

INDIANA

ROWAN BEAIRD

Hearing the voices of children camped out on the front lawn, he circles the house, crouching behind the old Ford parked on the gravel drive so as not to be seen. He is drawn to the one lit window at the back, a lampshade casting the room in a drowsy shade of pink. He sees her on the carpet next to an unmade bed, lying flat with headphones in her perfectly cupped ears. She is silently singing, mouthing the words of a song as she stares at the ceiling, hair fanned around her face as if she is underwater. He has never come to her house before, and will never come again.

The children are all gathered around the fireworks, the cheap rainbow cylinders upright on the plank of pinewood. Some of the boys nudge them with the tips of their sneakers, the same directionless twitches that make them poke the bellies of sleeping dogs. The girls are picking at the grass, wondering where the loose chicken they'd seen earlier had gone. Its feathers had been wet with mud, making it appear unbearably sad. If I see it, I'll cook it, one of the boys says.

They had decided they would light all the fireworks at once, an idea so grand it felt like they'd discovered it, a gold coin in damp soil. They forget who first suggested the idea, but it spread like a fever among them as the bonfire became nothing more than glowing embers and mounds of ash. Emme's father had gone to bed, leaving it unattended. They are twenty yards from the house, in the middle of the front lawn which rolls off into darkness, the road invisible, a car not having passed for hours. Their tents, empty as ghosts, cluster near the fence posts that mark the neighbor's farm. One tent for the girls, two for the boys. They are just on the cusp of being able to imagine anything else, kisses still only given from mothers and aunts, dry and hurried.

In the darkened kitchen, Emme's sister sneaks the boy through the backdoor, the blinds rattling against the glass. He walked four miles to see her, and she can't recall his last name, running through the roll call of their biology class and finding nothing,

their teacher's lips forming shapes with no sound. His hands are slick with sweat, and he is trying to wipe them dry on his back jean pockets without her noticing. In their next class together Hansen will dully register, but she will no longer care.

The children have been preparing, and now each fuse is meticulously lined up like spokes on a wheel. It's time, they feel it, clear as the cool, late-September air. Sam, the one whose mother died when he was two, the one who everyone trusts, lights the match. Two of the girls link fingers, the other boys laugh nervously, dry hunh-hunh-hunh's. Sam circles the plank, bringing the flame to each fuse, burning his thumb. When he finishes they spread outwards from the board without a word, even as fish.

The first to ignite emits a sharp, clear whistle, bursting into a chrysanthemum, red and wilting, above the trees. More shoot into the sky, cracks and booms, bathing the grass in white light. They stand in awe of the sparks, as if they are witnessing the rapture, an opening of the heavens, separate and absorbed with only their own individual wonder. Happy 4th of July! one of the boys yells, two months too late. Emme cartwheels, forgetting she is wearing a dress, momentarily revealing her lilac colored underwear, the soft skin of her stomach. Then the platform shudders with white sparks and white smoke, the crackle of static as it continues to burn, and only Sam, so familiar with death, sees the first of the cylinders waver and fall.

Emme's sister watches the fireworks punctuate the darkness of the kitchen, lighting up their skin as if they are in a movie theater. When she called, he was watching a man wrestle an alligator on television, his thick, glove-like hands wrenching its jaw open, displaying teeth like a prize. His skin warmed at the sound of her voice. For so long he'd followed her with his eyes down classroom aisles and school hallways, not caring how many others had been with her first, because he has had no one. This week they were partnered for dissection; she drew waves and plumped lips in his notebook as he sliced into the soft jelly of a lamb's eye.

Keep your voice down or you'll wake Dad, she says when he asks for a drink, as if he's her brother. He is not as tall as she remembered, and there is a prickling of acne near his left ear. She pours him a glass of tap water, wishing she was still lying alone on her bedroom carpet, her headphones a thin crown in her hair.

A rocket shoots across the driveway, trailing sparks across the tarred gravel, soon swallowed by the distance and the dark. The next is closer, level to their hearts, and only then do they realize what's happening. They scatter silently as soldiers, though they don't know where to run. They are blind to each other, able to hear only the shrill launch of roman candles and the rushing of their own blood. The fireworks are living

things, flames and color and teeth. One of the girls starts crying, the sort of tears that spring from pain, unwanted and insuppressible.

Her shoulder is propped against the fridge, and his left hip is flush with the kitchen sink. With nothing left to do, she kisses him, finding his mouth agape, like a catfish. She thinks of the boy she saw at the gas station, blond-haired, sleepy-eyed, skinny as a horse. Maybe he will be there tomorrow, maybe he will ask for her name, her age.

He kisses back and thinks only of her, overwhelmed with love, opening his eyes to the explosions, the silhouettes of children against the light.

The children soon find each other, gathering behind an overgrown Ficus bush along the side of the house. Their breath comes out shallow, like a dog's, and they look about wildly, pushing their small hands through the leaves. They realize one of them is missing. Emme.

They look across the lawn and there she is: barefoot, her blond hair in a long braid down her back. A dancer abandoned on an empty stage, she is directionless, running in a half-hearted curve. Emme has decided in her panic that she can't go into the house, as if the fireworks would follow her there, the rockets slipping beneath the covers of her parent's bed as she curls against her mother's back.

Kissing is not as effortless as he imagined; he is too conscious of his tongue and teeth, his hands. He wonders about the time, worries it will soon lighten to dawn. He imagines his father waking to the sound of him crawling through his bedroom window; his insistent questions: where'd you meet her, blond or brunette; his friends slapping his back as she calls to him across the school entryway's river of concrete; her backpack strap loose on her shoulder, this shoulder.

Emme hears someone yell her name and turns at the sound, though all she sees is light. Light that is palpable, purposeful, hot and blistering, sweeping across her eyes and forehead. She is surprised to find herself on the ground, the grass soft as fur beneath her head. The sky above her is cloudless and starless. This is how she remembers it. This is how she will tell the story.

The boy will tell no one. Nothing of her father's guttural yells as she pulls away from him, the front door ajar, showing children in a half-moon around a small form on the lawn. A final sputtering rocket igniting, falling to the ground like a dead fly. For a moment, it lights up the yard, and he sees the child: the new planes of her face, the blood black as tar. Her mother, almost naked in a loose t-shirt and underwear, is

crouched over her as if in pain, her fingertips brushing the grass.

In the kitchen the girl's father picks her up and pulls her to his chest. Her hands, the hands that were minutes ago curved against his ribcage, now hang flat and dead at her sides, and she is looking at him, pleading, and he is tearing down the road, telling himself he is running for help, telling himself, I am running, I am running.