

I was failing chemistry because my teacher only cared about book learning and not real life experiments. All year long at his desk, Mr. Mathe just fluffed his mullet and told us which pages to read, but I knew I'd made more bombs than him and dissected way more lizards. I was the real scientist in that class, not ol' Mr. Mullet with his velcro shoes and musty turtlenecks. The other students must have thought so, too, because they took to calling me Butter Teeth, my new science name, ever since I tried to make super-powered teeth whitener out of carburetor cleaner and Play-Doh. As it turns out, that shit will turn your teeth yellower than, well, butter. My gums scarred up a bit, too, but I never really smile wide enough for people to notice. But that's science for you. Answers through risk.

When I got home from school, Momma was sitting on the porch, her big body kind of melting through the slats of her plastic chair, like when you pour gasoline onto Styrofoam. She was flipping through the mail with her big sunglasses on, which meant she was having one of her migraines. Ever since Dad died, she had suffered from monster headaches that only went away when she took her pills. I tried to slip past her but she stopped me at the door.

"Donnie, what is this?" she said. She waved an envelope with one hand and rubbed her temple with the other. "Looks important." A fat house fly landed on her forehead.

"Oh that?" I said. I walked over like I was curious too, but I knew it was my progress report. "That's just something from school."

My heart was beating extra hard. It always does when I feel a lie coming on. My body went pins and needles too, like my soul was a sniff away from sneezing up a spray of untruth.

“Yeah, but what is it?” Momma asked. She hates reading. She says reading words of any kind trigger her migraines. It’s why she stopped going to church. Even the word of God was like pouring thermite onto that greasy head of hers.

As I stood there, I realized that if Momma saw that I was failing, she’d lock my stuff in the shed again—my bike, my science supplies, my TV—like she did a few terms back, then guilt trip me about how disappointed Dad would be if he was still around. I swear, there ain’t nothing worse than being bored in my room with nothing to do but listen to Momma crying on the porch. But, seeing as how I was born with the gift of thinking, it didn’t take me long to figure out how to take advantage of Momma’s dislike for reading.

“It’s a field trip form,” I said. I waved the fly from her face. “We’re going to the museum.” She readjusted her sunglasses.

“All right then, how much do you need?” She pulled a damp fold of bills from somewhere inside her sweaty sports bra.

“Twenty dollars,” I said. She pinched a twenty from the fold and held it out. I added, “Plus five for the bus fee.”

“Bus fee?” she said, pulling the twenty back toward her sports bra.

“These people don’t drive for free, Momma,” I said. She knew that was true because her good friend was a bus driver the next county over, and she was always complaining about money. She pulled a five from the fold, then passed both bills over to me. I had somehow turned this awful progress report into free money, without even knowing how I was doing it. Sometimes my brain just flies on ahead and leaves me to catch up later.

“Now leave Momma alone for awhile,” she said. “She needs to take her migraine pills.” She fumbled with the cap to her orange bottle and popped two pills into her mouth. I went inside, and she yelled after me through the screen door. “Would you hit play on Momma’s music?” I did, and Pink Floyd started in on their warpy sounds. She said she liked how it made her daydream, though I could never understand their funny accents.

I went to my room feeling equal parts guilty and excited. I laid the twenty-five dollars onto my unmade bed, then pulled out my science bin from the closet. With my new money I could restock my inventory. I set everything out on the floor, then took note of what was low. There were plenty of fireworks left over from the last Fourth of July, but I needed more aluminum foil and toilet bowl cleaner for bombs, lighters to set things on fire, and a can of keyboard duster so I could freeze critters and try to revive them. I opened my jar of rubber cement, the crust falling onto my carpet, and sniffed to see if there was any left. There was. I sniffed it again and my brain tingled. I kept sniffing until my body throbbed along with Momma’s music and whatever it was those British boys were saying.

I woke up from my nap with a carpet imprint on my cheek and a feeling that Dad was standing over me. When I looked up, there was only the ceiling fan rocking in its socket, the twin chains stuck in an endless double dutch. I knew I had disappointed him with my bad grades. Dad had always looked forward to cooking pancakes for dinner when I brought home a passing report card. I wanted to explain that to him that Mr. Mathe was a bad teacher, and that I was doing science on my own time, but of course I couldn’t.

I rolled onto my side and frowned at my materials that were spread across the floor. It was dark out, and I wouldn't be able to ride my bike to the store to restock my science bin like I'd planned. If I was going to do an experiment, I'd have to make due with what I had. I was sitting there looking over my stuff, brainstorming ideas, when a warm feeling welled up inside my belly. If I couldn't tell Dad that I was doing my own science, that I wasn't a failure, then I could at least show him, and if his spirit wasn't there to see, then at least I could show myself. I grabbed some Styrofoam, a Roman candle, some cherry bombs, and a book of matches, then walked out into the living room.

"Hey, honey," Momma said. She was leaning against the refrigerator with her sunglasses still on. There was a big smile on her face for no reason. "You're being a good boy in there. A good, quiet boy." Her knees buckled a bit but she caught herself, laughing suddenly.

"You tired, Momma?" I set my stuff down, then walked over and hooked my arm around her doughy ribs. "Let's get you onto the couch." She let me lead her over there. The trailer squeaked beneath us.

"These migraines ain't no joke," she said, flopping onto her back. I felt sorry for her having to deal with those headaches. She'd had a hard time functioning ever since they'd punched holes in her brain, or whatever it is migraines do.

"Just lie down for awhile," I said, pushing a pillow under her head. "I'm going to go play outside."

"And do what?"

"Some experiments."

She smiled one more time and patted her plump hand against my cheek. “My mad scientist.” Then she kind of melted away it seemed, which brought both of us relief.

The words *mad scientist* bounced around my head as I went to the shed to get the gasoline. I liked the way it felt to be called what I really was: a discoverer of things, a dabbler in how the world works. Mr. Mathe hadn’t used his Bunsen burners all year. He was a scientist afraid of experiments. It just didn’t make sense.

I carried the gasoline and a shovel down to the water, where crusty weeds lined the shore and frogs drummed from their hiding places. Other than the glow of the neighbors’ yards, the lake was so black I couldn’t tell where the water stopped and where the trees started. I liked it like that. It was like I had the world to myself.

I stacked the Styrofoam pieces onto the shovelhead and soaked them in gasoline. The Styrofoam bloated then oozed until it puddled up like marshmallows in the microwave. Most people don’t know that this makes poor man’s napalm. I’d made it once before, but had lit it in a trashcan that caught fire right away. I’d had to spray it down with the hose before I could record how long it burned, or what color the smoke was.

I lit a match. It crackled and the sudden flame scared the minnows from the water’s edge. As I watched them swim away, I noticed an old toy boat, one I played with as a kid, sitting there belly-up in the sand. The red plastic had faded over the years, and dirt was splattered up the edges. The last time I played with that boat, it was in the water and me and Dad were throwing rocks at, trying to sink it from shore. We missed every throw, but it was a good time, the last good time before his truck exploded with him still at the wheel. I don’t feel bad about bringing up his death now, because all scientists know that energy can only be changed, not destroyed. He

might not be Dad anymore, but he's made his way into some of those plants growing along the roadside where he crashed, and for a few minutes he even managed to be fire itself, like a flaming genie with no wishes left to give. The match flame had almost reached my fingers by the time I flicked it into the water. A new experiment idea, my best yet, had bubbled up into my head. I could tell I was smiling by the way the air made my scarred gums tingle.

I pulled the boat from the sand and unclipped its top. Several cockroaches tried to crawl onto me, but I dumped them in the water. The minnows came back to nibble their legs off. I upturned the shovel and plopped napalm into the hull. There were five cherry bombs in my pocket. I placed all of them in the napalm, like cherries on a sundae.

I attached the lid, poured on more gasoline, then put the boat in the water and gave it a push. I listened to the water lapping against the bow until I knew the boat was past the water lilies, drifting slowly toward the center of the lake. I lit a second match, and held it to my Roman candle. Sparks crackled up the wick as I pointed my arm toward the boat. There was a brief moment of silence, of held breath, before a green fireball shot out into the water in an arc that reflected itself as a quivering streak in the water. I missed the first shot, the fireball fizzling in the water. After I adjustment my aim, a red fireball arched beautifully and struck the boat.

The gasoline caught and threw a small fireball into the air. When that died down, the flames burned in a tall spiral. My arms and legs took over, and I probably looked like a cannibal dancing around a cast iron pot. I was ready for the boom of the explosion, but the fire must have had to burn through the plastic first. I eagerly hopped across the sand, back and forth, back and forth.

Just as the flames seemed to be dying down, the boat exploded. I felt the boom brush against my skin, then again when the echo made its way back from the other side of the lake. Splatters of napalm were flung high into the air. The lake was as calm as glass, and there was the fire, breaking apart and drifting through the reflection of the stars like something crashing to Earth.

The excitement I'd felt in waiting was immediately replaced with fear. Adrenaline pumped through me, but it was the nauseating kind, not the empowering kind that makes your dick hard. I was watching the napalm land, thinking of Dad melting in his driver's seat, when Momma yelled from the house.

"What in the great goddamn was that?" she said. She was a wide silhouette leaning against the porch railing.

"I set the lake on fire," I yelled back. I did my best to steady my voice, but my vocal chords trembled like the aftershock that rippled its way to shore. Looking out, I could see that the napalm was spreading, the individual flames floating across the water toward the weeds of the neighbors' yards.

Momma made her way down the porch steps, one at a time. Even from the lake, I could see that she was still shaky on her feet. I ran up to help her. She waited for me at the bottom of the porch steps, her hand waving for me to hurry up.

"You done did it now," she said. She licked her lips, but her mouth was so dry it all kind of stuck together for a second.

"I know, Momma. Should I call 911?"

“You know we don’t have that kind of money. Probably all kinds of fines.” She grunted, from a lack of words or from fatigue I wasn’t sure, then said, “I’ll deal with you later.”

I slid my arm under her damp armpit, and she grabbed my shoulder. Together we made our way down the pitchblack yard. Momma’s knees would buckle every now and then, and I’d have to steady her before we could go on. When we were moving, I assured her that we were almost there, almost there, while I watched the flames drift closer to shore.

When we got to the sand, Momma leaned against a pine tree and gawked at the fire floating over the water. “You did this?” she said. It sounded like she was trying not to cry, so there I was, trying not to cry, too.

“Don’t worry, Momma,” I said. “I’m going to fix it.”

The neighbors kept a jon boat and paddle by their dock. While they weren’t the kindest people, I knew they’d understand if I borrowed it. I ran over and dragged the boat back to where Momma was leaning.

“Now you sit tight,” I said, shoving the boat into the water. “I’m going to go corral these flames.” I was about to kick off when Momma stopped me.

“Ain’t no way you can paddle *and* put these flames out,” she said. She picked up the shovel from the sand. “I’m coming with.”

There was no time to argue, so I held the boat steady and told her to sit in the middle seat. The boat rocked wildly at first, and the water seemed dangerously close to spilling in, but I kicked us off from shore and we were on our way, me paddling on one side and Momma paddling with the shovel on the other.



I steered us counter-clockwise because the night breeze was blowing the napalm in that direction. Momma and I were paddling frantically, and we were making all kinds of noise, splashing and banging the side of the metal boat. The first flame bobbed just ahead of us, like some sort of floating memorial candle.

“Ready?” I asked.

“Pull up beside it,” she said.

I did, and Momma slapped the fire with the shovel. The napalm submerged and resurfaced, still alight. Momma smacked it again with the shovel. The clump of napalm broke up into smaller flaming pieces, each of them slowly drifting away. Momma had to reach to hit them, so I grabbed the back of her shirt to keep her from falling in. She put the fire out with a few more swings.

“What is this stuff?” Momma asked. She sounded like she was in awe. “I ain’t never seen fire act like this before.”

“Just an experiment gone haywire,” I said. I tried to sound apologetic, but deep down it felt good to hear that Momma was amazed by something I’d done.

I pulled up to the next bit of napalm. While Momma started slapping the fire out with her shovel, I looked across the lake at the flames that slowly made their way toward us. The smaller flames were dying down. The gasoline and Styrofoam must have been nearly burned away. Only the large pieces still burned bright.

Momma, who was reaching to extinguish some scattered flames, must have reached too far while I was surveying the lake. Her top half splashed into the water, and was quickly followed by her lower half. The bottoms of her dirty feet were the last things I saw.

“Momma!” I yelled. I peered into the water. Thankfully, her extra mass helped keep her afloat. I could see her just beneath the surface of the water, like an albino manatee about to catch a breath.

She breached with a whoop. “That’ll wake you up,” she said, flinging her hair from her face. With her hands clamped onto the sides of the boat, she laughed with her head bobbing on the surface of the water.

I sighed with relief, then laughed along. Though she seemed to be enjoying herself, I gazed cautiously at the napalm that was still drifting to shore.

“Get back in the boat, Momma,” I said. “We don’t want to let this stuff get to shore and start a fire. We can go swimming back at the house.”

Momma gulped some water, then spit it out in a stream. “Oh, all right.”

I grabbed her hands and pulled, but the boat almost flipped as her shoulders came out of the water.

Momma’s eyes went wide. “Pull me up, Donnie.”

I tried pulling again, but she barely moved. “Kick with your legs,” I said.

“How else can you kick?” she said, laughing. The surface churned as she flailed.

I scooted to the other side of the boat to steady it. “Can you get a leg over the side?” I asked.

Momma tried flinging her leg over, but she couldn’t even get it out of the water, much less over the side of the boat. I needed to get her back in, but I was out of ideas. I couldn’t paddle with her hanging off the side, and I definitely didn’t want her near the napalm.

“Go ahead and paddle,” she said, waving me forward.

“You can’t just hang off the boat like this, Momma,” I said. “You’ll get burned, or eaten by an alligator.”

“Don’t overreact,” she said. “Ain’t no gators in this lake. I’m fine down here. This is the most alert I’ve felt in weeks.”

That much seemed to be true. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen her so happy.

“How am I going to paddle with you hanging onto the side of the boat?” I asked.

“You paddle on that side, and I’ll kick on this side,” she said. “Now come on.”

I paddled port side. Momma kicked starboard. She couldn’t quite keep up, so the boat traveled in a hook rather than a straight line, even when I tried to correct it. As we made our way to the nearest fire, I could hear her breathing happily. I pulled up to the flame so that Momma was safe on the other side. She cheered me on as I swung the shovel and put the fire out. When the water around us was dark again, we paddled and kicked our way to the remaining fires. Lake water splashed into Momma’s silly grin the whole time.

When we were done, the lake was black again. I paddled back to shore while Momma kicked alongside. Before long, the boat eased to a stop on the shore, and there was Momma, beached and beaming.

She got out of the water, her clothes sticking in her folds, and we sat in the sand. She hugged me tight and got my shirt wet.

“I don’t care if you lit the lake on fire,” she said. “I love you, Donnie. You made my night.”

I hugged her back, but then that guilt I felt for tricking Momma into giving me twenty-five dollars came bubbling up. “There ain’t no field trip,” I said.

“No?” She craned her neck to look at me.

“That wasn’t a field trip form,” I said. “It was a progress report. I’m failing chemistry.”

She snorted and wiggled her toes into the sand. “I figured. You’ve never wanted to go on a field trip before. Always said the kids were bothersome.” She then muttered something to herself, as if she was doing a puzzle in her head. Her hug tightened around me. “Would you rather keep doing these experiments at home, or go to school?”

My heart caught fire like she’d doused gasoline on whatever spark was there. “Of course I would rather stay home. Nobody learns nothing in class anyhow.”

“Maybe I can home school you,” she said. “We can get new supplies and make our own classes. Would you like that?”

“Very much, Momma.” It was a dream come true. For a second I felt sorry that the other students would be stuck reading books with ol’ Mr. Mathe, but then again they were never into science like I was. I put my hand on Momma’s shoulder. “So you’re not mad I lied?”

She gave me a wet kiss on the side of my head. “You just ain’t meant for the classroom. My baby needs his thinking space,” she said. “We’ll get all the paperwork figured out tomorrow.”

The two of us sat in the darkness looking pointlessly out over the water. The sand was cold, but the heat that radiated off Momma kept me warm. I wondered what Dad would think if he could see us sitting there by the lake.

Almost on cue, Momma said, “Dad sure must be proud of us. We’re getting along just fine, ain’t we?” She patted my knee then left her hand there. It sounded like she was trying not to cry, so there I was, trying not to cry, too.