

*Mary Ann McGuigan*

**Tell Me What I Cannot Know**

**W**hen I opened the front door, I couldn't figure out what I was hearing. The sound seemed familiar but somehow out of place: hissing, crackling, and something else, like a soft but forceful wind. I walked through to the back of the house, toward the sliding glass doors that lead to the deck. The doors were open, and the sound was stronger here, more clearly out of synch, more menacing. I stepped outside and smelled it before I saw it, a fire, just yards from the house, just behind the back fence.

Flames climbed the trees like fanatics, like efficiency experts sent to do a job and do it fast, no matter who got hurt. Part of the fence was already on fire. And so near my house, so near the pile of dry fire wood just a few feet away? My legs weakened. I had trouble swallowing. I knew I was supposed to do something, but I couldn't remember what, like when a name you've always known escapes you.

I heard myself screaming for my son. He'd been in the basement when I left. I stepped back into the house, jamming my foot into the leg of a kitchen chair. I saw the phone on the wall and grabbed for it, realizing at last what I needed to do. I got through quickly. The woman's voice in my ear made me feel safer. They'd be on their way immediately.

Trembling, I went out to the deck again to watch the flames. I had left the house less than half an hour earlier, intending to dump my heavy collection of mostly unread newspapers at the recycling center and then stop at the library, close by. Weekly visits to the library were my harmless way of taking my mind off things. I'd wander through the racks, lose track of time, browse through book after book I knew I'd never get to.

I cleared my trunk of the newspapers and got back into the car. As soon as I pulled onto the side road that leads to the library, I heard her voice. It was Maryann's voice. No question. Maryann had had a distinctive way of speaking, not altogether pleasing to the ear, but mostly music to mine, because hers were the words that could calm me down when my temper flared, set me straight when I needed the truth, make me laugh in the back of Jesuit classrooms. She was my closest friend, my safe harbor, for more than thirty years. We had the same name, made some of the same mistakes. We'd fallen madly in love with our kids, and out of love with our husbands, but only after the bruises from trying to mend things had turned to calluses. Maryann knew me, and loved me anyway. But she was gone, taken by cancer just days after her daughter's wedding, years after the start of an illness whose outcome she'd been told from the start. I think it was the only secret she didn't share with me. How obvious now that I wanted to be fooled. She obliged.

"Go home now, Mary Ann," she said. The voice was not in my head. It came from within the car. A normal person should not be hearing a disembodied voice, I told myself, but I was hearing hers. This must be what grief is like, I thought, like something that messes with your head, has its way with you. I ignored the urge to cry and continued toward the library. My sadness in those early weeks after her death was never far off, always

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just waiting to settle in when a room emptied or a task got finished. “Go home now, Mary Ann,” she said again. This time I got frightened. I did not want this, did not want to turn into a lunatic. I shook my head, let out a small cry, almost a whimper. I gripped the steering wheel, determined to get to the library, take out a ton of books, take a dose of distraction heavy enough to fend off whatever might come at me next. But she said it again.

“Go home now, Mary Ann.” The tone was not alarming; it was matter-of-fact but insistent. This can’t be happening, I thought. Yet it was, and I knew, despite how foolish it would seem, that I’d do what she told me to, just as I’d done so often before, when the choices that came with being a wife, being a mother, seemed unmanageable, unfair, when she was the only one in the world who could hear me and not turn away, not judge.

I pulled onto the shoulder, waited till I could make a U turn. Heading back home, I listened for her voice again but nothing came. After a few miles, I began to smile. Medication time can’t be far off, I told myself. By the time I reached my driveway, I was chuckling at myself for being so silly. What was I doing back at my front door, obeying a voice in a Toyota? Children were playing. The day was clear. Everything everywhere was fine.

Except in my backyard. My son Matthew had had a forbidden cigarette on the deck and tossed the butt over the fence into the dry brush. Unaware that the woods were slowly catching fire, he had headed back to the basement to escape into a video game, Nirvana pounding through his headphones.

I have wondered since then how long it would have taken Matthew to smell the smoke, to hear the maniacal flames nearing the house. But it doesn’t matter now. In less than twenty minutes, the fire was out, my son was safe, and so was my house. My sanity, though shaken, has been mostly restored, and so has the hope—the pointless one that I had clung to when Maryann was too ill to hear my voice anymore—that I will never have to lose her.