

Fireworks

by Tree Riesener

You load the pipe and suck in the fireworks. Whistling missiles, slithering sparks, shivering teases, dripping embers. You fall asleep with flashing neon outside and the Fourth of July in your veins. When you wake up, your room is the saddest place of all the sad places in a cold grey winter world..

Shiver, heave off the bed. Smooth out the the glittering mini. Pizza at the corner, toke in the back room. Rush hour when you hit the streets. Smart and sassy when cars slow down. In between, sag back against the wall. Baby's packing on molecules, adding limbs.

Straighten up and shake your hair back, flash a big smile as the next car goes by and then screeches to a stop.

"Hi, sweetheart! You lookin' for some fun?"

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Sunday mornings, nice and slow. Eggs McMuffin, Dunkin' Donuts. Hot strong coffee, milk and sugar. Shampoo, cartoons, TV preachers in powder-blue. You load the pipe to smoke in peace.

You could keep her. You can see it. In the hospital, all the doctors and nurses can't hardly keep their hands off her. The nice white room, matching ribbons, her in your arms and everything so happy.

Get somebody in while you work. No trouble at all with those little jars of food. Fold-up stroller from the Nearly New. Sundays, take a walk. Everybody'd stop to talk, not just guys. Other mothers. Grandmothers. Everybody likes a nice clean baby.

Rattles and toys. Later, her own little TV she could have in her crib. Sesame Street and Barney. Talk shows. Ellen and Oprah for learning to talk and good vocabulary.

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Monday night, back on the street. Rat trap like that, wouldn't go with nobody in a rat trap like that. Always weirdos wanta go with

sombodys showin'. There you go, creepo, slow down, way to go.
Heya, handsome.

Wind starts to chill and stores put out their Christmas lights, but you and the fireworks keep going until baby bursts out in a squall as loud as a skyrocket and then, when he feels the cold and the greyness, shakes and screams with rage.

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Work harder, get more money. Bigger apartment. Fancy sneakers. Video games. Pull yourself up the last flight dark from another smashed bulb, take a break at the top, wish you could just slip in, crawl under the quilt. Stand up, take a deep breath and turn your key. Bruises, bloody lip. For what? Running in the wrong direction, dropping the ball, making them lose.

Longing for sleep with all your heart, you sit down and try to cuddle. Your baseball days are far away and you wish you could say, look, never mind. In a few years, it's not gonna matter. If you only knew what a little bit of time we play baseball, and then we depend on fireworks, gunpowder, crack, crack, crack but hey, you say, this is somethin' your mom can definitely help you with. Did you know I was a champion baseball player? Best hitter, fastest runner in the hood. Hey, did you? Look up at me. I ain't puttin' you on. I know all about baseball. Come on, you. I'm gonna show you like someone showed me.

You jump up, rummage in the kitchen drawer for the leftover red, white and blue boxes.

The metal of the fire escape is cold so you bring the old quilt out and spread it over the landing, strike match after match to the sparklers, toss the first few high in the air, let them fall end-over-end down to the alley, lean over to see the final glowing segments lying in the garbage-littered alley far below.

Look here at the signs in the sky. What you have to do is all laid out waitin' for you, you say. That's what baseball is like. The whole game is just there waitin' for you and you run through the pattern that opens up, like this. You gotta see the whole thing, and then you'll be a good player.

You write largely on the night sky with your glowing sparkler.

Look, there's the batter. There's the pitcher. There's the shortstop. See, all in a line to move the ball along. And then here, and here, and here are first base, second and third. See? Just remember the fireworks and you'll be a real good player.

You take a drag and let the explosions inside burn up your exhaustion. Let me try, he begs, and you let him have just one puff. Fireworks zip and zing all over and around the iron balcony while he learns the pattern.

Dawn creeps in while the instructions hang on the night air. Toward the end, you sit together on the quilt and pull it up around your shoulders. You know you need to feel more fireworks, but for a while you'll be able to make it on the glow in your heart.

Mother and son here learnin' together, you think, mother and son together. You don't want anything to change so you just light the last few one at a time and watch until they burn all the way to the end before tossing them over the railing, and after a while, when you have no more sparklers, you curl up together in the soft quilt nest and sleep for a while in each other's arms.

