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'This is not an emergency'

By Maureen Schlagen

Seven years ago, I bought a terrific grill, the Weber BabyQ.

"I am not comfortable with that name at all," my son Joe, then 11, said as he helped me assemble it. He was right — they definitely should have focus-grouped that one.

But it had the most wonderful cast-iron cooking surface, and because it used those camp-sized propane canisters you can buy at the grocery, I never had to carry a full-size tank home in the car, praying the entire time I wouldn't get rear-ended and blow up an entire city block.

One day last spring, I grilled some chicken breasts on it. When I took them off the grill and turned off the gas, however, the fire kept on burning.

"No problem," I thought. "I'll just close the lid, and it will go out."

A few minutes later, when I went back outside to put the grill away, it was a blazing inferno. My mind raced. As much trouble as my repair-ridden house had been, I did not want it to burn down. I had to act fast.

The first order of business was to carefully disconnect the gas canister. Next, I needed to put the fire out. I went inside for a large glass of water — but I stopped myself. This was clearly a grease fire. Everyone

knows you don't put water on a grease fire.

But what do you put on a grease fire?

I searched my memory, and suddenly, I pictured it clearly.

"Flour," I thought. "You smother a grease fire with flour."

Which was perfect, really. I didn't have a fire extinguisher, but by golly, I had flour — five kinds of it. I was a little concerned that the cast-iron grate would block most of it from falling onto the fire ... but if I used enough, surely it would work.

Except I was wrong — in the heat of the moment, I'd forgotten the lesson I'd learned every single time I'd tried to bake brownies: FLOUR BURNS. It wasn't flour they used in that demonstration. It was baking soda. (This is no longer recommended, by the way.)

The problem was getting worse by the minute. The fire continued to rage, and thick smoke from the burning flour was now filling the neighborhood. The time had come to call for help.

Since this was clearly not an emergency, I did not dial 911. I looked up the regular number for the fire department. Of course, calls to this number ring directly to 911, because what fire isn't an emergency, and what city has a special dispatcher just for non-emergency fires?

"Oh, hi," I said. "This is not an emergency. My little grill is on fire, and I can't put it out. I tried flour, and that just made it worse. Can you tell me what I should do?"

"What's your address, ma'am?" the dispatcher asked. I gave it to her.

"I'll send someone out," she said. Seconds later, I heard the siren.

"Oh, my gosh ... that's for me," I gulped.

The fire department is approximately 45 seconds away. And it wasn't just any siren. It was the hook-and-ladder. Several firefighters got out in full gear. They almost seemed disappointed when they saw the BabyQ.

"We saw the smoke, and we could smell it all the way from the station," one said.

Within a couple of minutes, the flames were out. They were really nice about the whole thing.

"I swear this won't happen again," I said, embarrassed. "Would you like some chicken?"

They didn't. I thanked them and promised to clean my next grill regularly.

I am now the proud owner of a terrific new grill. It's exactly like the old one ... except for the name. It's now called the Weber Q1000.

It goes great with my new fire extinguisher.