

From *The Surrogate* by Elizabeth Ayre

The speaker at the AA meeting was kind of hot. Not hot in an actual way, but in a fumbling, microwave dinner kind of way. He was in his late thirties, but it appeared as though he had skateboarded to the meeting. His hair was both curly and balding. He shared about trying to set himself on fire once when he found out, after struggling with wet hands and a lighter, that he had actually poured some sort of car washing fluid on his body instead of gasoline, and at that point basically just passed out on the floor of his mother's garage. This, he said, was the first time he realized that God might exist and there might be some loving force in the universe looking out for him. He woke up on the concrete floor covered in a rash that lasted two weeks.

He had to live in an oatmeal bath. He continued to drink for two years after that, but something had shifted, and now he sat here in front of the group with three years off drugs and alcohol. Everyone laughed when he shared about the rash and the whole burning yourself alive thing. The whole room smiled and nodded with sweet, red cheeks, as if thinking, "What a wonderfully creative way to kill yourself, I wish I had thought of that and failed."

"We all know what it's like to live a life on fire, to feel so bad that you might as well actually just burn yourself to death," he said.

Paisley nodded internally.

He looked like a sheltering tree, a fat weeping willow. It would feel nice to cry together, she thought, or to cry on top of his plush chest, or watch him cry and feel tears soak through her blouse and run into the crevices of her chest and arms. He was not a man she would be afraid to show her dirty apartment to. He probably wouldn't mind the pregnancy. In fact, he looked like the sort of guy for whom that might be somewhat of a fetish.