the first with the fork I had been using to stir the hot dogs.

Mom ran out of the room and came back with one of the army-surplus blankets I hated because the wool was so scratchy. She threw the blanket around me to smother out the flames. Dad had gone off in the car, so Mom grabbed me and my younger brother, Brian, and hurried over to the trailer next to ours. The woman who lived there was hanging her laundry on the clothesline. She had clothespins in her mouth. Mom, in an unnaturally calm voice, explained what had happened and asked if we could please have a ride to the hospital. The woman dropped her clothespins and laundry right there in the dirt and, without saying anything, ran for her car.

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