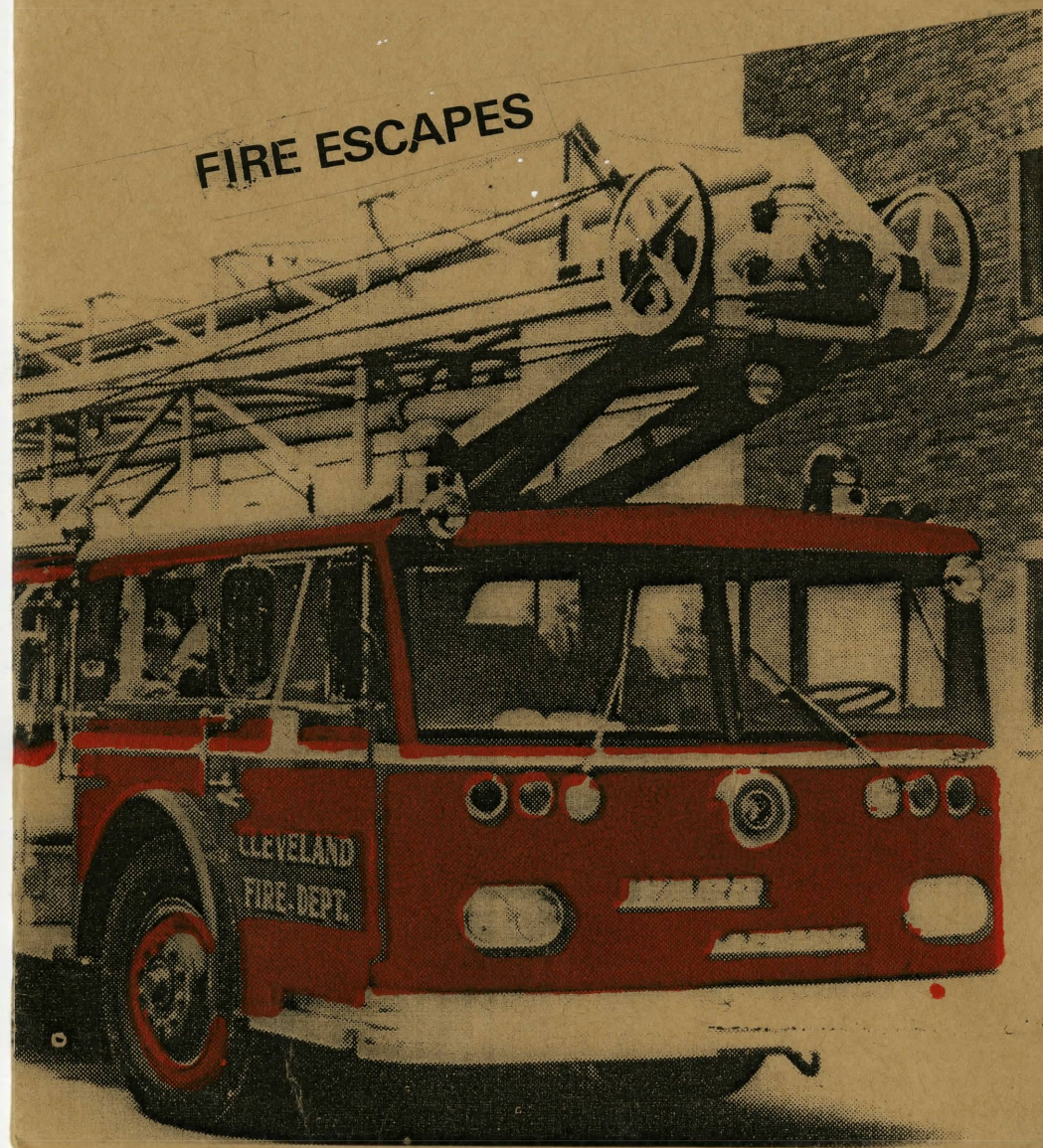


RATION

no.2

\$.25

FIRE ESCAPES





Hi! And welcome to Ration #2 - 2 pages, as promised. Or 4, or 8, however you want to look at it. Next time - 3, or 6, or 12! I originally wrote this story for a punk rock function, where I think I was supposed to read something punk, or political, or both. And this is what happened! You decide.

I agonized, as is my way, over whether this was too personal. But internalizing stress & conflict to the detriment of one's health - well, I've known it to kill women, even if it doesn't get as much press as ye olde needle in the arm. When I read this, there was a good deal of laughing going on - I hope some of that comes through written down.

Thank, for reading!
- Alwen



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FIRE ESCAPES

When I was six or seven my mother sent me to a "play therapist" in North Berkeley. What I did to deserve this was inconsequential, and I only attended a couple of sessions. It seems sort of drastic to me now, but I suppose they were different times. I wasn't happy about being left there on the first day, but I was curious. The therapist sat behind an enormous desk at one end of a long sunny room and motioned for me to sit down in a chair across from him. He gestured with both arms to the walls, where shelves rose far higher than I could reach, piled with toys and games, many with titles like "The Feelings Game."

"Now I'm going to tell you how this works," he said, soothingly, though I wasn't frightened. "You may pick any of these games to play with. You may play by yourself, or if you like, I'll play too. I'm just going to write a few things down as we talk, OK?"

I got up to look over the shelves. My experience picking things off of shelves was limited at this point to whether to blow my \$.50 weekly allowance on candy or plastic caps at the Discounts Unlimited, so this was sort of a thrill. The problem was, all the toys and games seemed pretty boring. Finally I noticed a plastic tub of kitty litter on the ground.

"Do you have a cat?" I asked.

"No," said the play therapist, from behind his desk. "If you like, you may build things in the tub of sand with popsicle sticks and matches. That might be all you'd like to do. But if you like, you may set fire to those things you build, and we can watch them burn."

"Really?" I asked. Build things with sticks and set them on fire? I mean, who needs feelings? "I want to do that," I said.

Perhaps he expected me to tire of this activity and move on to something else, but all through that hour, and resuming immediately at the next session, my doomed matchstick cities only became more elaborate. We never got around to playing the Feelings Game.



I was seventeen and about to finish high school, living on a pack and a half of cigarettes and five cups of coffee a day. Every time I saw him, my stepdad told me I was burning the candle at both ends. But in between my mom's house, where I checked in and changed clothes, and my friends' house, where I slept and ate and hung out, and my job at the hot dog place, and my job at the yuppie chocolate place, and homework at the Grand

Bakery, and getting to school early to edit the newspaper, and tripping on mushrooms behind the Lawrence Hall of Science, and punk shows, and trying to be a good girlfriend, I didn't see him very much at all, and I didn't have to listen very hard before I was out the door again.

I'd always had sensitive skin, and all the dishwashing and cleansers I encountered in food service were making my fingers react. They erupted in tiny blisters, then dried up and cracked. Only removing myself completely from the irritants made it go away, and quitting one of my jobs, or quitting anything else, didn't seem like a possibility.

A big weekend was coming up: I had chances for two scholarships on one Saturday. One was a juried contest where I would have to write an essay on site, then win a debate with five or six other kids from around the country. \$2000 if I won. The other was an interview, for \$1500—together, they would pay for most of my first year of college.

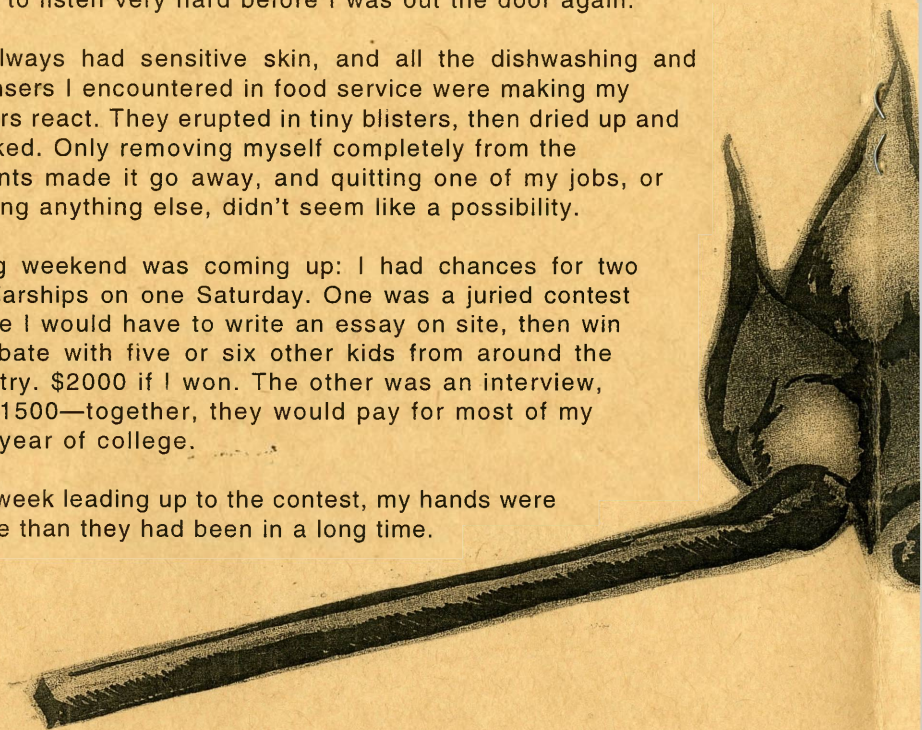
The week leading up to the contest, my hands were worse than they had been in a long time.

That Sunday, though, they were well on their way to being totally healed. My friend Gina took my wrists and turned my hands over to look at my fingers, causing me to wince in self-consciousness.

"It's amazing," she marveled. "It's like I can see into your mind by looking at your hands."

I went to see a dermatologist at the Kaiser in Oakland, where they have to prescribe you four or five medications or they can't sleep at night. No, they didn't know what it was, or what caused it—it's an autoimmune problem, affecting mostly women. Triggered by allergies or chemical irritants, aggravated by stress. Common in childhood asthmatics. No, no pending research that they knew of.

In addition to nasty, powerful steroid creams, poison for unfriendly microorganisms which might or might not live in my nose, and pills which I later found to be mild sedatives, the dermatologist gave me a piece of advice. "Listen," she said, soothingly, because I was a little upset,



"You're burning the candle at both ends. Opportunities are going to come your way in life, and sometimes you're going to want to take on high-pressure situations. But because of the way you're made, for the sake of your health, you should step away from this kind of life, attempt to live more simply."

It's so easy, especially for a doctor, to tell someone to live against their nature, and so difficult to do. Not that I tried. I lit as many candles as I could find, wherever the wicks stuck out, and let them burn.



Nearly ten years later I waited, overdressed and high, in the waiting room of a fancy downtown dermatologist's office, 17 floors up. It was September, summer in San Francisco, but I was wearing a thermal. Finally the nurse called me in to the office and told me to take off my shirt. I did this with difficulty.

"Oh my God," she said, "I'll get the doctor."

He returned with two nurses, who took off most of the rest of my clothes. The sudden temperature change sent me into a volley of shivering.

The skin on my arms and chest was so inflamed that I was losing heat quickly. They wrapped me in a blanket.

"You're running a high fever. Are you thirsty?" I nodded, yes. I had lost ten pounds in the last week and a half, just water, like a burn victim, just floating out of my skin into the atmosphere. And my mind was wandering—I felt weak, sick to my stomach.

"Why didn't you come in sooner?" the dermatologist asked, soothingly, because I was floating there, a scrap of fire in the white coolness of the room, among the nurses.

"I don't know, I had to work," I said. "I thought it would get better. It doesn't get this bad. I don't know what the hell it is." And the money, I thought. Why had I stumbled back here, now that I had no insurance?

The nurses gave me a shot of steroids—no time to absorb them through the skin—then shots of antibiotics into my arms. Then ointments to smear on, a skin sample, and blood tests, for lupus—another autoimmune disease, no known cure, research pending, affects mostly women. But not me.

The dermatologist's hypothesis sounded dubious, but was later echoed by another doctor I knew. I was exposed to a virus, he thought, that would pass through most people unnoticed. It didn't make me sick in and of itself, but was activated by the heat of the sun, because of the peculiarities of my immune system.

"Your body will take a long time to heal from this," he said. "You'll need to take some time for yourself. You'll need to address whatever it is that let it get this bad."

Hundreds of dollars later, knocked out by the steroids doing their brutal work, I lay in bed hallucinating, drinking gallons of water.

"Trapped," I said to myself aloud, absently, knowing my boyfriend would come back around soon. There wouldn't be a phone call; the doorknob would just turn, and there he would be.

"I can't deal with this," he had said when I got sick, and walked out. He had a habit of taking off in times of crisis, which was fine except for two things. One, he never took off for good. He always came back, just when I had it together again and was most desperate to keep it that way. Two, it didn't occur to me that this was one of those things you called your mom or your best friend about. I had forgotten there even were such things. I had gotten too used to diverting attention from the flames and now, fuck, I was on fire.



"There's too much heat inside you," said the acupuncturist out on Green St., not at all soothingly. "No showers," she ordered. "No baths. No spicy food, no hot drinks, no running, no walking, no sunlight, no blankets." No needles, even—my skin was too sensitive to them. The fancy dermatologist had been right. The inflammation cleared up in a couple of weeks, but the scars on my arms took almost a year to heal. Even when they were no longer visible, walking in the sun, or helping someone push a car down the street resulted in welts like hives or bites, that took half an hour of quiet breathing, in the dark, to resolve.

I'd been compared to a furnace, before, by people I'd shared beds with. "It's like you radiate heat," they'd say. But now I was a broken machine, constantly overheating. Or something only partly human—like a superhero, with horrible, but useless powers.

I had to monitor myself carefully. Hiding it became thoroughly impractical. I had no choice but to acknowledge my strange defect and handle myself with some care. Fortunately, I found myself developing a taste for self-concern.



In an exhausting and complicated effort, I left my boyfriend. Within days the skin on my arms began to clear up, become more forgiving. Within weeks I would reignite friendships, start new ones, start projects, feel better.

Gina came over, full of regret. "I should have known, when you got sick," she said. "I should have remembered."

"It's OK," I said. "I wasn't talking to you. And at least now I know how far I can be pushed. It won't happen again—at least not that way. That's worth it, probably."

"I love you," she said.



I dreamed the other night that the punks were crowded in at a show on a third story roof. A storm was brewing. It wasn't Oakland or San Francisco, but some flat, ominous and vast, grey city. The kids herded toward the bands while I looked out over a long, deserted street with timed stoplights, like Broadway in Oakland at night, but broader. Then I saw, far at the end of the street, 12 or 15 bolts of lightning join in the sky to form a single pillar of electricity in the distance. There were a few seconds of suspense, then a red ball of flame the size of Albany Hill began to explode toward us. It was coming for the punks! I raised the alarm, and we scrambled for safety, trampling each other, spilling down the fire escapes.

I told my dream to Rex, at work, and he smiled.

"What's so funny?" I asked. "It's like an Armageddon dream."

"No, it's just, I dreamed about a storm last night, too. I was in this glass cathedral, or avant-garde apartment building, or something. All the walls were glass, reflecting moonlight. Then outside, it started to rain. I could see it splashing against the glass. But when I got closer, I could see that the rain wasn't made of water, but a soft, fine ash. Drops of ash hit the walls, and broke apart, just like raindrops. It was all totally silent."

"Why don't I ever have dreams like that?" I asked, bitterly. "Why only the hellfire and brimstone? Why nothing like rain, or ashes, to put out fires?"

"You can have my dream instead, if you want," said Rex, solicitous.

I considered his offer.

"I want it," I said, "But not *instead*."

the end

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