

The Weight of Fire

by Christopher Locke

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The summer I was six years old, my parents smoked two packs a day and left their matchbooks everywhere. I'd take a book I found lying around the house, jam it into my pocket, and go outside for the day. I'd then carefully search out a quiet area on my street, maybe huddle down among a paltry stand of trees, and pile up some dried leaves, bits of scrap paper, little black twigs, whatever, and tear off one of the matches.

The sound of striking the head against the back of the book, that almost metallic/wet clicking, made my insides feel hollow. And when the flame sprouted from the top of the match, that feeling deepened. I'd place the tip against a brown elm leaf or a crumpled milk carton, and as the fire slowly grew, eating at the bits of trash, I felt far away and detached, as if watching a television program through someone else's eyes.

Finally, my parents started getting calls from everyone in the neighborhood that their "stuttering son" had started another fire. Adults would discover a loose pile smoldering behind the small brick school building, or maybe in the trash can of Mrs. Chevalier, white smoke climbing its invisible rope toward the empty, hot sky.

My parents grew tired of all the attention.

So one bright August morning, my dad showed up in front of our house straddling a ten-speed. He didn't own a bike. On the back was a seat for a little kid. He found me out back playing with my brother Brian, hitting rocks with a metal bat.

"Hey, Chris, wanna go for a ride with your old man?"

He showed me the bike and how I could fit into the seat. My brother wanted to know when he could get a ride on the bike, and my father told him soon, soon.

I was excited by the prospect of riding not only on a grownup bike, but also on one driven by my dad. The truth was, my time with him was limited as he usually spent most of the day at work (he was a local disc jockey) or upstairs sleeping off a Darvocet binge. Sometimes my brother and I would creep into his room, eager to have him play with us, and he'd sleepily open his eyes and smile, saying not yet, that he needed to rest his eyes.

My mom was certainly more attentive, but she was young and just starting to discover her own sexuality—this, unfortunately, usually involved men besides my father.

The helmet I wore was too big for my head but I wore it anyway, the chinstrap bulky against my neck. I loved the feeling of the warm air running past my face, the slight pump of tires churning against asphalt as my dad pedaled.

Downtown was busy that day, cars slowly moving through lights and then stopping behind immaculate bumpers. Some kids were fishing off a bridge next to the town's only hotel. I watched as the teenagers pulled a large fish up over the metal guardrail and then slapped it hard against the sidewalk. "Sucker!" one of them yelled. Milky entrails spattered as we wheeled by on the other side of the bridge. My dad said nothing; I looked away at the river escaping our town, going somewhere I could only dream of.

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