THE FIREMEN'S PICNIC

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"TECHNICALLY," PAULA'S MOTHER said, from the couch, "she's on restriction. Grounded." She leaned forward and adjusted the cushion beneath her. "When her father gets home I don't know *what* he's liable to do." Her guest, Mrs. Pieffer, shook her head in dour agreement. They sat together on the couch and stared at Paula. She sat across the living room from them pretending to be unaware of their attention, with her knees drawn up beneath her, and gazed abstractly out the front window at the scene being played out there. A young girl in a yellow sundress—Mrs. Pieffer's daughter, Margaret—was playing in the yard with their dog. She watched as the little girl rushed at the spotted terrier on her hands and knees, scrambling, then paused and retreated as the dog squared around and sprang after her. They went on and on like this.

"I wish I'd have known," Mrs. Pieffer said. "I wouldn't have brought Margaret along. I'd have left her at my sister's or something." Her head and eyebrows raised as if to look out of the window, then she settled back into the couch with a resigned heaviness. "She's a little terror at the mall—won't sit still in a restaurant. There's no way she would stay still at the hairdresser's. She'd be gone in a flash."

"I know," Paula's mother said, tapping her cigarette into an ashtray. "Paula was exactly the same way at her age. Just a little terror and into every goddamn thing that came along." The two women smoked silently for a moment, knowledge on their faces. Paula's mother ground out her cigarette and turned a little towards Mrs. Pieffer. "Couldn't Margaret just stay here and play with the dog? Paula could keep an eye on her. After all, she's not going anywhere." She said the last sentence with emphasis.

"As soon as she saw me get into the car she'd light up like a little Christmas tree. She hates to go to the store but has hysterics if I don't take her along." She shook her head. "The thing is, I *promised* her that

Paula would take her to the picnic and see the fireworks. I'm really stuck there. I don't like to break my word, you know, in front of her and everything."

Paula's mother picked up her pack of cigarettes and tapped it quickly on the edge of the coffee table. "Paula," she said, her head down, "I want you to take Margaret to the picnic so that Janet and I can go to the hairdresser's."

Paula turned from the window and looked at her mother, keeping her face as inscrutable as she could. "Fine," she said.

"Stay until just after the fireworks and then come right back. If you do this for me it might make things easier with your father."

"Fine."

Paula's mother watched her for a moment silently, her lips pursing, and Paula stifled a smile. Her mother pulled a cigarette out of the pack and turned to her guest. "Does Margaret have a jacket or anything?"

Mrs. Pieffer gave her a look of astonished concern. "You don't think she'll need one do you? Really?"

"No, no. Of course not. It's still warm out, I don't know what I was thinking." She looked distracted for a moment, confused, and Paula noticed this. She smiled and turned back to the window.

A moment later her mother spoke up. "Paula. Paula, go and get changed and get ready to go."

Paula turned back. "Get changed? What for?"

"Because you're still technically on restriction until your father decides on your punishment, and if you leave this house, it is under *my* rules. So it's not jeans this time young lady, it's a skirt."

"A skirt? Come on, are you kidding?" She looked at Mrs. Pieffer for a moment but the woman's face mirrored her mother's.

"No, goddamn it, I'm not kidding and don't get smart. I don't need it. You're still fourteen and you're in my house. Last night you felt the need to stay out all night, today you'll wear a skirt. You're lucky to be going anywhere at all." She paused and lit the cigarette, avoiding Paula's eyes.

After a moment Paula pursed her lips and turned back to the window. Outside the child had climbed up onto the trunk of their car and the puppy, disoriented, wandered in alert, quivering circles further and further away from her. "Fine," Paula said.

"Can I come in?" Margaret pushed aside an evergreen branch and stuck her small head inside the clearing where Paula struggled to get into her jeans. Above them there were three large spruce trees that were surrounded by bushes, leaving a space large enough to stand in

and preventing anyone in the street from seeing inside.

"Just be quiet a second, okay?" Paula pulled her jeans up under her skirt and fumbled with the buttons. The jeans were tight, her oldest pair, and she kept getting the fabric of skirt caught between the button and the buttonhole. She gave up on the top one and left it unfastened, and slid the skirt down to her feet. As she bent down to pick it up the material of the jeans bit into her, and she drew her breath in a little, surprised that she still hurt from the night before. She rose and noticed Margaret's nearby face, peering at her in tiny wonder, and she felt a touch of anger at being seen by the child. She stuffed the skirt into her purse and walked out from inside the bushes, ushering Margaret along in front of her.

"You don't have to tell anyone you saw that, you know." She walked into the street and continued along its edge. "Like your mother or my mother."

"Tell what?" said Margaret.

She looked closely at the little girl's face. "Nothing." The interest drained from it in a single, momentary expression, and just as quickly the girl ran out in front of her several yards and began walking two strides ahead, keeping pace out of the corner of her eye. She kicked gravel as she walked, and when she unearthed a stone she attacked it repeatedly until she struck it a glancing blow and it rolled up onto one of the lawns. Up near the white wood-sided house stood a man with a rake in his hand, glowering at them both, and Margaret stopped and waited for Paula to catch up with her.

"How come that man was mad," she asked as Paula drew up to her. "How come he frowned like that?"

"Because he's old." Paula said, then she hesitated. "How old are you, Margaret?"

"Seven and three quarters."

"You're seven, huh?"

"Seven and three *quarters*."

"Maybe you'll understand when you're eight, then."

Margaret shook her head dismissively. "Come *on*," she said. "I want to see the fireman." She started skipping, and then she started singing in time with the movement of her body. "I'm going to see the *fireman*, the *fireman*, the *fireman*, I'm going to see the *fireman*, the big, strong man."

"Margaret," Paula called out. "Stop singing and don't walk so far ahead."

Margaret stopped skipping, but tossed her head and didn't look back. "I can sing if I want to," she said. "It's a free country."

"It's a stupid song. Firemen are idiots. Plus, girls are supposed to

stop singing when they're six. They're not supposed to sing after that. I thought you told me you were seven."

Margaret stopped completely and turned around. "Seven and three *quarters*," she said. "And my mom sings, and she's over six. So there."

"That's right," Paula said, "but she's married. You can sing again when you're married. That's the rule." Margaret narrowed her eyes and stood silently until Paula caught up with her. She let Paula pass her, then walked behind her about two paces back. She stayed this way for about twenty seconds before running out in front again, skipping.

As they neared the park Margaret got further and further ahead, until Paula had to call out to her and tell her she was going the wrong way.

"But the rides are *this* way," Margaret insisted.

"I need to talk to somebody over by the baseball field," Paula said. "It will only take a minute, then we can go to the rides."

"Okay," Margaret said, and she ran back to Paula. They approached the main baseball fields and cars cruised slowly by, leaving the park entrance or waiting to enter it. Around the bleachers several young people stood in small groups and teen-age boys lounged in the stands with their backs on the bench behind them and their elbows spread sideways. A few of them held bottles in their hands and others kept them at their feet, nearly out of sight. Most of them had their shirts off and some had long limp hair that fell onto their bare shoulders, glistening in the late afternoon humidity.

After a moment Paula found who she was looking for in a group of girls and headed towards them. As she passed the boys sitting in the bleachers, one of them called out to her.

"Hey, Cates."

Paula didn't stop.

"Hey Cates, that your kid?" One of the other boys laughed, and Paula stopped.

"Hey go to hell, Crawford. Faggot."

The boy straightened up and put his bottle at his feet. His face took on a comically serious expression. "No, really, Cates," he said. "I'm interested. Was it a bad pill, a hole, or what?"

Paula felt her throat begin to stiffen and she struggled to keep it open.

The boy next to him cocked his head to the side. "You okay, Cates?" he asked, smiling. "I got something for that throat. Clear that problem right up."

"Hey fuck you, Murphy, faggot." Her throat clamped down on the words, squeezing them tight and making her duck her head away with the effort.

"Hey, anytime, Cates. You name it." The boy leaned down at her and wiped his bangs from his eyes, grinning. Paula started away. She grabbed Margaret's hand and pulled her into motion, and the girl resisted just a bit, as if she wanted to remain. Crawford called after them. "Hey, Cates. If you're gonna make us wait for it, you better button your fly. It keeps it fresher." Laughter echoed from the bleachers and Paula looked down, at the button she had forgotten. She pulled Margaret's hand and walked faster, leaving the button as it was. "Fuck you all," she said softly.

Paula's friend was a tall, long-haired girl who wore jeans and sandals, and as they approached she broke from her group and came forward. "Hey, Cates," she said with a sly smile.

"Hey, Smitty. Let's go for a walk and lose these people." Paula turned and headed for the picnic tables near the left field foul line, Margaret's hand held firmly. Smitty followed silently behind her.

The picnic tables were strewn with litter and the garbage cans had overflowed, the trash sprinkling the grass around them. Smitty cleared a place on top of one of the tables and sat down with her feet on the bench in front of her. Paula started to sit on the bench next to her feet but changed her mind and leaned against the closer end of the table, her elbows behind her. Margaret ran off a few yards and began kicking up trash.

Smitty gave out a small sigh and pushed a styrofoam cup from the bench with the side of her shoe. "You in much trouble?" she said, glancing at Paula without turning her head.

Paula shrugged. "I don't really know, yet. My old man makes those decisions, and he didn't come home last night either."

"Did your mom freak or something?"

"Not really, but I think it kind of rattled her, the both of us at the same time. She's usually pretty numb about this kind of thing, but I guess she just felt like making a stand or something. Then when Margaret came along, it was if she couldn't wait to get rid of me."

Smitty was silent for a couple of seconds, and took a long breath before she continued. "So, like, what happened?" she said. Smitty had a searching expression on her face, like a child's.

Paula closed her eyes for a moment, then turned and watched Margaret. She was tossing paper dessert plates into the air, trying to make them fly, but they merely arced sideways and struck the ground rolling. Paula laughed through her nose. "It hurt," she said. "It hurt like hell. I thought I was going to suffocate."

"Suffocate?" Smitty asked. "What did he do?"

"He didn't do anything. He didn't know what to do. I had to *tell* him."

"Carlo didn't know what to do?" Smitty looked shocked.

"No, he knew what to do, but he didn't know how to do it *with* someone. How to touch them. I had to show him how to touch me, I mean just *touch* me, and by that time I didn't want him to." Paula suddenly felt a chill, and she wrapped her hands around her sides. She avoided Smitty's eyes.

"I mean, I *could've* moved, if I really wanted to—I wasn't suffocated like that or anything. It was just that Carlo was sort of *on* me, and I knew right then that he wasn't the one, you know, and I didn't want him there." She stopped and looked at Smitty hard. "I mean, who are all these guys? Who do they think they are?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I have to tell this guy that it's my first time, and he doesn't have to say it's his, and then I have to tell him what the fuck is going on when I don't even want it to. And on top of all that, when he drives me home, he starts talking that this doesn't *mean* anything, you know. That I shouldn't think this *means* anything, as if I didn't know he was just as scared and embarrassed as I was. Like I give shit about him, or any of them."

Smitty had a strange expression on her face, almost fearful, and she looked away when Paula stopped. "Yeah," she said, weakly. "I know."

"You know what I mean, Smitty?" Smitty nodded quickly. "I mean, don't people *know* what they do? Don't they have any idea? I know what *I* do." She watched Smitty's face for a few seconds. It stopped nodding and looked away. "Don't I, Smitty? Don't you think I do?"

Smitty didn't answer.

"Don't tell me I'm like them, please, whatever you do."

"Look," Smitty said, "don't worry about it. Carlo's a creep. It's not your fault."

"I never said it was my fault. I never said that."

"Look. Let's drop it, okay? You're going to be in trouble for a while when your old man gets back, so let's have some fun together, and not get into this, all right?" Smitty's face was flushed.

"You're the one that asked."

"Well, I didn't ask for *this*. I just wondered how you were doing, is all. And you probably better take it easy, because Carlo's going to be around, you know, helping with the fireworks."

"I hope they blow his goddamn hands off." Paula's heart was beating quickly and she took long breaths to try and slow it. Margaret walked up and stopped before her, a stain of ketchup on her dress.

"Can I go see the fireman, now?"

Paula turned to Smitty, and forced her voice into a lighter tone. "Do you want to go see the fire, man?"

After a second, Smitty laughed slightly and nodded. "Yeah, man. Let's go see the fire. That would be groovy."

"The wildest. Far-out." They laughed hollowly and got up from the bench, and Paula took Margaret's hand.

Parked on the side of the street closest to the beer stands was the antique fire engine that led the annual Fireman's Labor Day parade, held on the last day of the two-day picnic. On the running boards were signs that read: "1938 FORD FIRE ENGINE, PROPERTY O'FALLON VOLUNTEER FIRE DEPT." Below that was a line that read: "Men of the community working non-profit for the safety and welfare of all O'Fallon."

"Where's the fireman?" said Margaret, after she had walked completely around the vehicle. She looked up at Paula with disappointment on her face and wiped a strand of dark hair from her face. "Where's the fireman?"

"I don't know." She turned to Smitty. "Where's the fireman?"

"Maybe he's on break. Maybe this year they're just going to let it sit here by itself."

Margaret's eyes widened. "But I want to ride on it. I want to ride on it."

Paula grabbed her hand and looked around her. "Just hang on, Margaret, don't throw a fit. We'll find a fireman for you." The three of them walked over to the Big Six wheel and stood along the high counter that circled it. There were four other people around the wheel, and they watched as the attendant, a short, skinny man with a fireman's t-shirt, gave it a fierce tug. It clacked and whirled to a stop, and the attendant raked the money from the betting table deftly into the pockets of his small, green apron. As the players stacked and moved their change for the next spin, the attendant approached the girls and stood before them.

"Got to be eighteen to play, girls," he said. "Eighteen, or you can't play."

"Where's the fireman?" Paula said. "My daughter wants to ride on the fire engine."

The man narrowed his eyes. "They're all over setting up the fireworks. No more rides."

Margaret turned her head back to the fire engine. "But I want to *ride*."

The fireman looked nervous. "Next year, honey. Mommy'll brung you back next year." His face, seeming to reject his attempts to work it into a smile, twitched and furrowed. "Okay, Honey?"

Margaret's face bunched into the middle, and her eyes squeezed

into small lines. She look a few very short breaths, and practically spit her words: "Fuck you fagger."

The skinny man took a step back as if he had been slapped, bumping into another attendant behind him. Paula grabbed Margaret's hand and dragged her away from the booth, out into the middle of the midway, and pulled her behind a soda trailer. Smitty followed a second later, and the two older girls leaned back against the side of the trailer, and simultaneously burst in laughter. "Fuck you fagger," Smitty said, choking, and she and Paula slid down and sat on the grass. Margaret stood above them, still holding onto Paula's hand with a slight smile. After a moment Paula stood up and brushed off her jeans.

"Now," she said, squatting to look Margaret in the face, "we'll go find you a fireman, before you get yourself into trouble." Margaret nodded vigorously.

The three girls walked down the midway, past the canvas booth games and the peeling, creaking kiddie rides, with Margaret in the middle holding onto both of their hands. She had a curiously determined look on her face, scarcely looking to either side, but rather straight ahead to the end of the midway where some firemen were milling around the baseball field. As the girls moved along they passed the large rides—the Tilt-A-Whirl, the Rock-O-Plane,—and one smallish trailer with faded paint. A sign on the top of the trailer said: "House of Wonder," and on the sides were painted human figures with distorted limbs or the faces and bodies of animals. Beneath each figure was a caption: Gator Boy, Shovel Boy, Snake Boy, Goat-thing, Five-arms.

"What's this?" Paula asked.

"I don't know," said Smitty, "and I don't want to." They stopped in front of the trailer and suddenly Margaret shook her hands free. She swiveled around and looked up at Paula.

"I want to go in *there*," she said loudly.

"I thought you wanted to see the fireman," Smitty said.

Margaret ignored her. "I want to see the *Gator Boy*," she repeated to Paula. "I want to see *him*."

"All right," Paula said. "You've earned it. We'll see them both." The three of them walked up to the trailer. At the foot was a card table with an old man behind it, his hand resting on a roll of purple tickets. The man's face was oddly calm and attractive, like a face that had been weathered with care instead of anger, and he watched them approach with what appeared to be patient and experienced interest. Paula opened her purse and found the skirt stuffed on top, and she took it out and laid it on the table while she fished through her purse for

change. The man eyed the garment silently. When Paula paid him, he tore off three tickets from the roll and dropped them in a pail at his feet. As Paula climbed the steps she looked down into the pail and saw that it was empty except for their three tickets.

Margaret had already climbed the five steps and was waiting for them at the door to the trailer. She turned as if to rush fearlessly into the doorway, then hesitated and turned back to the old man seated below her in the lengthening shadow of the trailer. "Does the Gator Boy talk?" she asked.

The old man looked up at the child, his mouth opening and his face cracking along its rutted lines, and a dry sound came out, like a gasp. He was laughing, and each time he expelled air his torso shook, and after three laughs he began to cough uncontrollably, and lowered his face into his hands and rocked with each cough. Margaret stood and stared at him until Paula pushed her ahead into the trailer.

Inside there was very little light, and the dusty odor of old canvas and rope. Along the rear wall of the trailer was set a long shelf, chest high, and along its length were a dozen gallon bottles, each full of a transparent liquid. Paula walked slowly up to the first, where Margaret was already standing, and took the little girl's hand. Inside the bottle was a human fetus, its head horribly distorted, spade-like, its face pinched inward, and its tiny eyes a total, pale blue. The creature hung suspended in the liquid and from its tiny belly, over its arm with the miniature hand curled into a fist, snaked an umbilical cord, and it led upward to the top of the bottle where it floated, severed. The slight force of their footsteps had caused the shelf to vibrate and the fluid in the bottle wavered, and the Gator Boy rocked slightly. Margaret's face, close to the bottle, was illuminated by the light refracted through the liquid, and Paula saw the transluscent lines waver across her smooth face. The little girl gazed at the bottle for a moment with her mouth slightly open, then she moved down to the next, her fingers trailing lightly on the shelf in front of her.

Paula shivered. "Let's go, Margaret." She took a step backwards to the door and bumped into Smitty, standing behind her, and they both jumped a little.

"Just a *minute*," said Margaret, turning and looking at her as if she was a child. "I want to see them all."

"No, *now*. I paid for this and I say we're going." She went forward toward the girl, and Margaret walked the other direction quickly, tapping her fingernails across the fronts of the bottles.

"*Margaret*." Paula heard her own voice, and she heard the nervous strain in it. She stopped and stood still.

"I *said* just a minute," Margaret said. She got to end of the row and

turned to face Paula, triumph on her face.

"Okay, we can go now."

Paula strode forward and grabbed her hand roughly, then pulled her out of the trailer into the darkening afternoon, oblivious to the little girl's cry that she was pulling her arm too hard.

In the outfield, among the small gathering knots of people sitting on blankets and lawn chairs, Paula sat cross-legged on her skirt which she had spread on the ground beneath her. Margaret knelt a few feet away pulling out handfuls of grass and throwing them into the air. The sun had set and the light was fading quickly from over the trees.

"Where'd Smitty go?" Margaret asked without looking up.

"She had to go home, she didn't feel good."

"Why?"

"Because she didn't. Stop doing that or I'll take you home before the fireworks."

Margaret turned and scowled at her and pointed to the skirt. "And I'll tell," she replied.

"Go ahead and tell, you little bitch. You think I care?" She turned her head sideways and watched the firemen setting up the last of the fireworks on the infield dirt. Two of them knelt over a large cylinder that rested on the pitcher's mound, and a few more lounged against the sleek new engine parked in front of the visitor's dugout. Paula recognized one of the men as the pharmacist from the drug store, and another as the supermarket manager. The pharmacist flipped a cigarette butt onto the grass in front of him and Paula could see the small trail of smoke it made above the grass. From the other side of the engine walked a younger figure, dressed in jeans but with the navy shirt of a volunteer fireman. Paula drew in her breath, and as the young man turned his gaze absently in her direction she ducked her head. When she looked up, he had walked a few feet further, and was talking to the pharmacist. The man reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and the young man took one. He leaned back against the engine and was hidden by the bodies of the others. After a few moments Paula looked away.

As the sky became darker more people began to arrive and settle, and from all around the infield small fireworks popped and flared. Children ran and waved sparklers in front of each others faces then threw them into the air, and small groups of boys set off enormous strings of firecrackers that rattled throughout the park.

"You know what that is?" asked Margaret, pointing to the large cylinder which the two firemen had just left.

"Yes, Margaret," replied Paula, turning away from the crowd. "I

know what that is."

"What is it, then?"

"Shut up, Margaret." Before the little girl could object there was a small, muffled explosion from the infield and a scream rose into the air, exploding quickly, white, and followed by a tremendous *boom*. On the infield a lone fireman walked towards a small cylinder, his front lit red by a flare held in his gloved hand, and his face indistinguishable in the uncertain light. He knelt and lit a spark at the base of the cylinder, and as it caught he stepped quickly backward, the flare's aura of red flourescence following him. The cylinder spit a streak of light, and then a breath later the sky lit in a green blossom. Paula watched the fireman without speaking.

After fifteen minutes Paula turned and looked at Margaret next to her. The little girl sat between Paula and the lights of the midway, and when the sky was empty of fire she could see the child silhouetted against the neon of the rides. Margaret turned and faced her for a moment, just as a firework burst overhead, and Paula saw that she was smiling. She looked away.

"Paula," Margaret said. "Are they going to set off the Volcano soon?"

"Come on, Margaret," she said. "You know they set that off last, so be quiet, all right?"

"Your mom said that you liked that one best of all."

Paula looked at Margaret, surprised, but could not see her face in the darkness. "When did you hear that?"

"In your house, while you were getting dressed. Your mother said that when you were my age you used to love the Volcano, and she said that you used to jump up and down like a goddamn little rabbit." She heard the little girl laugh. "She said your daddy would hold you and when it took off he would shoot you up in the air, too, and catch you when it blew up."

Paula turned away for a moment, then back to Margaret's silhouettte. "You know what happened with the Volcano a few years back, don't you? I never liked it after that." Paula felt an tightness in her voice, and Margaret's shadow remained fixed, her face towards her.

"What?" she replied.

"That year, the Volcano was set off by one of the apprentice fireman, a seventeen-year-old boy . . . ." A whine came from the infield and the sound of a shriek of fire. When the rocket burst overhead, Margaret's eyes were still fixed on her.

"What happened?"

The darkness fell again and Paula continued. "The boy didn't know

what he was doing and he set it off the wrong way." Paula paused and watched Margaret's silhouette; it didn't waver. "He set it off wrong, and when it went off, it went off sideways and hit him in the back."

"In the back?"

"It hit him in the back like it came out of a cannon and knocked him over. Then a bunch of firemen tried to get to him but he got up and started running and the thing kept burning in his back, and he kept running." Paula took a breath and leaned closer to Margaret. "He stumbled and he fell down, and then it went off, and the whole thing exploded up from the ground like a big fountain made of light. Just like that."

Margaret remained silent for a moment, then she said softly: "I didn't know about that. Nobody told me."

"Well, now you know."

Another screamer went up and popped. In the brief light Paula saw that Margaret hadn't even looked up; she'd kept her eyes on the ground in front of her, as if deep in thought. The little girl's face was furrowed, and her tiny throat seemed to periodically constrict and release. Paula leaned back onto her elbows, and closed her eyes.

After the sounds of two more rockets, there was a longer pause, and Paula heard the people around her whispering. She raised herself up to a sitting position and looked over to the infield. The crimson fireman walked over to the pitcher's mound, knelt beside the largest cylinder, touched it with his flare, then turned and walked briskly away. She saw a small flame sputter and then the cylinder spit a small shower of sparks into the air and she heard the crowd hold its breath in unison. She looked over to Margaret. Her small profile had changed, her head was back and her face was pointed once again upward, and when the Volcano exploded high above, Paula caught a glimpse of the girl's tiny face. The lines of distress were still present, barely perceptible in the imperfect light, but through them the little girl cast a certain, resolute smile of astonishment. Paula's lungs tightened and her breath would not come out. She forced herself to look away from the little girl, away from the infield and the rides and up into the sky above the park. The last of an enormous red and gold shower fluttered down, and she followed one ember as it cooled and drifted to the earth. It was a piece of blackened paper, glowing around the edges, and when it touched the ground of the infield her breath was released, and she felt it escape into the air of the park as a single, liberated sob.