

SKIN ON FIRE

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Soon as I stepped inside I saw him: in a window seat, eyes shut, posture so perfect he could have been president. I stumbled into a seat, my whole body burning. Mouth ajar and throat dry, turned to stone by my sudden need for this studly stupid boy. I hated him for it. I swung between desperate desire and caustic rage. The pendulum's arc got wider and wider, until I saw how if he wouldn't fuck me right in the aisle I'd have to set him on fire.

I already had the gasoline in my bag: a good sign I was in a bad place mentally. I needed it to firebomb somebody's car. I bought the gas in New York City so when I got to Hudson there'd be no chance some gas station attendant could put two and two together. But

the longer I looked, the more I felt I had to kill this kid. It would be easy. The gas was in a giant thermos. I could stand in the aisle and pretend to be drinking it and then stumble and spill it all over him and light a match, all in the space of three seconds. I'd do this as we were pulling into a station. So I could dash out the door before anyone figured out what happened.

On its way upstate, the train went through the Bronx. We came out of the tunnel and everyone stiffened, clutched their purses and briefcases tighter, like we were in a wagon train passing through hostile Injun territory. We passed an empty factory surrounded by tanks and armored police cars, with five helicopters buzzing right above it. Two weeks back it had been taken over by a crowd of homeless veterans, and the Mayor vowed to get them out by any means necessary—the land had just been sold to some developer with visions of condos dancing in his head—and then shit got ugly. Both sides had weapons way more sophisticated than you'd have pegged them for. All week long I'd been seeing the story on television, so it was nice to see the actual scene of the conflict. The afternoon was windy and the lowest helicopter bobbed up and down unsteadily; from time to time you heard the rattle of machine guns coming from snipers inside the building.

But my eyes kept flicking back to my boy. What if he got off before me? What if he stayed on longer? I took the thermos out and cradled it, wishing it was full of whiskey, or coffee. I couldn't stay on past my stop. I had no money whatsoever and I'd never be able to get back.

After Riverdale we switched to express. The tracks ran right alongside the Hudson River, its sides choked with ice, the buildings getting farther and farther apart.

Two days before, my mom called to tell me my friend Frank got killed. Burned alive. Now, if you know Frank, you know you can't get more flamboyant than that, and if you know Hudson, you know you can't get more homophobic than that. So the whole thing screamed hate crime to me, especially the part where the cops turned loose the main suspect, an aging over-

weight ex-bully named Rick. Whose car I was on my way to destroy.

You're probably thinking—if you're going to set someone on fire, why not Rick? So I'll be honest: at this point, I was thinking maybe there were lots of people worth setting on fire. Maybe that was my new mission. To burn away the hate in the world.

Each time we slowed I feared he'd get his things and get off. I tried to concentrate on the paper the guy across the aisle was reading. They were still running stories on the explosion at the Brooklyn Waterfront napalm factory. The building blew up Monday, but it was still smoldering, and eight whole blocks had been burned down. The cover showed a naked little girl screaming. The photographer had obviously been trying to copy that famous shot from Vietnam, with the little girl running down the street with her skin on fire, which made me wonder whether or not the picture was staged. Like he told this burning girl, can you stand just so, and open your mouth just so, head back a little further, yes, good, now sort of run forward, but keep your arms out away from your sides, no, a little lower, that looks too Christ-y. Or maybe he just doused her in napalm and set her on fire and sat back and took pictures til it came out perfect. At Hudson, I stood. He didn't budge. His shoes were off. Probably he was heading all the way to Montreal. I spent a long time in the aisle, and for the first time he caught me staring.

"Have a good night," he said. Smiling sweetly, looking maybe a little apologetic.

"You, too," I mumbled. And then I was in the vestibule and then I was on the platform, caught in a blast of wind so cold I could think of nothing else.

