

Background Noise

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The Fire Man

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One morning my mother backed the car over our dog.

A police car came down the street, unusual for our quiet suburban neighborhood. I waved for him to come over, an instinctive gesture, since my mother was upset.

His uniform was blue and crisp and everything about him seemed shiny, even his smile. He placed the dog on the grass and covered him with a towel from his trunk.

Later in the day, at my Little League championship game, I told my best friend on the team, Tim, about the police officer. Tim once said he wanted to be a fireman because he would get kisses from all the girls he saved, but after hearing my story, changed his mind.

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Why don't you be the fireman, and I'll be the policeman, he said, and then we can be a couple of heroes.

In our final at bat, I stepped up to the plate with the bases loaded and the championship on the line. We were down a run.

I was our best hitter. My father once had a tryout for a semi-pro team and taught me how to line up my knuckles on the bat to help bring my swing around at full power.

Come on Henry, I heard my father call out from behind the backstop.

I worked my way to a full count. As the pitcher released the ball, a dog barked from somewhere. I thought of our dog on the driveway, lying in a puddle of urine.

A called third strike. The bat never left my shoulder.

In the parking lot of the field, my father and I were getting into the car when I heard a kid from our team yell, you suck Henry, from across the lot. Then I saw Tim charge him and smash the kid's nose. As we drove away I heard a cacophony of yells and screams.

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We found out later that the policeman who covered our dog was on his way to the house of Kevin, a kid who bullied me in school. He would kick my chair in math class and say, wake up idiot, when the teacher called on me. My strategy had been to pretend not to hear her because I didn't understand math. Especially fractions.

It was common knowledge that Kevin's family was unstable. His older brothers had been arrested for breaking into people's houses, and their father was a drunk who took a belt to the kids. This time when he beat them up, someone called the police.

Once, Kevin set my tree fort on fire. I couldn't prove it, but he always said that my fort was nothing, that a real fort was underground, a place where you could hide cigarettes and *Playboy* magazines.

My father built the fort one summer day and said it was so solid it would never come down. He was like a God in the way he swung a hammer, making long steel nails disappear into the wood. I read comic books and ate candy bars in the fort.

Firemen tramped through my backyard with a hose. There seemed to be a special power in their black

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rubber coats, which stood in contrast to the green of our yard.

The plumbing store my father owned was across the street from our fire station on Main Street and for years I watched the truck, shiny and red, come and go. They'd wave to me and I'd wave back, and I thought how much purpose they must've felt in the act of putting out a fire and inspiring young children to want to be in their place.

After I finished two years of college, I worked various construction and custodial jobs and then ended up at Home Depot, where I unloaded trucks and set up patio furniture displays. During my lunch hour, I'd read in a chaise lounge chair. My manager felt it wasn't appropriate but I convinced him that my presence was a symbol of leisure, which was the ideal selling point.

The years drifted by.

One morning I open the paper and see a picture of Tim on page three. I know it's him. Same name, same age, same I want to kiss all the girls smile.

According to the article, Tim was a police officer who'd been killed by a drunk driver. He was married and

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had two children. When I read the name of the driver who hit him, I whisper, Jesus Christ, Jesus fucking Christ.

The old bully, Kevin. I wonder if he still lived in the same house. Whenever I'd pass it, I'd think of the tree fort fire and the way he'd kick my chair and laugh his dumb laugh.

I put the paper down and stare out the kitchen window into the yard. I'm not sure how to feel about Tim's death, but I take some comfort in the fact that he might've become a policeman because of my story about a kind officer with a shiny smile who covered our dog.

I pour another cup of coffee.

An officer who just happened to be on his way to the house of a kid who would cross paths with Tim years later.

I laugh in the quiet kitchen.

I cut the grass and then take a drive around the neighborhood. I stop across the street from Kevin's house, which can only be described as dilapidated.

The paint on the house hangs off like skin from the burned bodies I saw in documentaries about Vietnam. The

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shutters are crooked, the gutters twisted. It's like the house was built for a movie that needed a haunted house.

I put my head back against the seat and remember the day our dog was killed. The police car cruising along, slow enough for me to wave down. The shiny badge. A gun with a wooden handle. On his way to this house.

I look down at Tim in the casket. There's a vague resemblance to the face I once knew, but on the street, I wouldn't recognize him. A display of pictures is mounted on an easel. A full life.

I leave the funeral parlor and stop off for a drink at a local bar. The place had been here forever and was walking distance from the neighborhood. It sat on the edge of a strip mall that contained a bakery, deli, ice cream parlor, and barber shop.

Everyone knew that Kevin's father was a regular here. He was a skinny guy with glasses and a mustache and always had a suit on.

The Good Humor ice cream man was his drinking buddy. One night I saw the truck parked in front of Kevin's house. It seemed out of place, an ice cream truck parked at night next to a front yard overgrown with tall weeds.

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I watched from behind a wide Maple tree as the Good Humor man sat Kevin's father down on a wooden porch swing. In his white uniform, he looked like a ghost.

I was in Kevin's house once.

My mother was a class mom and stopped by to see Kevin's mother about a field trip they were planning. The inside of the house was bereft of comfort. There was no carpeting, just dull bare wood floors. Nothing on the walls. It's as if its inhabitants were just passing through.

Kevin and I weren't in class again together until high school, when we shared a couple of classes. Our English teacher was new to the school. I liked the way she taught us how to look for symbols in novels. In *To Kill a Mockingbird* she pointed out something in the scene where a character's house burns down. Orange flames in the upstairs windows resembled the eyes of a pumpkin, and she explained that it foreshadowed something that was going to happen on Halloween.

I felt bad for her when Kevin called her a slut for failing him, and flipped over a desk as he left the room.

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A follow-up article in the paper says that Kevin is out on bail for his drunk driving accident with Tim. It also says that Kevin is a mechanic, divorced, and has a son. He lives in the house with a brother and a nephew.

At night, I take walks and watch the house. Sometimes I stand behind the tree where I witnessed the ice cream man drop off Kevin's father.

One night, a guy who looks like Kevin might look many years since high school, goes for a walk. I keep my distance and follow him down to the pub.

The jukebox plays that annoying eighties tune "867-5309/Jenny." Kevin sits at the bar, near the door, a bottle of Budweiser in front of him. I walk to the furthest end of the bar and ask for a Tequila Sunrise. The bartender gives me one of those you gotta be kidding looks. I tell him that I just want to see something colorful.

Kevin stares at the television above the bar. He's got a beard, and wears a denim jacket. The bartender puts the drink in front of me and says not to blame him if it sucks. He's never made one before.

I keep my face turned away from Kevin.

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After he leaves, I finish my drink and grab a book of matches, the kind with the name of the bar on it. You never knew when you'd have to light a candle, or something.

I eat spaghetti with homemade sauce, my father's recipe. I always woke to the smell of garlic on Sunday mornings. He liked to cook as he listened to old crooners on eight-track tapes sing about heartbreak.

In the yard, leaves crunch under my sneakers as I take a short cut through the woods, my favorite place to play as a child. Branches brush my cheek. I sit on a tree stump and listen, eyes closed, a kind of private seance: kick the can; lawnmowers; my mother's voice yelling supper time; the morning paper on the stoop; the distant pop of firecrackers as I drift off to sleep.

From behind the Maple tree, I can see that Kevin's house is dark.

I walk up to the front door. The porch swing is rusty and hangs at an angle. I cover the swing, and the wooden porch, with gasoline. Then I walk around the house and splash gas onto the wooden shakes. I take out my matches.

I walk down the street and lean against the Maple.

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I stare at the upstairs windows, where the movement and beauty of orange and yellow flames offer life to a dead house.

Later, in bed, as sirens break the silence of a fall night, I think about the flaming upstairs windows, and how they did resemble two eyes.

But not the eyes of a pumpkin.

More like a skull.