

Burning Boy

The secret is in the sauce. Barbeque sauce: it's the only sauce that will work. My father taught me this.

My grocery cart rattles to the shelf. Round bottles of barbeque glimmer beside mustard, ketchup, mayo—stupid sauces. I sweep barbeque into my cart and they clang, all of them, which isn't a lot because we live in a small town, small enough that there are only two brands of barbeque sauce, two rows each, twenty ounces per bottle. It will have to be enough.

Now that my cart is full, it doesn't rattle so much. I push it through the grocery store, enjoying the way bottles fill the metal basket: a tiny pond of shiny brown plastic, all mine. Now that my father is dead, I have to buy my own sauce. People's heads swivel toward me on my train-track swish through the store. Mouths open, but no one says anything. I already feel invisible.

In the check out aisle, the older cashier girl's pierced eyebrows shoot up like tasered caterpillars. Bubblegum pops in her mouth, wide and white, like her eyes as they stare at my cart.

“Why do you have so much barbeque sauce, Noah?” she asks.

“How do you know my name? You’re not in my classes.” I line bottles on the conveyor belt in neat, symmetrical rows, like teeth.

“You’re Coach Simmons’s son,” she says. “He coached my volleyball team before—” she stops, closes her mouth, starts swiping bottles through the laser scanner.

I say it. “Before the baseball.”

It had been one of those red, dusky evenings that seem to last forever before the sun finally unclenches its red fingers and falls behind the horizon. Right before it did, inside that short moment where every kid blurs into weird shapes in the dugouts right before the field lights wink on, a ball was pitched, hit with an accompanying crack of lightning, and thrown back into my father’s face on the mound. He crumpled. Me and the other boys spilled over to him, huddled around his snow-angel form, but even by then he was dead, his empty eyes staring blankly up into the blinding lights, a red crater caverning the spot above the bridge of his snapped nose. He hadn’t seen it coming. Neither had we.

“Yeah. Before the baseball.” The girl scans and bags the last of the barbeque sauce.

“That’ll be one hundred and thirty-dollars, sixty-nine cents.”

I unfurl the wad of cash Mom pushed into my hands earlier, tears streaming down her face as she listened, phone pressed to ear, to the funeral director.

She hands me the change. “I’m sorry about your dad. He was a great coach. Probably my favorite.”

I pocket the change and push the cart toward the exit.

“Hey, you didn’t tell me what all that sauce is for!” the girl says.

“Turning invisible!” I shout over my shoulder. She says something else, but thoughts of how best to smother myself in barbeque washes it in static.

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The TV screen flickers on with a tap of the remote. Later the Tigers will play the Mets. In the noise of pre-game, the carpet shoves against the shopping cart's motion as I push toward the kitchen, but eventually, the wheels clear onto tile.

Wheeling the cart home had been hard: the handle had jumped in my grip on every sidewalk crack, so that by the time I jostled the cart in through the garage, my hands felt numb and tingly, like they'd fallen asleep. I wish fourteen was old enough to drive.

At the kitchen sink, my dress shirt comes off. My shorts and underwear pool on the tile. You have to be naked for it to work. Mom and Caitlyn are at the funeral home, preparing for the funeral service, so this can happen in the kitchen, rather than the bathroom. This is good. It'll be easier.

The first bottle has a satisfying weight to it in my hands, but intuition tells me it won't cover much skin before the last drop squeezes out and must be cast aside. Hopefully there is enough. Smothering myself completely is new ground.

I unscrew the cap. Tear off the white protective paper. Screw cap back on. Raise bottle.

The first drop splashes into the metal pan on the counter.

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The first time he teaches me is on the couch. Mom and Caitlyn have crawled away in the minivan for girl's night—movie at the theater, popcorn, and a hundred human eyes locked on one bright screen, watching like the distant stars watch me when I'm standing alone in the

outfield. We do guy's night—pizza speckled with pineapples and pepperoni, baseball in the living room.

After licking the last garlic crumbs from my fingers, and the first inning of the Little League game finishes, Dad says, “Did you know barbeque sauce will turn you invisible?”

My face pinches. “That can't be true.”

“My father showed me when I was ten.” He hoists off the couch and disappears into the kitchen, comes back with one of the barbeque sauce bottles we bought for tomorrow night's ribs. “Take off your jersey.”

Clothes puddle on the floor. A spoonful of sauce, warm from the pantry, bursts onto my hair like the first drop of rain. Then a shampoo's worth buckets down. It unfolds down my neck, my shoulders, my bare chest, sticky and tangy. Human chicken nugget.

When my upper body is enveloped, he says, “Noah, it worked. You're completely invisible.” He tugs off his jersey. “Let's see if it works on me.”

Two bottles later, my father is right: through the shimmering brown curtain honeycombed thickly in front of my eyes, he has become invisible. But it is more than invisible. The sauce is spicy armor numbing my skin—my father's hand seems to pass right through me.

We watch Little League like this. Two golden cicadas buzzing on the couch.

But when the headlights of the minivan balloon through the window, and Mom and Caitlyn amble inside, the final corner of ice cream cone crunching in their mouths, the barbeque sauce and our secret have been washed away in the shower drain.

On the couch, I am clean.

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In the kitchen, the pan fills with goopy sauce that rises slowly with every squeeze, every bottle. It's like a metal stomach, or my open mouth when I was a baby. Dad would swish in a spoonful of applesauce, make plane noises. Now I am the spoon. The airplane. And the pan is the baby.

Ten drained and crumpled bottles later, the pan is full to the brim. My hands slip beneath the pan's cool base, cup and lift. My arms strain against the weight of what must be done. Hands trembling, I press the lip against my forehead. Tip it.

Sauce washes over my head, drips and dangles in wet sheets down my face, my chest, to the spaces between my wiggling toes. Some probes between my pressed lips. Blossoms like spicy honey on my tongue.

Marbled in gold, I flex. Power ripples through me. I cross to the back door, feet slapping a sticky trail on tile. I step outside. A breeze crusts the sauce against me, and yet it feels like nothing because I am invisible, light as air. The church where the funeral is being held is close: a climb and swing over the backyard fence, an arc over the bridge tight-rope across the bubbling river, a short sprint up the hill, and the sky-slashing spires, the funeral, will be in sight.

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Half the crowd cheers as Jonah's cleat slaps on home base. The other half moans. Beyond them, field lights loom at the edge of the field like metal cyclops, their angry eyes bathing the last game before my dad's death in bright white.

Jonah slams in next to me at the end of the dugout bench. The electric energy of victory crackles off him, wiring me like my sneaked sips of Dad's energy drink beneath the bench. "You see my hit earlier? Ball almost smacked the moon."

I nod. “Almost struck Mars.”

He throws a sweaty arm over my shoulder. Dirt and salt crinkles my nose. “Your dad taught me a new batting style in our private lessons. I hit doubles like every time now.” He points to Tommy striding up to bat. “Even if Tommy is caught looking, we’re going to finals,” he says. “Isn’t that cool? We can stay in that fancy hotel again.”

“And leap off the waterfall into their big pool.”

“Eat those grilled bison burgers, too.” Jonah presses his dirty fingers to his lips, then blows out a kiss. “*Delizioso!* I wish my dad made them like that.”

I look toward Dad; he is leaned in beside Kaleb, hand waving in wild gestures, likely delivering an empowering lecture beneath the baseball cap shadowing his stubbled face. With every word, his teeth gnash and glint. White tombstones.

I have to look away, and find Jonah starting at me, fire smoldering in his eyes. Suddenly his hand is on my thigh, gripping my mud-whipped pants. His words are hot in my ear, their tone curious but edged, stuck with sandpaper. “Did your dad let you in on the secret, Noah? Did he make you take off your clothes, too?”

The field lights flare to blinding stars; the crowd’s roar could burst my ears. Previous weeks flicker in: my teammates piling into their parent’s cars after the games, the last red tail lights swinging out of the parking lot, my father leading me through the lock-up procedure, telling me how great we played, I played, how happy he is to have me as a son, as he plucks a tube of barbeque sauce from the hot dog stand condiment tray and smears it on my face.

On Jonah’s.

The sun explodes in my stomach. The world tightens. When it unclenches, Jonah is splayed beneath me on the dirt, his fingers pinching his freckled nose as blood faucets from his nostrils, reddening his white uniform. As my fist throbs, he stares up at me, his mouth split in a red-toothed grin.

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River-water gurgles beneath wooden bridge slats, cool beneath my feet. Every few steps, brown droplets drip from my body, fall, and are swept away in the river's pulse. In some places, boulders bulge from the stream, tiny wet islands, their pebbled surfaces holding strong against the constant grate of motion. I like this. I consider abandoning the funeral. Wade into the river, spread out on a boulder, and stare at the blue sky, water brushing me like a million feather dusters, until clouds and sun tilt to night and stars.

My chest tightens until I remember I'm invisible. After trekking up the hill, brambles thorning my toes, I reach the garden behind the church. A low stone wall protects the rose bushes and hedges mazing up to the church's moss-gnawed double doors, the warped stain-glass windows that cut the pews into rubies on Sundays.

Except for flowers dying slowly in the grass, the garden is empty. In the midst of rose-sharp air, grass and cracked cobblestone give way beneath my feet, then five stone steps. Ancient, thousand-year old doors tower like the tall oak barrels my father would store beer in inside the garage. I reach for the iron handle with a glazed hand.

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On the Sunday morning before Dad's death, my voice pitches to match the final note held by the robed boys standing shoulder-to-shoulder beside me. Our hum unfurls through the church,

echoing among the clogged pews, the suits and dresses and slicked hair and impassive faces of the congregation before us until everything seems to vibrate. My lungs expand to feel like a pair of too-stretched balloons, then finally, we cut to silence.

In front of us, Father Highland stands adorned in gold-streaked robes before a nervous couple. The woman cradles a clothed-wrapped baby in her arms. The man keeps fidgeting with the back of his suit collar. His neck shimmers with sweat. Father Highland's voice swells as he reads from the Bible in his hands: "And this water symbolizes baptism that now saves you also—not the removal of dirt from the body, but—"

Eyes smash into me from the crowd. Fire crawls up my lower back; a heavy hand presses hard against my chest. Jonah elbows me. Beneath the rumble of Father Highland's words, he whispers: "When are you going to talk to me again?"

I pretend to be a rock—a rigid sentinel, unmoving, only here to feel the warm wash of sunlight and songs.

"I can help you," Jonah whispers.

As Father Highland says, "And may the saints assist us, so that we may, in turn, be saints for our children—" Jonah tries to say more, but I am a rock. I do not move. I do not speak. I do not break.

Father Highland tucks the Bible under one arm. He drags the lid open on the barrel poised before the crowd, raises his hand high above it. "God has used water throughout salvation history as a symbol—his presence, and his power." He turns to the mother. "Do you reject sin?" She says yes. He turns to the father. "Do you reject sin?" He says yes.

On stage, the Mother and Father balance the baby between them. They lower her carefully to the barrel. Father Highland dips his hand beneath its lip, heaves a palmful of clear water up onto the baby's forehead.

A weight dams up behind my eyes. The ground is shaking. Father Highland sweeps more water across. He, the mother, and the father are all bent over the baby, watching and holding and cradling and helping—they are a wall against the wind, a roof against the rain. My head tingles, something drums and throbs from my head to my toes; I am caught in a downpour.

Father Highland gently wipes the baby's forehead clean with a cloth. They all stand. Smiles split their faces.

I don't realize the ceremony is over until the other boys fracture into motion around me. Jonah's hand grips my bicep. He is saying something but the words are lost in noise, voices lilting to roars and screeching laughs, all of it tumbling around and around until it seems as if it will spark an earthquake, shatter the stained glass.

"Noah?" Jonah asks.

I take Jonah's hand and pull him through the jumble of white robes, around the altar, to the back doors. Push open the gnarled wood. Sunlight floods my vision, then the snap of roses, the lush wrap of flowers and grass. Drag him through the lazy amble of bees and hedges until we collapse on a shaded bench in the far corner of the yard, a place where you can hear the vines grow and no one will find you unless they know you're there.

My hands shake so much I almost can't pull the sauce packet from my pocket. When it hits the air, is made real, Jonah goes quiet at my side. My fingers pinch the tiny plastic corner,

tense, ready to tear and pour and smear and buzz, but Jonah's hand shoots out, grabs my wrist, and stops me. "No," he says softly. He holds out his hand. "It's wrong. Give it to me."

"Nothing is wrong." More words clog the back of my throat, but do not come out. I shove the sauce back in my pocket. Giving it up will be a sharp sword point leveraged against my shell until it cracks like the splayed king crab clenched in my father's meaty hands at last night's dinner, and the meat is ripped out, smashed in butter, and popped between gnashing teeth.

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The church door creaks open. At the end of the dark hall, around the curved archway, Father Highland's voice whispers about funeral rites. My feet carry me silently toward it, and it raises to a chant. Faces tilt into view, all cocked up at the same angle, trained on Father Bishop as he reads in front of the casket. Mom is webbed in a black dress in the front row, face crunched and handkerchief dabbing at her red eyes. Jonah sits on her far side, wearing amusement. Caitlyn sits closest to me, nothing on her face at all; a blankness that remains even as her eyes flicker to me, the first to notice.

Jonah notices second. His amusement crumples to something else.

I cross in front of the black-clothed congregation. More faces swivel toward me, one by one—my aunts and uncles, cousins, the wrinkled face of my grandmother, teachers and even the red-puffed face of our school's principal. They tilt toward me one-by-one, like the lock of puzzle pieces, or the collapse of dominoes, until all are trained on me.

"Noah?" my mom asks from a far shore.

When I ascend the steps to Father Highland, he cuts to silence. Above his half-moon glasses, his eyes are the cooling embers of a barbeque pit. He steps aside. I step forward to the casket. It is pure white, leafed in gold, sliced with silver, and closed.

My forearm muscles flex beneath the dried sauce; it takes all my strength to lift the lid.

Make-up powders the crater above my father's nose, hiding the angry color, but not the slight curve inward of the skull. His eyes are closed. I reach in and open them. The dam inside me ruptures. Tears raindrop his face. I do not like this. My thumb scrapes a brown trail across the cold, rough skin of his cheek—it feels just like a baseball—mixing with the tears, smearing make-up. I want to break his frozen face and bring him back to life at the same time.

Concerned voices ripple behind me. A wrinkled hand falls on my shoulder. I push it off. There is another. It is slapped away. People are shouting. Fingers and palms and perfume and bitter cologne wrap around me, then a hand takes my wrist and yanks me away from it all.

It pulls me down the dark hallway, out into the gold-seared sky. I am led to a low stone wall and forced to climb over. As brambles pinch my feet, I wipe my eyes and follow the fingers up to where they virge into a bony wrist, a thin arm, a black shirt, a mop of brown hair, and that's when the hand becomes Jonah.

His grip is iron-tight on my wrist until we reach the river. As mud squishes under our feet, and tiny fish zip through the water kissing the shore, he lets me go. He yanks off his shirt, kicks off his shoes. Sheds the rest of his clothes.

He takes my wrist again and drags me into the water. We wade until it engulfs our calves, our thighs, our waists in cold endless motion. When it laps at our chests, he plants his palms on my shoulders and dunks me below the surface.

The world deadens into darkness and bubbles and a quiet roar that sounds like the screams of distant stars. I come up gasping, water and tears spraying. Jonah uses two fingers to scrub my forehead, my cheeks, my neck. He does not put his hands any lower. I love him for this.

“Now clean me.” Tears stream down his face, too.

My hands force him under. Beneath, his face becomes a pale, pinched blur, and his brown hair waves like wooden seaweed.

I let him up for air. He sputters, nose and mouth leaking, his hair black and slick against his head. Something yellow and green is caught in a curl near the back. “There’s something in your hair.” My fingers pluck out a moss-draped french fry.

Jonah's eyes widen when he sees it. Then he's laughing, and it makes me laugh, too. We laugh at the fry. We laugh at the barbeque sauce and the baseball. We laugh at each other, at being naked in a river while people in suits and dresses pile up on shore, shouting at us. We laugh so hard and so much that our stomachs hurt and all we can do, for the second time, is cry.