

The Attraction

by Paul de Denus

He had passed the same attraction three days running. It waited patiently down the leafy back road just off the golf course, the monument of snapped limbs and discarded brush stacking high, a rambling golden pyre bone-dry and quivering like an expectant lover. He had hoped the daily running would alleviate the burning need, a mindless distraction offering less to lose. It hadn't. He slowed to a trot as the mind game caught hold. A glowing ember of the thought circled and he wanted to touch it, one strike of a match, one finger-flick of a clean cigarette, the words lightly crackling as it said, "*you're it.*"

Later from his spot on the hill, he watched *it* run and play, quietly glowing hot and bright, pleased with what *it* had started. He could hear a sound coming from somewhere along the darkening horizon. It was the blare of wailing sirens and he relaxed a bit. The sirens smothered his pounding heart with a blanket of relief like of cool rain and he licked his dry lips.

"It'll be alright," he whimpered, almost collapsing. "They can put it out."

As he turned to leave, his eye caught a glimpse of something moving and it dropped him to his knees. A surging wall of orange flame boiled through a row of trees that kissed along a ridge of large homes hugging the golf course.

"*What have you done?*" it said.

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It had first called to him when he was very young. His mother had noticed it too — the attraction - had seen how his eyes would light as they stared into their blazing fireplace, how they transfixed on the candles at the dinner table. She took him to church where together they lit votive candles for lost souls and the dearly departed. He lit them all. She believed it was goodness he saw in the flame, the guiding light a source of warmth and comfort. She was wrong.

His father saw it exactly as it was.

"You're it," he said, flicking a flaming match toward him as the boy played on the floor with his older brother, Davey. A contemptuous laugh slid from his mouth and he drowned it with a pull from the tall bottle. "You're it alright," he grunted, "it... not it... it." The laugh was silenced the first time the boy, quick as a viper, snatched the lit match as it bounced off his chest. His eyes widened as he felt the sting of the flame, then an overwhelming sadness as it quickly extinguished, the burn searing his palm. He didn't mind. He liked it, this new game.

"Fire's a motherfucker... a beast," his father said, holding the shaky cigarette up close to eyes. He lightly blew on the smoldering orange ember. "It's like you. It's tricky." His eyes faltered, then dropped drowsily down to the boy. "Unplanned. That's it. Unplanned and tricky. Not like Davey there, not like him at all."

The boy didn't understand all the things his father said but sensed the man knew what he spoke of. He and Davey rolled and played about on the floor, dumping plastic soldiers and Tinker toys into their father's stained fireman's helmet. Crinkled matches lay scattered about the carpet, black and brittle as torched bodies.

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The first engine arrived and a fireman, heavy with gear stumbled from the side railing. He was shouting instruction to the other firemen as they scrambled from the truck, serpentine hoses uncoiling over the road like spilled guts from some reddened beast. On the hill he watched them play, mesmerized as flames took the first two houses. They flowered, a hushing sound like marshmallows near flame. "It's just a game," he whispered, his face shiny, angelic. "We can stop anytime."

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He started setting fires when he was eleven. The attraction was in a rough clearing by the old dump near Rollins Swamp. It seemed a safe place to play, and so much ready to burn, so much smoldering just beneath the surface of discarded trash. It was a game - "I'm it... you're it" he'd say and flick matches one by one from the long

matchbox, each one tumbling, some flaming out, others burning eagerly as they landed in the scratch of bramble and oily boxes. They quickly caught on. He heard the voice in the crackle, a soft whisper at first that would detonate into a terrifying roar. It was always the same roar, his father's.

***"YOU'RE IT!"** it boomed.*

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A second engine arrived, the firemen falling off and running before the truck had come to a full stop, the men calm, calculating the situation as the blaze fueled and cracked around them. People were running down the street and the firemen pointed them away. Two firemen trotted toward the inferno, their yellow coats glowing in orange light.

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He controlled the fires at first, kept them small but the day came when the wind seemed to shift out of nowhere and his world split open, revealed itself. It stood before him - the beast, alive and unstable, urging him to play. He was not afraid; he was terrified. It ran around him, leering, its fiery tongue lolling and whispering around his ears. It quickly turned and rolled toward the swamp, like some creature eager for water to soothe it, to cool it. He followed and waited. Instead of water, it found fuel to feed on. The dry bramble swamp exploded and it consumed everything, its gaping maw flame red and hot.

He had run then, somehow escaped through the thicket, excited and horrified, sprawling flat in a ditch as the fire engines screamed past down the smoke-choked road. As the last truck flared by, he glanced up in time to see his father riding the top of the engine's cab, saw the terrified look on his face as their eyes locked. He never saw his father again. In the swamp the beast circled, trapped the truck and consumed it in its monstrous fury, his father and four other firemen perishing in the inferno.

After that, he began running in a futile attempt to outrun what had happened. Then in his mid-teens, he made a small attempt to change the game. He started running with the fire, hoping it might

grow tired of the game and burn itself out on its own. But it circled and circled... circled and chased, circled him in a trap and stoked his desire. Again they played.

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The fireman stood frozen. The blaze towered above him, the heat an open oven wrinkling the air. It had taken hold, jumped the street to the left of the golf course, rolling like a wave toward the opposite curb. Smoke churned between the remaining houses, hugged the gravel in a low thick fog as orange spikes flickered and peeked through like demon eyes in the night. He felt his partner, Al Conrad, at his side grabbing his arm. He was shouting, barely audible through his mask over the roar.

"We gotta go D... it's out of control!"

For a moment, he thought he might faint. His vision blurred and he felt disorientated as if falling down a funneling dark tunnel. He thought he heard Conrad again but the voice was different, familiar.

And he knew.

The voice was high above him, on the hill somewhere, his brother's voice screaming, screaming. He turned to look but all he saw was Conrad's face, wet and pleading, the beast rising behind him.

"We gotta go," Conrad shouted. **"PLEASE DAVEY, NOW!"**

