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Alex's Fire

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ALEX'S FIRE

A late steamy afternoon on the cramped beach behind Mendelssohn's Bathhouse. The squealing children have disappeared into hot station wagons or pedalled standing up over the hill on fat-tired bikes, and we are left with the buzz of a last water skier from the far end of this stale lake. *Miss Whalom*, the dwarf steamer, loiters at her moorings nearby. Alex watches the lovers who sit on a gummy picnic table at the edge of the canopy. The boy is older than we are, nineteen maybe, the girl our age but unlike the chilly tennis-playing types we've taken out this summer. Her hair is long and swept up into a lacquered swirl, which is only now beginning to release a few dark strands for her to brush away. Her suit is a green-striped two-piece that balloons in front as she leans forward, smoking, rubbing the boy's leg with her small white hand. It is nothing they do outright, only the intimacy of the touch, the way they seem to feel secluded by the corner of moist shade cast by the bathhouse. We are desperate for experience, but the desire and the patience in their look shrink us. We're stranded between the two chunks of time that make up our lives.

In a month I'll take the train south for my last year of boarding school, and Alex, who has been away and come home, will enroll in our town's high school for his senior year and begin laboring through its offerings, after school running errands and hosing off cars in the back lot of the Ford dealership where his father manages to stay employed. Alex has worked at three jobs this summer, each one automotive. I'm accustomed to looking for him in cluttered backstreet garages—places like Lloyd's Radiator Shop—and I'm no longer surprised when men like Lloyd glance up darkly from their work and tell me Alex went out earlier and never came back. He has no particular talent for fixing things, even less for discerning what's wrong with them. He has yet to figure out that the bond between young men and cars is not absolute. His skin is pallid, chronically oil-stained in the pores of his hands. He drives a maroon Mustang with dealer plates—not ideal since the car can't be modified, but it's easy enough. His talk is laced with words like *glasspacks*, *hemis*, *427s*. They excite him. This is a difference between us: he loves the car, I like the feel of

driving. Pointless solitary rides through back-country Massachusetts, the stone walls and fields whizzing by, the radio beating out harsh new songs by Eric Burden, the Stones, against which I sing almost fluently. But I have no keen interest in the artistry of engines or in pacing off the thick, still-warm tails of rubber on the road behind Alex's house.

We are not so different to look at, two nondescript seventeen-year-olds, limp brownish hair brushing the tops of our ears, shagging longer over our foreheads. Neither of us is unblemished or physical enough to pass for a lifeguard, or eccentric enough to draw an interested stare. We blend in all too easily. I am the one with black glasses (one bow wrapped in white athletic tape), Alex the one with the long, almost horsey face, the one who is slow to smile these days, who walks with his shoulders bunched and his hands balled in loose fists.

When it's time to leave the beach and enter Mendelssohn's yeasty changing rooms, Alex shuns the lovers. Beyond the bathhouse lies Whalom Park, an oasis of aging rides and attractions, part carny, part good family entertainment. From where we stand, the sun can be seen blasting through the roller coaster's webbing of white-washed struts and crossbeams. It's a big one, beautiful in its way, a kind of landmark. Every night a line straggles back from its ticket window, people holding pale blue sno-cones, joking and bragging, and a few staring up with something like awe as the gears tick the cars' ascent to the highest tier, followed by a cascade of screams as regular as breakers at the shore. Every few years we hear that someone has been thrown from it and killed, but they've broken the rules and they're nobody we know.

Then Alex stops abruptly and grabs my arm, waving his free hand in an arc that takes in the whole roller coaster.

"See that," he tells me in a voice both calm and riled. "I'm going to burn that thing down."

Every night after dark there were crowds, up on the bright midway and down on the street where the back of the park met the lake. In the distance a few white lights burned at camps on the far shore. Alex and I worked our way down the sidewalk through the clusters of girls perched on parked cars, on the railing, hunched on the curb. Down from a fried clam place on one end, past a

bar and an open-faced Skee-ball palace, past Mama Castiglio's, past the dancehall called Roseland, past the last fluorescent-lit soft ice cream stands to the dark area under the roller coaster protected by hurricane fence.

Then back.

The sidewalks were patrolled by local toughs, some alone in their immaculate black leather, picking through the foot traffic, alert for something to take issue with; others with the red lettering of the RYDERS club on their denim jackets, gathering among the bikes outside the White Horse bar, then scattering into the crowd. Alex knew a few, by name at least, and once as we lingered with one called Angie, Alex said, *Here, feel*, and pressed my hand to the back of Angie's jacket where I felt a huge knife tucked into his belt. Angie looked off above us and said there was going to be trouble later. If there was, I never saw it and I never wanted to. Sometimes Alex wore his own leather jacket (actually a kind of vinyl) but nobody mistook him for that breed of roving anger.

I see myself in lock-step with Alex, drifting through snatches of music, yells from passing cars, mad laughter carrying down from the park—some human, some canned and broadcast from a tattered dummy outside the Fun House. As he talked of other things, I dwelled secretly on the act he'd vowed to perform. I measure who I was by what I didn't think of. I had no thought of what would happen afterward: I didn't picture the police picking through the charred wood, or the insurance adjusters, or the owners and their rage, or the barricades families would drive past, slowly, pointing fingers. Nor did I wonder why Alex had chosen the roller coaster—was it only that it was so bright and visible? Nor do I remember saying to myself *This is rotten*, though I must have had my doubts. I only imagined, as Alex must have, the flames that would dart like excitement through the old wood, rising tier to tier, until the night sky was blasted with a light he'd never forget, a light of his own making.

We paused across from Roseland and drank Cokes in huge paper cups full of crushed ice. Alex stopped a girl he thought he knew from the beach, or maybe from the counter at Friendly's, or maybe from another night along here. She had long straight hair made white and lusterless by peroxide and indolent hours in the sun. She wore a man's blue button-down shirt, tails out, and cut-off jeans dappled by Clorox.

"You want to go for a ride?" Alex said.

"Where to?" the girl said—or maybe she said she had a friend waiting, or maybe she was savvy enough to snap, "Whatcha got?"

Nothing would happen beyond this, we all knew it. A light hand on the shoulder, endless fractions of talk. My attention wandered uncontrollably to the dancehall across the street.

When my folks went out to dance, it was to the country club. I see them standing in the foyer, my father showered and suffused with witch hazel, his tux newly pressed, my mother in her long quiet dress trying aloud to persuade herself she'll survive the evening's clamor. They'll return not long after midnight. Most likely I'll have just gotten in and will be sitting on the edge of the bed, the lights out. My father's voice will drift under the door, buoyant from Scotch and a few sociable hours among his equals. My mother will sound fatigued, resentful. *Never again*, I'll hear her say, as I lie back, trapped a while longer in protective custody.

But there before me stood Roseland: a long frame building sheeted in painted tin on which there was a great furled rose and lettering in a script that said Roseland had survived from the park's more genteel beginnings, into this present-day noise and gaudiness so strangely attractive to me. Downstairs was the bar, upstairs the dance floor. From the sidewalk I could see the dancers sweep by rows of windows, speckled with darts of colored light from the spinning mirror near the bandstand. Sometimes they stepped onto the balcony and looked for a moment over the lake or down at all of us, from whose ranks they had once come, then disappeared inside. They were beautiful in their bright tight clothes, in the sweaty flow of fast dancing and drinking and being so unashamedly in the prime of their lives.

I should say this about Alex: he lied. Not once, dramatically, but habitually, as if his life had come to depend on doses of it. I hated to admit it because he had been my friend and sometimes confidant since grade school, and because it was needless and transparent. He wasn't one of those drifty kids who lies because he can't keep anything straight in his mind, nor was he any more devious by nature than the rest of us; it was just that we couldn't trust what he

said he did outside our circle of friends.

On summer evenings we played music in a built-over shed down behind Alex's house. We were joined by our friend Owen who played a Hofner base (left-handed, McCartney-style), and by Fritz, who hunched behind his partial set of drums, always ahead of the beat so that even slow songs scampered toward the end. And some nights Jody, Owen's lovely vulgar sixteen-year-old sister, would come too, jumping at a legitimate excuse to get out of the house. Were it not for the fact she'd always seemed more like a sister to me, I might have driven myself nuts lusting after her. It was the same way for Alex.

Alex was our leader, our director and arranger and singer. He got us an occasional job at somebody's barn party in Ashby or Townsend. His voice was fair enough when he relaxed, but his falsetto leaked air like a split reed, and he liked to sneer the words in a way I thought was corny. He favored three-chord songs like *Hang On Sloopy* or ones he'd written himself, which were thin on melody and rhymed only in the sense that most of the lines ended in . . . *girl*. But the quality of his voice ended up not mattering much because he played his guitar too loud. Owen and I would have to keep turning ours up, then Alex would nudge his up, and soon the songs were instrumentals.

One night after we'd stopped—our ears exhausted by the sheer weight of the noise we'd made, our fingers unable to come up with anything we hadn't played already twice over—Alex dug around in a drawer by the turntable and produced an unlabelled 45 record and held it up to us proudly.

"This just came in the mail," he said. "It's that group I was in up at school."

He hovered over it as it played, head cocked to the spinning disc as if it filled his mind with glamorous memories of the recording studio. Unfortunately, the song was old, one of those reverberating space-age numbers done by groups like The Ventures. In fact, it *was* The Ventures, no doubt about it. He must have found a remaindered copy and soaked the paper label off.

"That's you, huh?" Jody said.

"Sure," Alex said. "Me and others."

Jody made a face. I don't know what Owen thought, but we kept our mouths shut. Maybe I thought he was entitled to his illusions. From time to time there were stories about prodigious tender-hearted girls from the teachers' college, stories of high-speed chases late at night, Alex's ass saved at the last by his hot car, his cunning, his instinct for backwoods geography. As

truth, his tales were hard to swallow, given what we knew about Alex firsthand—unless somehow there was another Alex inside, who only came out in the world away from us. As fantasies, they were too tame and predictable to capture our awe. When we were in a group I let them blow by like a bad smell. When it was just the two of us—as it often was, since we had the long-time habit of killing time together—he was more restrained. Maybe I seemed less gullible by nature, but more likely he felt some unspoken respect for the allegiance we had made, and maybe a little fear that it would—would have to be—broken.

So what did I believe? Did I think he meant to send the roller coaster up in flames—not a boast or a figure of speech or an outright falsehood, but actual premeditated arson, something criminal and assinine? The more I thought about that recent afternoon at Mendelssohn's, remembering Alex's reddened eyes uplifted into the lowering sun that made the roller coaster look like it was already on fire, the more the answer was *yes*, passionately, despite the lying, despite everything. As we drove home one night I told him, "You know, you don't have to prove anything to me."

"Sure, yeah, I know that," he answered after a long pause. "I just wanted you to know about it. You're my guarantee."

I worked on a framing crew that summer. *Good experience*, my father said, meaning (he elaborated often) that I would know how a house was put together and would not be cheated by a shoddy builder in later life, and meaning further (he did not say) that I would see what it was like to work with my hands since he had every intention of seeing to it that I would have a choice about it. I held the job that summer (and two more) though I neither loved the work nor hated its drudgery. It was only—especially that year—a passage, and if I ever thought of quitting it was only after a day when the wood and the sun and my own hands fought me, a passing thought, one I would scarcely recall in the subdued air of the next morning. And if I had yearned to quit, if I ever happened to think it was my right, I would not have given in to that urge, partly out of fear of not living up to my father's version of me, partly because I knew it was a passage and that stepping out of it would put me smack against a

reality I wasn't ready yet to face.

But Alex had quit or been fired three times in three months; I have no idea what his father had to say about it. Rex was a big, slope-shouldered Texan whose discomfort at being stranded in New England for twenty years was dulled by bourbon and by the long-term lethargy of a dulling job. He probably said very little. The fact was, Alex's mother kept the family afloat. She ran a travel agency in Fitchburg and had a solid grip on the business-trip market, occasionally lapsing into guided tours she directed herself. She was not exactly a tiny woman, but the clarity of her features and the insistent Old Boston snap of her voice made the contrast with her husband all the more glaring. Divorce was still rare enough then to be considered evidence of some significant failure, so people like Alex's folks mostly stayed together and let their fires smolder.

For a few days the previous spring, Alex and I had been home from school at the same time. Though it was called spring break, there were still islands of corn snow in the yards and the sky hung low over our heads with a terrific dreariness. His mother had taken a group of company wives to Mexico City (or maybe Martinique—someplace with sun), which left Rex nominally in command of the household. I was there late that Saturday, engrossed in serious talk with Alex. Rex appeared now and then in a worn path between the door to the room he called his office and the bar at the end of the kitchen counter, looking up from his slouch as he passed by, ready it seemed to share some drinking man's wisdom with us, but settling for a soft nod of the head, acknowledgment of how far our downbeat presence was from any true sons of his, red-blooded Texas boys he could throw his arms around and bullshit with all night long.

The reason for our conference was that Alex had dropped out of school and needed my help in explaining it. The truth was that he just couldn't cope with it anymore but the truth didn't sound like an explanation. Though he might have just gone in that night and said it plainly to his father—who surely would have recognized a kindred outlook in his son—there was no tradition of such talk in that family; besides, Rex's sympathy would have carried no weight.

We were huddled on the couch near the kitchen's open fireplace, talking the problem around in circles, when the night took a new turn. The door slammed open and Alex's mother appeared, American Tourister in hand, her gray-

flecked ringlets drooping and wet, a pained yet eager look on her face. Without a word to us she marched into the office where Rex had whiled away a major chunk of his married life lost in *Shotgun News*. I remember perfectly what she called him: *You slug*. She elaborated in detail, her voice prodding him like a sharp stick. He had failed to leave a car for her at the airport as specified in careful arrangements. He had no doubt let it slip his mind. Alex watched the sputtering fire, head on knees. From the other room Rex offered no defense.

"Listen," I told Alex, lamely, "you'll come up with something."

Alex kept his mouth shut and I left wondering what he'd say when he couldn't put it off any longer, how he could make it look like something he had no responsibility for. I envied him neither his mother's angry attention, nor his father's sloppy charade of surprise and disappointment, nor the understanding, surely taking shape in his mind, that he was—in one rattled embodiment—*both* of them. In the end, he returned to school that spring, finished the year and waited for the counselor to do the dirty work.

You might imagine Alex asking me into his plans, the corner of his mouth squeezing into a look that's less than a smile, the look of a card player who can no longer quite hide his estimation of the night's luck. Or picture us as we circle the park discussing in the privacy of the Mustang such details as timing, gaining access to the understructure, whether gasoline or kerosene would do the better job. Or hear Alex sharing his misgivings with me. It would be wrong: Alex said nothing.

In fact, for several weeks I hardly saw him. Then one night Owen and I drove out to Alex's, accompanied by Jody, who sprawled in back, filling the car with her mentholated smoke and her obscenely comic commentary on what she saw beyond the window.

Alex was down in the shed, his guitar so loud he didn't hear us come. Jody stopped at the door, which had a sort of porthole window, and waved to us.

"Look, look!" she said.

Alex was alone, the guitar slung below his belt where he beat at it, stiff-armed, savage. He'd taken off his shirt and we could see the sores on his back as he humped and shook in front of the wavy mirror on the wall. His left hand had stopped making chords and was gripping the guitar as if it were a wild hose.

Jody started laughing her coarse husky laugh, the braids flopping across her chest like two weathered rope ends. She made her face long and serious and shook her hips like Alex. Owen and I couldn't help laughing too, though in a moment I turned away and walked to the car, halfway ashamed of myself.

It was several summers later (at a party before her wedding, both of us lit by champagne and the pleasure of the occasion) that I learned what had given Jody's mockery of Alex its edge. Of all of us, Jody—at fifteen, then sixteen—was the only one who took her sexuality with anything like an open mind, the only one who really *enjoyed* it. Unlike her brother who was habitually cautious, ever-aware of his role as the oldest male in the family, she dealt with her appetites and curiosities with a bright willfulness, which had once, earlier that summer, brought her into an encounter with Alex, a walk on the ridge overlooking town, which in turn had progressed from two near-siblings shooting the breeze on a warm summer night, to Jody's sudden desire to lie down with him in the long grass. Alex had failed her. He had fidgeted atop her, half-dressed, antic and humorless for a long time, then red-faced and groaning (in fact, an exact replica of the act he was staging for the benefit of the shed's mirror, so that Jody's imitation of him was not as he was in the shed, but as he had been, up there in the grass with her). He'd stood abruptly then, crying, and run from her, down the hill toward the lights of the houses, leaving Jody to pick up his shirt and one of his boots and walk slowly after him—though not for a while, she said, because it was a nice starry night and she was in no particular hurry.

Then it was Labor Day weekend, the end of summer, though that year it came in the midst of a fierce hot spell. For days there had been no trace of the wind that came in from the Atlantic, moderating the afternoons, cooling the evenings. Saturday was my last day of work. I said my simple farewells, came home, showered, letting the water run cold on my sunburn, changed into fresh jeans and sat on the back porch with my father listening to the Red Sox game on his transistor radio. He had taken to offering me a Ballantine Ale now and then, so I drank with him, the long branches of the willow hanging still, a fragile dusty feeling in the light around us. It was the second game of a twi-

nighter and the Sox were already falling behind.

"They'll pull it out," I said.

"Those heartbreakers," my father said.

All summer I had worked and cleaned up and gone out, and for once, at the end of it, I felt no restlessness. It was a happy moment, the kind you wish you could seed your life with, but which is instead an extract, something distilled and rare.

Into that soft hour Alex appeared around the corner of the garage, hands in pockets.

"Well, Alex," my father said. "How's the world treating you?" his irony subdued by the time of day to a point below Alex's threshold. Actually, my father had never cared for Alex, often referring to him as *that jerk*.

"OK, I guess," Alex said, standing awkwardly between us.

My father nodded. A burst of cheering rose from the radio then died away but he seemed to pay no attention.

"You boys have hot dates tonight?" my father asked.

"There's a dance down at the Park," Alex said.

I looked at my father. "I better go," I said, though I could have stayed there easily enough, and in a way I wish I had.

My father nodded again as I stood. He touched my arm and said, "Have a good time," then added, "Use your smarts."

Alex did have a hot date. Once we were on the road his excitement began to show. He drove slower than he had to, the Mustang cruising along in restrained bursts as he talked, not at me but toward the windshield. We climbed the hill that separated our town from Whalom, and from its sloping ridge we saw the last color of sunset smeared across the horizon, and below it in a bowl, the park's flashy neon, reflections of each trapped together on the surface of the lake.

Her name was Fran and she was a secretary at the Ford dealership. Twice in the last week, Alex proclaimed, he had aced out all the salesmen for her attention. He'd taken her to the drive-in movie.

"She know how old you are?" I asked him.

"Sure, hell," Alex said. Then in a minute he said, "What difference does it make?"

He downshifted past the driving range and rounded the corner that brought

us to the park, slowed at the traffic circle by the roller coaster, holding his hands together at the top of the wheel, peering up at the string of cars rattling by above us.

He said something like, "This could be the night." It was the kind of statement he often made, vague enough in its promise to mean everything or nothing. Or maybe he didn't say anything just then and what I remember is the peculiar expectant way he seemed: cool on the outside, jazzed up inside.

We drove past the park to the house where Alex's date lived with another girl. Cars were pulled up on the lawn and music poured through the screen door. We waded into the middle of a party, a few couples dancing in the pastel beaverboard living room, others straggling into the kitchen drinking beer from plastic mugs. I trailed Alex through the house as he searched for a familiar face, then out the back door where he found Fran's roommate talking with a guy straddling a big, low-slung motorcycle he had cranked up to a high whine.

"Where's Fran?" Alex said.

The girl looked at him distantly, trying to hear.

"Fran?" Alex said.

"She isn't here?" the girl said. "She was here before."

The bike's owner eased off the handle. He seemed to be listening for something and paid us no attention.

"She was going to the dance with me," Alex said.

"Yeah," the girl said. "She went to the dance."

"She was going with *me*," he said. "I was going to pick her up."

"Oh," Fran's roommate said. "I don't know then. Maybe she was going to meet you."

"Sure, yeah," Alex said.

The girl smiled. "There's a keg in the sink," she said.

Alex walked off, not back through the house but around the outside, scraping through some dark bushes to where the Mustang was parked. He got in and sat behind the wheel as if that was the place to do his best thinking. He smoked one of his Luckies and said nothing for a minute, then flicked the burning cigarette out into the darkness and revved up his engine. As we pulled out to go looking for Fran, the roommate shot past on the back of the motorcycle, her bare arms clutched around the man's body, her hair

streaming out behind her in our headlights like a vapor trail.

They had blocked off the street, above the clam bar on one end, at the traffic circle by the roller coaster at the other. The band played from a flat bed parked outside Roseland, a group from Boston who'd made it big enough to have a hit record everyone remembers, but not so big as to escape playing fairs and street dances. They were bored and buried their boredom under volume, which made it so they couldn't hear each other, but nobody seemed to mind. A ring of people stood in front of the stage, two or three deep. Dancers spilled out into the road in either direction and behind them others milled along the sidewalk at the edge of the lights.

Roseland was dark upstairs. A bouncer stood in the doorway of the bar below, and you could see past him to a few of the regular Saturday night patrons holding their beer cans at their bellies as they checked the action outside for a moment, then drifted back to the dark interior.

Alex went about looking for his date.

"So what's she look like?" I asked.

Alex became very serious. "Real good-looking," he said. "Sort of dark red hair. Looks kind of like Ann-Margret only with glasses."

We split off through the crowd. I worked my way to the back, hoping I wouldn't see anyone of that description. The last thing I wanted was to tell him I'd seen his hot date being led away by one of the RYDERS, or to pretend I'd seen nothing and watch Alex go on making a fool of himself. The crowd was mostly strangers, dotted by a few faces I knew, people I saw that summer along the edge of the park and never again. No Fran.

Once in a while I could see Alex skirting the ring of dancers, stopping and squinting then moving off against the grain. More than ever the night seemed like a maze, and I marvel now that we could go into it each time with our hope unblunted, believing we'd suddenly see its design and make it through to the far side.

Just before the band broke, I ran into Jody who had shed a blind date, and we danced. She looked wonderful and I had a strong pang of wishing we weren't so much like family. Still, it was nice holding her in the midst of the noise and the drifting salty smells. I realized that the longing I had felt so often that summer was quiet; a peace came over me, a return to the feeling I'd sensed earlier that night sitting with my father (in the *gloaming*, as he called it), amid

the clipped grass and the soft straining of the lawn chairs and the quick lacework of the swallows above us. Even if the night had not turned out as it did—under the spell of another mood entirely—I might have remembered it anyway.

When the music stopped I could no longer see Alex. Jody took my arm and walked with me up the blacktop to the midway and sat on a bench opposite the shooting gallery. The families were mostly gone at that hour, the crowd reduced to packs of boys in jeans and T-shirts, to couples drifting from one attraction to the next, to a few older men wandering wherever there seemed to be something going on.

Jody told me what a *cretin* her date had been. I sympathized. Then she stood puckishly and said, "Aren't you going to take me on the roller coaster?" I didn't want to. For one thing, just the mention of it made me think of Alex again and with that came a shot of dread. I would've liked to have pulled Jody back to the bench and told her about him, but telling it would have conjured an image of him I knew would be wrong. For another thing, I didn't want to admit to her that in all my seventeen years, I'd never been on the roller coaster and was honestly reluctant to do so now.

"Come on," Jody said. "Don't be an old fart."

As we stood in line I heard the band start up again. I hoped Alex had given up his search and had gravitated to the front of the flatbed where he could study the guitar player's hands. It was a reassuring thought. But as we moved onto the raised platform I caught sight of him darting across the midway. He ran from ride to ride, lurking at the exit gates, shading his eyes as he scanned the seats for Fran, his date, who was surely not in any of them.

Jody pulled my arm and we locked ourselves behind the bar and began to move up the long measured ascent away from Alex. Those moments remain an emblem of that night: the slow tick of the gears, the fading of heat and noise as we climbed, and the sight of Alex, seen over my shoulder. He'd come to rest on the blacktop below, arms dangling at his sides, the people from the last ride drifting clear of him so he stood alone, numb-looking, at the base of the roller coaster as we pulled steadily away. And then the corner, the tilt, the beginning of the momentum that made everything run together.

I didn't see him later. Jody and I danced, our feet scuffing lazily across the sandy tar until it was late, the crowd thinned to a few dozen. The park began to

close. I offered Jody a ride home, then remembered I didn't have a car. We walked along the lakefront, past the barricades to the parking area outside Mendelssohn's where Alex had left the Mustang. I halfway expected to find it gone, but it was there, in the shadows, and no sign of Alex—except the trunk was standing open.

So we waited a few minutes, talking lightly, leaning against the car, only a few feet from where Alex and I had watched the lovers that day. The air hung perfectly dead. Jody moved in front of me and reached her hands in back of my neck and rubbed gently. The music had finished as we'd walked, supplanted by the tinny echo of loudspeakers within the park, and now they cut off and there were only a few distant car horns and the sporadic clap of doors and the ringing of gates shutting for the night. She kissed me. After what went on between Jody and Alex on the hill, you might think she was trying to stir me into action, but it was not that at all—only a wonderful, time-filling kiss that meant nothing.

Then there were shouts and we broke from one another and looked back along the curved shore of the lake and saw a plume of smoke rising into the lights.

"Something's burning!" Jody said, pulling away from Alex's car. She ran ahead, but I hesitated, confused for a moment as I stared across the road at the roller coaster. It loomed up like a huge bulwark, its white struts glowing with a dull luminance. The fire was elsewhere, two hundred yards further down.

I caught up with Jody and we ran together to where the dance had been and saw that it was Roseland burning. Already flames had eaten a hole in the roof and were leaping out in jagged bursts. Park employees ran down the blacktop runway and gathered in the street, joining the stunned beer drinkers who had hurried out of the bar and others like us who had not quite left. The upstairs windows filled with color as a section of ceiling caved in, then the glass suddenly blackened and imploded violently. In the distance now we could hear the whine of approaching sirens.

Quickly the rest of the roof was burning. As the heat grew, we backed away and waited against the railing by the water. Jody was transfixed, her mouth open but soundless for once. All around us people were shaking their heads. *No wonder*, they said. *What a firetrap*. Deprived of its dancers and twirling mirrors it did seem rickety, more a decrepit warehouse than a place to

celebrate.

I left her and tried to find my friend among the assembled faces, and having no luck there, backed farther away and made for the car. It was only then I saw him, collapsed against the hurricane fence, head down as if he'd been in a fight.

"Alex?" I said.

I expected to see blood streaming from his nose and lips, but when he looked up I saw he was sobbing. As I knelt I was overpowered by the smell of gasoline on him. I didn't know what to think. It seemed for a moment that he might actually be responsible for what had happened. But it made no sense to me. I drew back, shaken. His face was ugly as he cried, barely recognizable.

"What did you do?" I said. "*Tell me.*"

His shoulders shook, then were still. The streaks on his face shone in the fire's quavering light.

"I didn't do it," Alex said. "I didn't do anything."

The fire trucks came to a gritty squalling stop in front of Roseland.

"Alex," I said, touching him. "Tell me the truth."

He looked into my eyes for a second, miserably, then past me at the halo of flames.

"Go away," he said.

And I did.

A year later we barely knew each other. I have no good sense of the grown man Alex became, about whom only rumors reach me, and none of them decent. I remember him as he was that night, at seventeen: freshly brutalized by a glimpse at what his plans would come to. He had given me the truth: he'd done *nothing at all*. The dancehall had burned to the ground, but not by his hand, instead a victim of tattered wiring and neglect.

So I see how the fire mocked him that night. I see him crouched in the hot, litter-strewn crawl space under the roller coaster, one hour, then two, waiting for his moment to come to him. The two tartan Thermos jugs (hidden earlier in the Mustang's trunk) lay empty beside him, the gasoline splashed on the undersides of the old supports, and some on his jeans. I see how he took the new butane lighter from his breast pocket, where it said *Alex* in red script, and flipped it from hand to hand. He could hear the timbers straining overhead, the last cars roaring through the maze of track and wood, the screams bursting into the night, and then the silence, in which he could feel his heart beating right up in his throat as it finally dawned on him that either way, he couldn't win.