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At the beginning of December, I hauled my light-up nativity set out from the garage. I dusted off the plastic Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus. I immediately noticed that Mary especially looked a little rougher than last year. Joseph and Jesus looked about the same, but she definitely had aged somehow. Isn't that the way it goes?

Anyway, with the assistance of a lovely friend, we got the holy family cozily nestled in the landscaping by the front steps. We plugged them in; they lit up brightly; all was well.

Last week, however, I noticed while backing out of my driveway that Mary was not lit up anymore. While Joseph and Jesus continued to cast a steady glow, Mary was clearly burned out. I smiled rather wryly to myself.

Welcome to motherhood, Mary, I thought cynically. I love cynicism.

Terrible, isn't it?

Yes, I know.

I gave the Virgin Mother no extra dose of compassion, being a mother who was at the moment teetering on the brink of burnout myself...compared to *her* task giving birth to the Son of God in a stable without an epidural or even aromatherapy, my tasks seemed silly and trivial...endless errands and schedule coordination and programs and events and cookie plates and cheese trays and wrapping presents and so on...I am well aware compared to “Give Birth to the Son of God,” my list loses in the race to burnout, but nonetheless, we can all concede that this really, truly is a tough season.

There is a reason strained relationships often snap during the holiday season. There is a reason already stressed out people start to look as if they might literally explode at any moment. There is a reason families struggle, parents fight, kids whine. We want our spirits to be bright and cheery, and sometimes they are, but sometimes they’re not and we are just plain sad, and

often don't even know why. We all strive for our own brand of perfection, and we all fail, and that's a bitter pill to swallow.

So we are all familiar with burnout.

So, anyway, back to the plastic Mary. I dutifully changed her lightbulb and plugged her back in...and lo and behold she did not light up. Since that exhausted my knowledge of electrical repairs, I called my neighbor Vern. It turns out, Mary was more than just burned out. She had, in fact, blown a fuse.

Again, welcome to motherhood, Mary. Beyond burnout now, into the world of blown fuses. This is where the rubber hits the road. This is an ugly place to be in parenthood, in life.

It just seems to get worse and worse for my poor plastic Mary, does it not?

I pause here to assure any Catholic brothers and sisters, former or current, who might be here tonight, that my intent is not to mock the Virgin Mother, but rather to offer an existential metaphor of the human condition. Just stick with me.

What does it mean when Mary, the Mother of Our Lord, blows a fuse? On one level, it means she literally does not shine brightly, casting a lovely glow over my front lawn. On the other hand, perhaps she, being human, blows a fuse as all mothers do from time to time, as all people do, from time to time. At some point, we all snap, we all blow our own fuses, from the greatest of us to the least of us.

I offer myself as an example, just to prove I have no illusions of self-aggrandizement. This past Thursday night the boys came home from school like usual, and we were going about our usual routine of looking through backpacks and gathering up boots and hats and all that. It quickly became

apparent that we were short one pair of brand new snowboots and one pair of snowpants. Now, I should inform you, this episode comes in the heels of several items getting lost or misplaced...and replacing every single lost item gets expensive and doesn't teach kids responsibility and accountability...well, you can see where this is going...I flew past burnout, I passed go and did not collect my \$200, I blew a fuse...I was a red-alert.

DEFCON 1. A 5 on the Fujita scale of tornadoes. The expression on my boys' faces indicated that they thought I was now one to be feared and pitied at the same time. My head throbbed. My eye twitched. Yeah, I blew a fuse.

Here's the tragedy, and here's where my confessed ridiculous behavior becomes a metaphor for all of humanity, and here's where it ties in with my poor light up plastic Virgin Mary. In my fussing and fretting over this plastic figure of Mary, I had neglected to notice the baby lying right in front of her...didn't pay him any attention at all, barely gave him a "how do

ya do” as the Brits would say, didn’t pause even for a second to appreciate the gentle, steady light he was casting over my front lawn...Because I was preoccupied with Mary’s blown fuse. I saw only the failure; I completely missed the perfection.

And when I blew my fuse with my sons, it was the same thing. I wasted so much time and energy on getting mad and lecturing them about responsibility and ranting about the cost of replacing lost items and reminding them I was not their slave (does this sound familiar?)...that I almost wasted my entire evening with my sons. Precious time, never to be recaptured, gone forever, wasted in a rant. I say almost, because after this had gone on for way too long, I looked at the clock and in horror realized it was their bedtime. Was this how our day was going to end? No. I let them stay up late Thursday night. We watched A Charlie Brown Christmas. They

practiced their instruments. They took baths. A calm settled in. The night was saved in the 11th hour.

How often do we fail to see the gift right in front of our very eyes because we are so busy blowing fuses? We lose our tempers, we lose our patience, we lose our minds...and to what end? To fix a plastic, light up Mary? To find a lost pair of boots? You know as well as I do that most nights are not silent nights and holy nights, where all is calm and bright. Most nights are a race against time, to do what has to be done, to dwell on the negative instead of the positive.

But perhaps this can be a simple message tonight, meant for tired ears and blown fuses...a rally cry at midnight...it's not too late to right what's wrong....it's not too late to focus on what needs to be focused on...and it's not usually the one with the blown fuse who requires our attention...usually

it's the one who is softly glowing, giving a sift light while the rest of us rant
and rave over stupid things.

There is still time, if we can still muster the energy, for a silent night,
holy night...even though we might look a little rougher than last year...there
is still time to turn away from the burnout and blown fuses and gaze upon
the soft glow of the beauty right in front of us...a beauty so undemanding, so
gentle...the beauty of Jesus the Christ, a soft, tiny face, so easy to overlook,
so easy to ignore, and yet ever present, ever lovely, ever glowing.