

The Burnt Boy

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I was walking back from the supermarket when I first saw the boy. Across the street, the scorched shell of the old corner shop slouched where it had burned down last year. The boy was the other side a blackened pane of glass. He made a circle in the soot with his sleeve and peered out.

At the time, I thought nothing of it – just some rebellious kid playing where he shouldn't. But his image grew stronger in my mind with each step home. Maybe I should have said something – told him to get out of there, that it could be dangerous. But there was something not right about the way he had looked, about the way he had made me feel: empty, like I was looking through him the same way I had looked through the marred glass.

I turned the key in the lock and pushed the front door open with my elbow, the plastic shopping bag digging into my fingers. And that's when I heard the baby screaming.

Richard came out of the kitchen still wearing his shoes and coat, holding the baby. 'Where the hell were you?' he shouted.

I shrank. 'The shops... to get nappies,' I said, gesturing to the shopping bag. I went to hand the nappies to Richard as evidence, but when I looked in the bag all I had bought was a newspaper, a fair trade chocolate bar and a bottle of diet Coke. I looked up. I could see the intensity of anger in Richard's eyes, his brow contracted and lips tight as he bounced the screaming baby in his arms. I could see the anger, but I didn't feel it.

That's when I saw the boy. He was standing behind Richard. I should have been surprised, or afraid – but I was neither. I simply stared at him, as he stared back at me.

He was a ruin of a boy. What was left of his patchy hair was the colour of soot. His skin was red and crinkled like an old man's, but had a plastic sheen to it, as though he'd been shrink-wrapped wrong. His eyes were wide - floating black coals in dual pools of milk.

Richard said it was the last straw. The next morning he phoned his boss and took leave from work.

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Richard looked after the baby. Which meant I could look after the burnt boy. The burnt boy didn't speak. I never saw him even open his mouth. I had a sickening suspicion that his lips had melted together. I called him Peter. The boy who never grew up.

Peter wouldn't let me wash him or sooth his burns with cream. He flinched and ran away whenever I tried. So I stopped trying. Instead, we spent the days together in the garden. It was a beautiful summer, but Peter just sat on the bench under the parasol all day, watching me tend to the flowers.

One time, I heard him rapping his knuckles on the bench to get my attention. He pointed to his hand, where a ladybird had landed, and he was smiling. I smiled too, and told him that ladybirds were a gardener's friends, as they ate all the nasty greenfly. The ladybird took flight and Peter waved goodbye to it.

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I was lying in bed that night, restless. It was too hot. The sheets trapped me. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw flames.

Richard rolled over. I tried to be still, I tried to fall asleep. But the more I tried, the harder it was. I scratched my leg, cleared my throat; threw the sheets off, pulled them back on.

Richard got up, sighing. I could just about see him in the darkness. He didn't say a word, but glared at me as he snatched up his pillow. The stairs creaked on his descent.

The bedside clock glared bright and red: 03.27

I found myself on the landing. I thought I was looking at the clock again, thought that I was too tired to read the time, but it was the red light of the fire alarm I was staring at. I needed to check that it worked.

The alarm pierced the night. The baby cried. Richard swore.

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I knew that Peter thought it was a good thing that I now checked the fire alarm on a daily basis. Each time, Richard would shout at me, but I would simply focus on Peter, who would stand behind him, smiling sympathetically with his thin, wiggly lips and nodding at me in reassurance. Richard removed the batteries once, but I cried hysterically for hours until he put

them back in. Richard made me promise not to do it anymore. It really scared the baby. Okay, I said. I'll try.

Five days and I hadn't slept. I went around the house unplugging everything in case there was an electrical fire. Richard went around plugging everything back in. So I sat in the garden with Peter, where there weren't any plugs.

The summer sun was so bright and hot. My shoulders started to go red. My skin hurt, and I couldn't help but imagine it peeling and blistering. The sunlight on my closed lids was the colour of fire.

Richard was taking a shower, so I took the baby to the bottom of the garden and put it under the lavender. The bees buzzed around it and it started to cry, but I barely heard. I ran back to the house, taking the stairs two at a time to the fire alarm. Richard opened the bathroom door and saw me. I hesitated for a moment. I contemplated pretending I was doing something else. But Peter was looking at me with his big, lashless eyes, and I could see the sadness and the expectation and the hope that I wouldn't disappoint him - and the urge was too strong. I jabbed the button.

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It has been five months since I started counselling. For the last month I've been bringing Julia with me, to show how much I've improved. She's getting big, now, and heavy to hold. But I hold her close to me throughout the sessions, even though she cries sometimes. I can't help it, though. She still makes me nervous.

'And Peter?' the counsellor asks.

'Peter is gone,' I say, bouncing Julia on my knee and making her laugh.

But Peter isn't gone. He sits with us at the dinner table, swinging his legs. He sits cross-legged on the floor and watches T.V with us. Best of all I like it in the summer, when he watches me gardening. I don't talk to him, but he understands.

He's in the room with us right now. While the counsellor is writing her notes, I give Peter a wink. He's my favourite. He's the one I can't hurt. But this one on my knee - her fragility is terrifying.