

A Spark and a Flash

by Neil Serven

Butchie was the one who heard about the bonfire happening over on Harrison Avenue. It was on the corner where the old fish shop had been torn down. The wood pile was there when he had driven by that morning. Butchie was only five months older than my brother, but unlike Eric, Butchie already had his license.

Among all my cousins I was the third-youngest; with my siblings and me there were twenty-six of us total, once you counted all the second marriages and stepchildren, and even then, for the oldest of us, spouses. They piled out of their cars in shorts and sneakers, their legs tan; some I saw so rarely that I didn't know their names and was too shy to ask. It was the Fourth of July, a scorcher. In the fall I would enter the third grade.

The backyard to my grandmother's house was partly shaded by a canopy of crabapple trees, and some of the crabapples had already fallen and begun to rot in the heat. You had to watch where you walked or you could turn an ankle. Lawn chairs were set up in a ring, each family bringing a few of their own.

The men were in charge of the grills. We brought our ancient one in our station wagon, and so there were three in all, set up next to each other. My father and two of my uncles stood side by side, sipping beers and being loud while tending the flames poking up through the iron grates. They sweated, red-skinned, between the sun and the burning charcoal, the burgers and frankfurters blackening under their watch. It would be the only time all year the men did the cooking. My mother and aunts sat in the kitchen chatting over iced coffee and cigarettes.

For us kids there was a beverage cooler stocked with sodas in store-brand cans that matched the color code established by the national brands—the one dictating that cola should be red, ginger ale green, root beer brown. I plunged my hand into the ice and pulled out what I thought was a root beer, because the can was light brown, but which turned out to be cream soda. It held an aftertaste

that was nothing like root beer, and so I took tiny sips, the liquid becoming gradually warmer on my tongue, the wet can remaining heavy in my small hand.

The yard was immense, and in different areas games had been set up. There was a badminton net, and ring targets for lawn darts, back when you could own lawn darts without getting arrested. Wooden stakes were spaced apart the proper distance for horseshoes. On the back of the garage a dartboard had been set up, mounted to a sheet of plywood stretched across a door that was never used. Since none of the games were suited for my age, I watched my cousins play, warned in annoyed voices to stay clear of the flying darts and horseshoes, and made myself useful by fetching a stray shuttlecock whenever the opportunity came around.

Even back then, if you wanted fireworks you had to go to New Hampshire. They sold them in a roadside shack just over the border; we passed it every year on our trips to Lake Winnepesaukee. My cousin Freddy showed off his stash. Out of a large grocery bag he pulled out firecrackers, sparklers, and Roman candles, all in clean, colorful packaging. Freddy's proud grin fell slightly when my grandmother asked just where the hell he intended to light them since he damn well wasn't about to do it in her yard.

The mosquitoes showed up before dusk fell, drawn to our sugar drinks and our sweat, and the next-door neighbor's underground pool. The party lights were turned on: cylinders of red, white, orange, yellow and green set up to dangle from the clothesline. We ate cookies and ice cream and I sipped from another heavy soda. Butchie said the bonfire was definitely going to happen, a friend of his came by and said so. Sometimes you heard rumors about stuff that like happening but the cops would break it up before it ever got off the ground. But this time it was real. Butchie seemed to like being the only person who knew what was going on, the one everyone else had to ask.

My brother Eric got permission to go along, as did my sister Lily. When it became apparent I would be one of the only kids left behind

I pleaded to my mother to let me go. She was still sitting at the kitchen table with her sisters, working on another iced coffee and keeping away from the bugs and sun, as well as my father, who tended to become more obnoxious as the beer-soaked afternoon went on.

Normally I would never have been allowed to go near things like bonfires. But something in my mother's expression, the way she took time to light her cigarette before answering, told me that just this once she might break. Perhaps she saw the cruelty of the math, or she had an early sense of how unbearable I would be if I were to remain behind with the adults. Maybe her sisters would nag her for being too protective. *Eric will be there, the girls'll be there. He'll be fine. Let him go.*

She waved her match and dropped it into the ashtray. Her bottom lip remained tight as she exhaled smoke; her bottom teeth showed, as they did whenever she was angry. "You stay close to your brother and sister," she said to me. Then, pointing her cigarette at Eric and Lily: "Anything happens to him and it's *your asses.*"

The walk was longer than I had anticipated; Eric grudgingly held my hand, pulling me along as I struggled to keep up with his much longer stride. The city was loud, metallic and hot. You smelled the tar of the streets. In spite of my zeal I really didn't know what a bonfire *was*, but knowing the concept of *fire*, and remembering my mother's reluctance to let me go, I had in mind something dangerous, something with a crisp odor close to death.

Finally we arrived at a corner, where a crowd had already amassed, their faces highlighted yellow-orange by the flame growing on the other side of the street. Some of my cousins recognized friends from the neighborhood. Lily gave a hug to an older boy I hadn't seen before. As we became absorbed into the crowd I tried to work my way past bug-bitten legs for a better view up front, but every time I tried a protective arm came down across my chest. Lily was leaning against the older boy, who had his arm wrapped around her waist, and she was smoking a cigarette like she had done it

many times before—the orange tip glowing in the blue light of dusk.

There was a tension in the air that may have been enhanced by my own expectations. The arc of flame angling up to the heavens was exactly how I had pictured it, but what I had not considered was the sheer force of *heat*—the way you felt it in the face, the way it sizzled everything you could see around the edge of the flame, warping the image like a fun-house mirror. Part of our enchantment may have been because the flames were getting awfully high, licking dangerously close to the neighboring buildings. If you looked closely into the flames you could see names painted onto the old signs and fish crates that had been busted up for the pile. As the fire spread, the letters disappeared into blackness. When I would crane my neck for a better look, an arm would again come down dutifully on my shoulder to hold me in place.

The street had been blocked off to traffic, and neighborhood kids proceeded to set off bottle rockets from the middle of the intersection. Freddy and Butchie joined them with some of the Roman candles that Freddy had brought. Butchie lit one and quickly ducked back; it spiraled upward, green and white and trailing smoke, into the space above the fire where the brightness kept you from seeing beyond.

Someone pointed to one of the neighboring houses, and people exclaimed upon seeing that it had caught fire. Right there, flames were dancing in the window. I tugged on somebody's shirt: shouldn't we do something? That's somebody's *home*. But it turned out that the house wasn't really on fire. What we saw in the window was just a reflection of the original bonfire. Soon people came by in pickup trucks full of scrap wood to add to the flame, to keep the baby burning well into the night.

No one had thought to bring a camera that day, which was a shame since that was the last year the bonfire happened. The next year brought a new mayor and a crackdown on public safety. We still had cookouts, though, and for the next one Eric brought his Instamatic. We found the photos last week. There was one of Eric

sneaking a sip from my father's can of Schlitz while Dad was tending the grill; one of me, soaked to the bone and getting ready to lob a water balloon at someone; Lily, looking beautiful in a red-and-white striped tank top, in the arms of a different boy from the year before; and Butchie, waving to the camera, his hand bandaged where his pinkie finger had been blown off.

