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## Heat

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## HEAT

When I was younger, my family lived in a quaint, old-fashioned home that was heated by a floor furnace. It lay between our living room and dining room, spanning about two feet in width and four in length. We children used this heater as an automatic drying system, standing above it in our towels after a bath or shower. I can still hear my mother yelling, “Don’t let the water get in there!” as droplets fell from my body, making a relaxing *hiss* each time one of them landed on the hot metal under the grate. I’d stand there, until the heat began to chafe my well dried bare skin.

The furnace was a symbol of happiness to me, and occasional rebellion when I didn’t heed my mother’s words. Looking back, I wonder if my regular encounters with concentrated blasts of hot air have anything to do with my constantly feeling cold. Living in Montana, you might think it is usual to feel less than warm all of the time, but most people find themselves plenty comfortable within their homes. I, on the other hand, shiver even on the warmest days. You’re likely to spot me in a heavy sweater in the middle of July, no matter where I am.

If you think a floor heater might be dangerous in a home, especially one with young children, you’d be correct. Once, after disappearing for the night, my father stumbled into our home, drunk and incoherent. He collapsed on the floor after taking a few steps from the door. I peered over the couch I had been sleeping on (since the couch was rather close to the heater, and therefore warmer than my bedroom) at the six-foot-five giant of a man. Maybe I would have tried to move him into his own bed if it weren’t for his size. As it was, he remained passed out there on the floor, inches from the furnace.

The next morning I awoke to yelling. My father had outstretched his arm in the night and now a crisscrossed pattern





burn could be seen, raised from the skin and inflamed. He continued yelling, at my mother and at my sister and me, as if we had intentionally contrived a plan to hurt him. He punched a hole through the living room wall before storming outside and into his ancient blue pickup. The hole is still there, covered in the same plaster that my mother used to fill all the unfortunate openings in our home.

My father's burn was not the only time the heater caused someone pain. One morning, after a friend of mine had stayed the night, we woke up and quickly moved to stand above the

**“But my friend and I coaxed her into it, showing her how fun it was to fall backwards”**



heater. The warmth combined with our camaraderie brought out a dark side in me. Granted, I was only in elementary school, but I still knew that heat can cause pain. My younger sister pranced into the room, and began bothering us. She was always doing that; trying to be friends with my friends. It made me

terribly angry this particular morning though, and I told her I wanted to play a game. I chose “the trust game” in which one person falls backward with their eyes closed, and the other person catches them.

My sister was immediately suspicious, knowing how easily this game could be a ruse. But my friend and I coaxed her into it, showing her how fun it was to fall backwards. Finally, she assented. Standing straight with arms crossed and me behind her, my sister began to fall. The precariousness of the moment seemed to drag on, until finally, she fell.

She screamed and stood up, tears streaming down her face. My mother rushed in and asked what was happening. My friend and I had begun to laugh, but now we realized there had been a flaw in our plan. We meant for the fall to shock her, maybe scare her a little if she came near the heater. But the result of our trickery was much more serious, as poor misjudgment of distance resulted in her falling directly onto the

scorching metal covering. A palm-sized burn appeared on her lower back, just where her shirt had come up above her pants when she fell. It looked even worse than the one my father had received. The crisscrossed pattern was more prominent, and the raised skin was eerily free of any color. My sister continued screaming, weeping in pain. I froze, regretful of what I had done, knowing that it was completely my fault.

My mother treated the burn with cold washcloths and bandages, while I cowered in the corner. My friend was sent home without a chance to say goodbye. I stood there, unmoving, with tears swelling up in my own eyes. I knew that I had something bad coming to me, and I only prayed that it would come from my mother and not my father.

I was, in fact, spared the wrath of an angry patriarch, but still punished. For weeks, I watched my sister's burn turn to scab and eventually into a scar. She says it's gone now, but I think I can still see it. The mark reminds me of how ruthless and spiteful a child can be, and how fragile the flesh really is.

The heater is still embedded in the house's floor, although it is no longer used. A more efficient system has been installed in the ceilings and walls. I stop by, occasionally, but even this simple change makes me uncomfortable. There is no longer the danger of burning yourself, sure. But the lack of direct heat leaves me feeling empty, out of place, and—worst of all—cold.

