

TO LIGHT A CANDLE

By Janet S. Anderson

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EARLY Every November, back on the farm, my father and I would light a bonfire. The Fabers would join us, and our neighbors down the road, the Murrays. Their son, David, was my best friend. We would all watch as twilight gave way to night. The wind would move in over the bare cornfields and swirl sparks high up and around into constellations. The cold would move from the hard ground through our feet, up through our bellies, and out through the tops of our heads. We'd feel the beginning of winter.

Then my father would stir his kettle of hot cider. We'd cradle our steaming mugs in both hands and, at the sound of his voice, raise the mugs high and repeat his words after him.

"To warmth after cold," he'd say. "To waking after sleep. To spring after winter. And over darkness, light."

"And over darkness, light. . ." The cider would shock down inside us. Then David would grab for me, and we'd race shouting around the fire and fall wrestling just beyond the circle of laughing grownups. Finally, panting, we'd watch the fire die.

When there was just one last coal glowing in the middle of the black field, we'd start for home. We'd look back over our shoulders and see the coal growing smaller and smaller, but never, as long as we were watching, going out.

And then one December everything changed. The Fabers lost their farm. The next spring the Murrays sold out and moved. David wrote a few times, and then stopped.

Our farm was the next to go. When the last cow had been sold off to pay the bank, we packed up the truck and moved to the city. My parents took over managing a small apartment building. We lived in the basement, rent-free. The "garden apartment" they called it. It wasn't.

I hated the city. It was noisy and dirty. When I walked to school, the wind blew up grit, and paper and garbage swirled around my feet. The buildings up and down the street shut out the sky.

I hated the school, too. It was crowded. There were too many kids, and they wore too many different kinds of clothes and spoke in too many ways I couldn't understand. They pushed past me up and down the halls and shoved at me in gym class and jostled me in the lunch line.

They scared me. One kid scared me a lot. He was big, the biggest kid in my class, and for some reason he hated me. Everybody called him Tank because once he got going, nothing could stop him. One day he followed me home, shouting all the way, telling me what he'd do when he caught me.

I outran him, but as the cold began to seep down into the streets and the afternoons darkened into October, I became convinced that one day soon he would catch me. Halloween, I thought. He'll catch me on Halloween. I stayed in my room all day on Halloween, not even going out when trick-or-treaters rang the doorbell. Once an egg splatted against a window. I knew who had thrown it and I knew it had been meant for me.

The next day I found my father in the furnace room. "When are we going to have the bonfire?" I asked.

It took him a long time to answer. "It's November, isn't it?" he finally said. "I'd almost forgotten." He gazed out the small dirty window high up in the wall and shook his head. "Son, we can't have a bonfire on a city street."

I stared at him and, turning away, pushed open the door and ran up the stairs to the outside. It was much darker than usual because the streetlights had been busted out the night before. The other busted thing was the glowing jack-o'-lantern my mother had carved and put on the stoop to welcome trick-or-treaters. All that remained of it were mashed bits of its smiling orange face and the stub of its candle.

I picked up the candle and held it in my hand. At that moment, something slow and strong started beating inside me. Tank, the city, the look on my father's face: all were stirring something stubborn that began to pound inside my blood.

The next day at lunch I went over to Tank and his friends. With my hands shoved deep in my pockets to stop my voice from trembling, I said, "I've got something to show you. Tonight, after supper, in front of my house."

Tank scowled. Then he nodded and grinned. The sound of his friends' laughter echoed after me as I walked out of the cafeteria.

I heard him coming that night. He and his friends were still laughing, the harsh sound bouncing off the brick buildings. Tank saw me first and stopped about twenty feet away.

"So what do you want to show me?" he yelled.

I held it up.

"A candle?" he shouted. "You're showing me a *candle*?"

"It's not a candle," I shouted back. "It's a bonfire."

An egg smashed against my arm, knocking the candle to the street.

"Now it's nothing," he yelled. "Just like you."

The beat inside me faltered for a minute, then quickened. I took another candle out of my pocket and scraped a kitchen match against the stoop. "It's a bonfire," I repeated. I lit both candles and held them out in front of me. "Now it's bigger."

This time there was a barrage of eggs. I held on to one candle, but had to drop the other to wipe the yolk dripping down into my eyes. It took me longer to light the candles the next time, but when I did, there was a moment's unbelieving silence. "It's a bonfire," I repeated. "It could be even bigger. I've got lots of candles."

Suddenly Tank charged. I waited for him to slam into me, for me to go down beneath his fists and his feet and his terrible hatred. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything but the wild stubborn thump of my blood in the cold November night.

He stopped a foot away and screamed into my face. "It's a CANDLE!"

I took a deep breath. "Yeah," I said. "It's a candle. But it could be a bonfire if you wanted it to be."

"You're crazy," he said hoarsely. "What do you mean, a bonfire?"

"It's November," I said. "You've got to have a bonfire in November. To keep away the cold and the winter. The dark."

"Yeah, you afraid of the dark?" he said.

“Yeah, aren’t you?” I asked. I held the second candle out to him. “But a bonfire keeps it away. And so do the words.”

“What words?” he said, and took the second candle. We stared at each other for a long minute in the flickering light. Then I pulled the rest of the candles out of my pocket and held them up.

“You make the bonfire,” I said. “I’ll say the words.”

He squinted down. The light in his hand rose and sank in the night air, throwing gigantic shadows against the building. Then he jerked his head. One by one the other boys straggled into the circle of our light. One by one, puzzled and silent, each took a candle and lit it from Tank’s flame.

“It’s a bonfire,” he said.

And suddenly it was.

Suddenly I couldn’t see the city anymore. All I could see was flame and faces rising out of it, intent, peaceful faces shining against the cold lonely blankness of the night.

“The words,” said Tank. “You say them. Then I’ll say them. Then everybody else.”

With both hands I held my candle high. “To warmth after cold,” I said, and the double echo murmured into the darkness. I sensed a movement on the stairs leading down to our door and I knew who it was. “To waking after sleep,” I continued. “To spring after winter. And over darkness, light.”

“And over darkness, light,” my father’s voice whispered along with the others, and then the door shut quietly behind him. I brought over the bucket of sand I’d filled earlier and shoved my candle, upright and still burning, into it. One by one the other boys did the same.

“See you,” said Tank, and I nodded. As he and the others started down the street, they kept looking back. I knew why. It was for the same reason that my father and I later stood silently at the furnace-room window and watched the bucket until only one candle was left, glowing in the darkness of the black city street.

We turned away before it went out.