

After The Fire

Throughout the benefit Jeremy Coulter's parents host for Bradley's family, Bradley tries remembering a worse ordeal. Even losing their house in the fire a week ago wasn't as bad—an event organized specifically to attract Woodstock's bored and wealthy, and push them to help Bradley's poor family. These half-strangers' insipid, sympathetic coos seem certain to appear in Bradley's future nightmares. The donations are generous, but the non-monetary contributions will help the most. One family donates two months' rent and a year lease on a three bedroom apartment right outside town. Others give them used furniture: an ottoman with lion faces engraved on the legs, orphaned from the chair it matched, a writing desk with an overly sculptural stool, and a rolling bar cart that his parents leave with the Coulters.

The Coulters paint his parents as artists in need but Bradley doesn't remember the last time his mom used her darkroom or his dad wrote a song. Most of the guests seem aware of his father's drinking. They keep offering him club sodas and smiling gently as they sip their wine. The whole thing makes Bradley want to disappear. Not to vanish, but to blend into the life around him so seamlessly as to be forgotten or to belong, if that's even possible anymore. Bradley leaves the clamor of the Coulter's house and sits on the back porch. Trees waver almost soundlessly in the breeze. A few minutes pass like this, until someone rests their hand on Bradley's shoulder. It's Jeremy.

They were reading partners in the second grade when there weren't enough books for everyone. The other kids couldn't keep up with Jeremy but Mrs. Powers insisted Bradley could. Bradley believed her until they read together. In order to pretend to keep up he lied to Jeremy

repeatedly, saying he'd finished pages long before he was even close. Maybe Jeremy lied back but it was unlikely. Even with a bad senior year Jeremy would be valedictorian.

“Hate being in there, huh?” Jeremy asks, hand still too at ease on Bradley’s shoulder. Jeremy’s probably only ever seen discomfort in others.

“I’m fine.”

“The fire must have been terrible but at least the town’s doing something about it.”

It’s really his parents, not the town, but I just say, “Thanks.”

“You sound unhappy,” Jeremy says and smiles like he’s just been surprised with a gift he’s always wanted. “I get it though. These are unfortunate circumstances.”

What seventeen year old gets away with talking like that? Bradley thinks and tosses a pebble at one of the trees on the edge of the yard. It lands in the grass. Jeremy makes as if to throw one too but just rolls it between his thumb and index finger.

After the whole reading thing was almost forgotten, in early second grade Bradley and Jeremy appeared equals. Back when things in Bradley’s family were border-line okay. The two best students. Athletic, charming and happy, but then Jeremy broke his leg. After that Jeremy’s smile took on an almost deranged permanency, as if by displaying his teeth he could somehow ward off further bad luck. Before the injury, Jeremy was a natural athlete. After it, he remained their best quarterback and power hitter. His parents are both doctors but the leg never healed properly and Jeremy still has a limp. If Bradley hadn’t seen Jeremy as a little boy limping he might be more disturbed by seeing a teenager limp now.

“You remember 2nd grade, when you always picked me first for football?” Bradley asks.

“Why’d bother? I wasn’t even good.”

“What do you mean? We always won.”

“You would have won on your own. When anyone else was captain I got picked second to last.”

“You always followed the play. Didn’t argue.”

“So I was obedient.”

“You were a good teammate. Why’s it matter?”

“It doesn’t.” Bradley says and Jeremy walks back into the house.

Bradley’s kept on with sports by running track, while Jeremy has popularized the sort of after-school activities that are usually ridiculed. Harvard Model Congress, Student Government (he’s been class president two years straight), and Honor Society. To Bradley, the difference between him and Jeremy is minor yet massive. Like the difference between an Olympian and an Olympic Gold Medalist. With a few tweaks Bradley’s life could’ve been just like Jeremy’s.

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Bradley stretches with the relay team. Before runs he imagines birds and their tiny, hollow bones. Maybe flight necessitates fragility, or maybe it’s the reverse.

The clay-colored, rubber track bounces against his feet and he shakes out his legs in imitation of a more accomplished runner. Everywhere are the smells of spring: fresh-cut grass, bitter dandelion, and wet earth. According to Coach, Bradley’s better at shorter runs, but this year he’s trying to expand his range. The only indication of support that coach has given him for joining

the relay team is his position. Bradley runs second, in the slot where teams usually put their fastest runner. Julie runs third.

Tall and thin with a pony tail and a jubilant smile, anywhere else Julie would be popular, but here she lives along the edges carved out by the popular kids. Kids like: Karen Kosoik, Don Sappel, Jeremy Coulter, Claire Pondisch, and Heather Scott. Julie has dark brown hair and eyes that glaze over when she runs. Someday he'd like to ask her what she thinks about during laps.

The rest of the school seems vaguely aware of his parents' struggles. Bradley tries to act normal to shield himself and his father from scrutiny. All anyone seems to know is that he's a troubled musician. EMTs were called to the house months ago but since then, thankfully, no one has mentioned his father's heroin use.

Julie's family moved here a year ago and although she's been filled in about most things, certain gaps provide Bradley hope. She lives at the edge of the school district, far enough away to isolate her from the well-wishing that's terrorized him and his family for years. They aren't the only poor people in Woodstock, or the district, but sometimes it feels like they are.

Joselin runs first, opposite a blond, haughty-looking boy from their rival Saugerties. A boy who already belongs more at the Ivy League college waiting in his future than Bradley belongs at a high school dance. The boy could be Bradley's future boss. Bradley wishes he were running against him, feels a rising need to defeat him, and soon he's imagining slamming the boy's face into the ground, suddenly feeling capable of any degree of cruelty, even if he's never been in a fight.

When Joselin passes the baton to Bradley they're behind a sixth of a lap. Bradley's problem isn't speed, but maintaining it. When he's half-way around the track, he's halved the distance between him and the other runner. Coach's words about everyone chipping away at a lead

echo through his ears and the pleasant scrunch of his shoes drives him on as Julie waits for the baton. He doesn't close any further, but he maintains the progress he's made.

Which could be enough. Doug, their anchor, can win most close races. He's a senior whose transition to relays supposedly helped him secure a scholarship to UC Davis. He never used to run anything farther than 200 meters but he still runs so hard that he usually vomits. Where everyone else is lithe, Doug's rippled.

Julie starts to run and cranes her neck back to watch Bradley's approach. Her lips curve pleasantly, but he focuses on her outstretched hand. Saugerties has already handed off to a tall girl with a ponytail the same color as the track. Bradley nearly has the baton in Julie's hand when he stumbles. He lifts his arms to catch his balance and pulls the baton back. Someone laughs and he's sure it's the blond boy from Saugerties.

"Just give it to me," she says. After all those practices, now this. He finally passes it to her but by then Saugerties has restored its original lead.

Maybe it's frustration that propels Julie on but, she runs faster than normal and if she didn't have to hand off to Doug she might even have passed the other girl.

During practices, Coach tells them to visualize the perfect race and this is what Bradley does when his parents fight, when he waits for the bus in the morning, and in the empty hour that often passes before he can fall asleep. He sees himself winning race after race. Sees the medals and trophies accumulate until they cover shelves, fill cases and rooms and then the scholarships pour in and he's certain he won't end up stuck in this town forever. Bradley closes his eyes and imagines Doug winning, pictures coach thumping Doug's back as the crowd cheers.

“Guess we need to practice a little more, huh?” Julie says and he opens his eyes. She’s smiling. The race appears to be over but no one’s celebrating.

He wants to wink but he’s worried it will come off wrong. “We lost?”

Bile, from Doug’s vomit, wafts up to them.

“He won. I mean, we won, but who cares? Coach will still be pissed.”

Bradley shrugs and they slump into themselves, elbows to knees, eyes tethered to the ground. Even in silence, he enjoys being beside her.

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Eventually their handoffs improve but a month later Bradley is swapped with Doug to run anchor. He’s unsure whether this is punishment or reward but they win division and lose state. Bradley’s lap time broke an eight year old school record. They lost the meet because of the standing long-jump and pole-vault. Events Bradley doesn’t even compete in. It’s the furthest the school’s gone in years and suddenly people are touching Bradley in the hall, calling him Flash. Some afternoons he stays late to run with Doug even though the season’s over.

A week after losing state, Bradley’s mother kicks his father out of the house. In the evenings after, Bradley finds himself lying on the floor reading like he did when he was a boy. Rolling among sheets of homework in a way that feels almost productive. On a retake he scores just fifty points less than Jeremy’s perfect SAT score.

Right before eighth period, on the second to last day of school, Bradley asks Julie out to a party. One they’d both already been invited to, but still, she says yes. She must like him. Otherwise why make all those practice plans? Why else change in front of him that one time but with her

back turned? The knuckles of her spine the only marks on her perfect back. All they ever talk about is running or other students, but even those subjects they see so similarly that he can't help but feel tied to her.

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Julie eyes him over one of the beer cans they're nursing. The other kids seem more comfortable with alcohol. There's not much time for drinking with how long track season lasts. It's nice to be with her outside of school. Nestled in another family's breakfast nook. Karen's breakfast nook. She's Jeremy's girlfriend and her parents are in Tahiti.

Their house is beautiful. It's all unpainted wood. Exposed wood beams, two stories, with a large staircase and a balcony that overlooks a huge living room, where everyone's dancing. Kids make out along the railing upstairs. Bradley's never lived in a two story house, but sometimes wishes he had.

Julie's lips pull away from her beer can. He's finally about to reach for her hand, but Louise slides into the booth next to her and practically shouts, "You want to play a game?"

"What game?" Bradley asks, aware that ignoring her won't make her go away.

"You'll only find out if you play," Louise says.

"Fine," he shrugs and tries to enjoy his beer, despite the sudden fear that a single drink could turn him into his father.

"It's called Murder, Marry, Kill... wait, I mean, Marry, Shag, Kill."

"Like the carpet?" Julie asks.

“It’s a classy way to say fuck,” Louise says. “I pick three people and you choose who you’d marry, who you’d kill, and who you’d shag.”

He’s about to suggest they choose from celebrities, but Julie shushes him by pressing her finger to his lips. Her skin is nearly too soft. So they’re stuck choosing from classmates, a perfect way to start rumors.

“I’ll go first,” Julie says and finishes her beer.

“Don Sappel, Jeremy Coulter, and Ricky,” Louise says and raises an eyebrow as if it’s a particularly clever list.

Julie looks at Bradley. He smiles back.

“Don’t be all weird about it because you and Jeremy had that thing the first week you moved here,” Louise says.

“Can we just do something else?” Julie asks.

“Too late, you promised.”

“Fine, I’d kill Ricky, fuck Don and marry Jeremy.”

“It’s boring if you don’t say why.”

“Fine, I’d murder Ricky because he’s mean and stupid and I’d fuck Don because I couldn’t kill him and I’d never marry him, and I’d marry Jeremy because he’s the least annoying of the three,” she glances at Bradley, “but it would be an open marriage.”

“Let me show you. I’d murder Ricky because he smells like a dead goat. I’d fuck Don because he looks like an MMA fighter and I’d marry Jeremy because his family’s rich and I’d get

half if anything went wrong. Not that anything would because he's *so perfect*," Louise says in mock-sing-song. She leans back and lights a cigarette with feigned ease. "Bradley you go, guys are usually better. Julie will pick your list." Louise crosses her arms, elevating her breasts.

"Regina Withers, Claire Pondisch, and," she scans the room, "Heather Scott." The million reasons Julie couldn't include herself dawn on Bradley.

Regina sat behind him in ninth grade French class and traced shapes with her pen along his neck at an excruciating pace. Then she'd nearly passed as sexy, but they were all kids. Now she reads weird books and ignores the girls who tease her about her pageboy haircut.

Claire is tall and plump in the right places, her body and disposition far more mature than the boys who admire it. She always smiles at Bradley and even though she's aware of his family's troubles she'd never mention them. She has the sort of ease that guarantees unattainability.

Heather Scott is beautiful and troubled, the type who sits on the stairs at parties and cries because her and her boyfriend are fighting again. Back in third grade, Heather and Bradley drew mazes together until other kids started teasing them and singing about marriage. He still has the notebook they drew in, but it smells like smoke from the fire. On their class trip to Boston this spring, he gave up his bed so Heather and Joselin could sleep together. During the bus ride home, she shouted that she loved Bradley. Everyone heard but it came off too easily to mean anything.

"I'd marry Claire because she's kind and—" Louise grumbles and he adds, "her ass is amazing." Louise squeals and grabs Bradley's arm.

"And, everyone else makes Heather unhappy so I'd sleep with her and I'd..." Bradley trails off.

"You have to say it. You'd FUCK Heather and you'd KILL Regina," Louise says.

“I don’t want to,” he says. “She’s nice.”

“You guys are hopeless.” Louise storms off theatrically toward the living room.

“Claire *does* have a nice ass,” Julie says and steeple her fingers together. She stares at him.

“Heather, Louise, and me.”

He cycles frantically through the names of other guys to offer up in return when he should be concentrating on forming an answer. He’d be able to answer if Louise were still there. He chugs what’s left of his beer, trying to ignore its mustiness.

“Maybe, kill Louise—”

“But her breasts,” Julie says.

“They’d still be there.”

“Don’t go for some fucked up loophole where you kill **AND** fuck Louise,” Julie says.

“Actually I was going to marry and kill her,” he says and she laughs.

As if she heard them, Louise returns. “Come on, they’re smoking outside. Let’s go,” she says.

A maple straining hopelessly to become a redwood juts out of the front yard. Claire sits on the swing hanging from it and Jeremy nudges her forward. Before Claire swings, Jeremy plucks the joint from her mouth.

Somehow over time, Jeremy’s incorporated his limp into his charm. He handles setbacks with infuriating ease. Maybe without the limp he’d be over-perfect and no one would like him, but Bradley doubts it.

The smoke scatters each time Claire swings past. Bradley tries not to stare after her.

“You want a hit?” Jeremy asks. They gather to the side of the swing’s path.

Louise nods but Julie steps forward.

“Here, I’ll shotgun you,” Jeremy says and Julie leans in. Jeremy inhales and cups his hands between their mouths. She sucks down the smoke Jeremy exhales and all Bradley can do is watch and feel his hope disintegrate. He reminds himself that Karen’s been Jeremy’s girlfriend for a year and that everything’s fine between them, tells himself that whatever happened between Jeremy and Julie is long over, but regardless his thoughts, the shotgunning continues. He watches like everyone else. When they finally stop Louise winks at Bradley. He tries not to cringe.

Jeremy passes the joint to Louise, leaving Bradley next. The first time Bradley got high, Jeremy said he smoked like Bill Clinton. A month passed before Joselin explained it wasn’t a compliment. Bradley remembers his first bong hit, when he wrapped his lips around the tube instead of pressing in, while everyone watched, only half-hiding their smirks. As if he could protect himself by coming up with the insult himself, he considered saying he’d started smoking like Monica Lewinsky.

Now the joint’s poised awkwardly between his fingers, pulsing with wet, hot fragility. The smoke fills his lungs with a tightening warmth. He inhales until his head tightens and pulses. When the smoke clears, Claire’s next to him in a black flowy dress. Moonlight glints in her eyes as she takes the stub. She winks and passes the swing to Louise, who sits and twirls the ropes. Louise lets the swing uncoil and spin, she cackles obnoxiously.

What sounds like a lawnmower roars inside the house and Jeremy limps quickly toward the kitchen. Karen’s probably already reprimanding whoever’s responsible but when they get

inside, she's still dancing in the living room, like she has been for the last two hours, probably on ecstasy again. Gary, a short wrestler almost as wide as he is tall, stands behind the kitchen island awash in the glare of two blenders. He smiles impishly before shutting them off.

"You almost done?" Jeremy asks.

"Oh yeah, sorry. Take one," Gary distributes what looks like cookies and cream smoothies to Jeremy and everyone else in the kitchen. "Coconut vodka with banana, mint frozen yogurt and almonds," He announces proudly.

It tastes like alcoholic baby food.

"No, no, no," Julie says when Bradley tries to discard his almost full glass. "You've got to drink with me." Bradley retrieves his glass and makes eye contact with Jeremy.

Soon the music's too loud and everyone's drunk enough to either go on dancing alone or to have the courage to pull each other off into rooms. Bradley and Julie linger in the kitchen with Gary, who rambles on about smoothies. After Gary blends an unpeeled orange with vanilla vodka, Julie leans in toward Bradley and whispers that they should go for a run.

It's less than he hoped for but he follows her outside. The asphalt's so dark it looks like they're running over black ice that's frozen in the gap between the shadowy pines. He follows the scrape of her steps until his eyes adjust. They're running toward his elementary school. Julie's ponytail sways hypnotically, beckoning him on.

Bradley expects her to pause at the fence outside the playground but she hops it. Her shape fades into the dark like dry sand rewet by a wave. He looks at the golf course across the street, at the empty road, and the unlit houses along it, before he finally jumps the fence. The playground is called the Wonderworks. It was built by the student's families the summer before

Bradley moved here, almost twelve years ago. Some of his classmates helped “design” it. Throughout his time in elementary school, their scribbled plans sat in a glass case at the main entrance of the school.

Practically the only mass-produced parts of the playground are screws and bolts. Everything else is hand-made. The students collected the gravel on a class trip to a quarry. Each of Bradley’s steps sends it rolling around his ankles.

There’s a short documentary about the playground’s construction that starts with a scene of Jeremy’s parents going on about how easily everyone came together to build something to reflect the children’s values. About the vital and often overlooked simplicity the children brought to the project. It shouldn’t bother Bradley as deeply as it does. The playground’s great whether or not he had anything to do with its construction. It’s not like the other kids actually contributed anything. He remembers how Jeremy’s parents prattled on at the benefit. Prizing second chances over dignity.

Reluctantly, he sees Jeremy in fourth grade, shouting plays across the asphalt behind the playground, “Split left. Watch for blitz,” or, “Green 98.” The play where everyone ran deep and Bradley stayed close for the hand-off.

Bradley calls for Julie twice before she sneaks up behind him and covers his eyes. She smells how she always smells after runs.

“Shh, if anyone wakes up we’ll get in trouble,” she says. She sounds like she’s smiling.

Julie leads him into a wooden tunnel under the slides. He’s imagined moments like this before but without their knees hitting each other, or their clammy hands or his sudden fear of bad

breath. Crammed into a tunnel built for elementary kids, she slides his hand under her shirt, along her oblique and the moment grows suffocating.

“I have to tell you something,” he says. He can feel her heart beat, inches away from his hand, but the steadiness of its rhythm doesn’t reassure him.

“What?” she asks gently.

“I’m poor. Everybody else already knows.”

“Who cares?”

“Just so you don’t find out later.” He looks at her and she looks at the metal slide. It curves the reflection of the moon into a vague, silvery shape.

She takes his hand. “Look, you don’t know my stuff, or why we moved here, and you don’t have to. This can just be us.” She pats the wood plank beside her.

“But I want to.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t.”

He presses his head back against the wood. Feels its ridges on his skull. Sees fragments of blue-tinged stars between the planks of the wooden walkway above them. The stars more trivial-looking than ever before, verging on pointless.

“I didn’t bring you here because I thought you were rich.”

She leads him to a patch of grass behind a tree. They kiss and in a surge of confidence he pushes her against the tree but then worries that he’s hurt her. She giggles. Their hands wander each other’s bodies until they lie down and she crawls over him. Their kisses grow loud and

sometimes he loses track of his hands and finds them limp at his sides, his awareness reduced to the movements of his mouth and tongue. Soon she's pushing against him and things narrow until he's pawing her clothes off and right when it seems like he should try to take off her underwear, or make some other intermediary move, the words slip out. "My father's a drug-addict," he says.

She stops.

"Our house burnt down when he was high on heroin." The tears start before he can finish the words.

"I said I don't want this to be about that," her voice hardens. "I just wanted to come make out with you."

"But we were," he says, in almost a whimper.

She pulls her pants up and looks past him.

"Why don't we go back to the party?"

"It was a mess when we left. I'm sure it's worse now. I only ever went because you asked," she says, holding his hand.

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay." She dresses and walks off through the playground. As she approaches the streetlight, her shadow stretches out until it thins and eventually disappears.

He sets off, running toward home, all while trying to worry that Julie will tell people about his father, but even a little drunk and upset he knows she won't. To get home he has to run past Karen's. The lights and music are off and most of the cars are gone. Bradley stops at the edge of

the driveway and listens. Tree branches creak in a steady rhythm and something sways in the dark. Someone's on the swing.

Jeremy calls out, the location of his voice shifting with the swing, "Where's Julie?"

"Why do you want to know?" Sun blurs the edges of the treetops. It's late for Bradley to still be out. "You don't have to get all jealous."

"I was just asking where she went."

"She went home," Bradley says as he enters the yard. "Like I should." Jeremy looks tired and sad for what feels like the first time.

"Almost everyone else already has."

"I was just running past. I only stopped because I saw the swing."

"But then you realized it was me." Jeremy drags his feet along the ground and stops the swing.

"So?"

"So who better for you to tell that you went for a run with Julie?"

"I didn't mean anything by it, I'm just tired."

Jeremy's eyes are bleary. "You didn't come here to tell me about it? To gloat? I saw you eyeing me when we all together outside. You were ready to add her to the list of things I have that you don't."

"Fuck you."

“I’m sure nothing happened because she remember that you’re a loser. Not even my parents’ help can change that.”

Bradley stares off at a deer tip-toeing across the street, its front leg extended delicately, like it’s testing the strength of a frozen lake.

“Fine. Ignore me, go on feeling bad for yourself,” Jeremy says, and then Bradley’s on Jeremy. He hits him twice before Jeremy’s hand struggles free and grabs Bradley’s throat. Bradley stands and he’s about to start kicking Jeremy when he realizes what the sound Jeremy’s making is.

Jeremy’s cackling. “Was that so hard? You’ve wanted to do that for a long time. Now you have. Maybe we can finally move on now. You think I want to be whatever you think I am? You think I have any choice? You know how many pointless hours I’ve spent with tutors just so kids like you could hate me? Nothing I do matters. I’m going to go to one of the colleges my parents went to and I’m going to study medicine and maybe just maybe I’ll have enough freedom by the time I get to choose a specialty that I’ll be able to do one damn thing differently than them, but until then it’s all already decided. This is it. THIS is what I have, a bunch of drunk kids I barely know and a wasted girlfriend upstairs.”

“I thought everyone left.”

“Don’t be a prick.”

“Okay,” Bradley says and raises his hands in mock-surrender. Jeremy hits him in the stomach and Bradley falls to the ground. He recognizes the fury in Jeremy’s sneer, that same rage he feels seeping out of himself at strangers, the bottled-up way he feels about his dad. He wheezes and Jeremy leaves him there in the empty yard. The sucked on remains of a joint inches from his

face. He worries that the popular girls have woken up and seen them, but when he catches his breath and stands the window is empty and unlit.