

A Rumour of Fire

Rumors traveled quickly in the Westlake Apartment complex. [...]

Everyone said Cindy, who wore the black bikini and slathered herself with baby oil, had slept with the handsome maintenance man with sleepy eyes, even though he had a son with gorgeous curls and a skinny wife who always seemed to be looking at the sky. Still, I'd borrow
5 Cindy's baby oil thinking it might make me sexy like her, though I was what my mother called "a late bloomer¹".

Dad told me not to "traffic in² gossip".

"Keep your own counsel," he said, whatever that meant. Dad was smart and funny and always listened when I talked.

10 But, the rumor of a fire in the laundry room was definitely true. Me and my friend Charmaine went to see the burn marks on the walls and could smell the lingering smoke. Management replaced the old dinged up³ dryer with a new one that had a window in the front so you could watch the clothes toss around. They also installed a fire alarm on the wall.

Charmaine and I thought of ourselves as the unofficial detectives of the complex. We were a
15 great team [...]. We called each other at night and talk on the phone while we're watching TV. One time, I said Dolly Parton⁴ looked fat in her jumpsuit, and Charmaine swore she was about to say the same thing. We had spent all of last summer following the comings and goings of the Donatella Brothers delivery truck. We were sure they were drug dealers, though we only saw them drop off fruit baskets.

20 The firemen said it was faulty wiring on the dryer, but we were sure it was arson. It happened all the time in those cop shows. My dad had studied philosophy in school but became a cop, which was what I've wanted to be since I was young enough to sport⁵ a plastic badge.

Dad once helped stop a robbery. He came home that night and said, "All human failings are because of love or money or love of money." Mom rolled her eyes.

25 I thought about the fire before I fell asleep and wondered what happened to the clothes in the dryer. I imagined nylon panties melted into little blobs, a baby blanket ignited, and a white cotton blouse turned black. [...]

Charmaine and I figured it was our job to find out what had really happened during the fire. We started by staking out⁶ the laundry room. Charmaine sat outside on the stairs pretending to read a book. She had her mother's meditation gong in her pocket. I hung around in the utility closet of the laundry room. It was dark and warm in the closet. The air had that warm dryer smell that was so comforting in the wintertime. I tried to imagine it was cold outside, as sweat dripped down my back.

¹ *a late bloomer*: at være sent udviklet

² *traffic in*: (her) løbe med

³ *dinged up*: ramponerede

⁴ *Dolly Parton*: (f. 1946) amerikansk countrysangerinde

⁵ *blære mig med*

⁶ *staking out*: overvåge

35 The laundry room door was propped open, and I listened for the gong, which signaled someone heading for the laundry room. I heard the gong and then Charmaine's voice going "ohm" over and over. I almost cracked up.

I peeked through the door and saw Clint Dahlem, who we secretly called "mustache Joe," come in with a basketful of gray towels and gray sweat socks. Clint was humming the guitar part from In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida⁷ and doing a surprisingly decent job of it. He loaded up the machines with quarters. He was dropping handfuls of socks and underwear into the machine when I saw 40 him lift an old sweat sock to his nose and smell it. He made a face, but was kind of smiling like he liked it. My stomach turned. Gross. What a skeez⁸.

Clint left, and I waited a few minutes before joining Charmaine on the landing. After the hot air in the laundry room, the breeze was wonderful.

45 "Nothing yet." I said.

"This may take time."

"No, duh."

"No, duh."

"Stop mocking me."

50 "You stop."

We broke up laughing.

"You take a turn in the laundry room."

"But it's my mother's gong," she said.

"Weak excuse."

55 We'd decided to spend the night in the laundry room and see who showed up. I told my mother I was at Charmaine's house, and she told her mother she was at my house.

We each grabbed our sleeping bags on the way out and some snacks. Our sleeping bags blanketed the floor of the utility closet. We spread out our snacks – Cheetos and King Dons and Charleston Chews. I crept out and got us sodas from the vending machine. If we had to go to the 60 bathroom, we could use the locker room by the pool. We had everything covered, or so we thought.

Charmaine brought a deck of cards, and we played Rummy and Go Fish using hand signals rather than words in case anyone came in. Around 9:30, we heard the door to the laundry room creak open. We peeked through a crack in the door. It was Johnny Cutler. He was new to the 65 complex. It was just him and his mom in their apartment, and she was gone all the time working double shifts as a nurse. He was around our age, thirteen, but he had the slightest shade of a mustache and a hand-tooled leather wallet⁹ chained to his belt loop. He was kind of greasy, but kind of sexy. My mom said he "looked like trouble".

70 Charmaine said he was gross, but she smiled too much when she said it, so I knew she liked him too.

Johnny didn't have any laundry with him. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a handful of quarters. He put the change in the vending machine, and a bag of chips slowly pushed

⁷ sang fra 1968 af *Iron Butterfly*

⁸ klam fyr

⁹ *hand-tooled leather wallet*: (her) kunstfærdigt bearbejdet læderpung

forward on a coil¹⁰. “Funions¹¹,” mouthed Charmaine. She loved Funions, and I was pretty sure she thought this was a cosmic sign that Johnny was meant for her.

75 Charmaine had hair like the girl on the Breck¹² commercial, shiny and bouncy. She didn’t wear braces. She had been an “early bloomer.” Sometimes I was jealous of her, but then I thought of her father, who seemed never to have time for her, and I felt better.

The Funions hung at the end of the coil without dropping. “Damn,” Johnny cursed. He banged on the front of the machine with his fists, and the Funions didn’t move.

80 “God damn, mother fucking...”

Charmaine looked like she was about to burst out laughing. I pinched my arm to keep a straight face.

Then Johnny backed up and kicked the machine hard, over and over. It rocked back and forth.

85 “You bastard,” he said. “You deadbeat¹³. Just taking off. The hell with me and mom.”

We watched as the machine swayed. The Funions fell and plenty of other snacks too. Finally, Johnny stopped kicking. He wiped his face on the edge of his Iron Maiden¹⁴ t-shirt and grabbed the Funions and a couple of candy bars and left.

Charmaine ran out and grabbed the candy left in the bottom of the machine. We split it, neither of us mentioning Johnny’s tears. We knew tons of kids whose parents were divorced. We both agreed we couldn’t stand it if our parents split up.

“I would just die,” I said.

“Curl up and die,” echoed Charmaine.

95 I hated to think it, but her folks would probably be more likely to split. They argued all the time, like it was a game or something. My folks never argued. The only way I knew they disagreed was when my mom’s mouth made a tight, straight line.

We continued our card game, and about an hour later, we heard the door creak again. We peeked out the door and saw Joe and Sue Collins, an older couple, come in carrying a portable tape player.

100 “Nice and quiet. I told you,” said Sue.

Joe nodded as he pushed the laundry table against the wall. Sue placed the tape player on the table and pressed play. Old-timey music filled the room. Sue stood in the middle of the room, her arms out. Joe took her hand, and they began to dance, stepping back and forth in time, as if they’d done it a million times before.

105 “Isn’t this better?” he asked. “We have room to move around here.”

“Remember the Crystal ballroom? The way we glided across that floor?”

“Yes. We do alright,” he said and kissed her.

I mouthed “sweet” to Charmaine. She puckered her mouth until she had a fish face. I elbowed her until she stopped. We watched as they danced for thirty minutes. When they were done, they sat in folding chairs facing one another. Joe lifted Sue’s foot and took off her high

¹⁰ spiralrør

¹¹ majssnack med løgsmag

¹² virksomhed, som sælger shampoo

¹³ taber

¹⁴ *Iron Maiden*: britisk heavymetal band

heels. He rubbed her toes gently, while he hummed. After a while, he helped her back on with her shoes. Joe held the tape player with one hand and held Sue's hand with the other as they left.

115 So far we were getting nowhere with the investigation. We had Johnny on property damage if we wanted to turn him in, but what's a few candy bars compared to a deadbeat dad. It was getting close to midnight, and Charmaine's eyes were drooping¹⁵ when we heard the laundry room door open. It was bikini Cindy with a small basketful of silky things.

120 I made a face. Charmaine crossed her eyes. Cindy set the washer on delicate and poured in some Woolite¹⁶. While the washer began to fill, Cindy stood in the middle of the floor and bent her head until her hair fell forward. She fluffed it from underneath and then flipped her hair back.

She was expecting someone, maybe the person who set the fire. Then I saw my father walk through the door. He walked right over to Cindy and kissed her on the lips.

"You look so hot you could start a fire," he said.

125 I stepped further back into the closet. Charmaine watched. From the look on her face, they must have kissed. I looked away but felt her squeeze my hand. I turned to her in time to see Charmaine lean out of the closet and pull the fire alarm on the wall.

130 My father and Cindy left so quickly that she left her laundry behind. Charmaine grabbed the basket as we ran from the building. We went to hide in the woods behind the apartments. We could see the flashing lights of the fire engine. The firemen were too busy looking for a blaze to notice the small fire we made in a clearing.

135 Charmaine found matches in her purse, along with a small bag of sunflower seeds. We made a clear space in the dirt, and I built a small pyramid with the clothes. The pointed cup of Cindy's brassiere¹⁷ lay on top. It made me sick to look at it and wonder if my father had touched it. I was too ashamed to look at Charmaine. I touched the match to the pile and watched as Cindy's lace panties and padded bras disappeared inside the flames. I thought about Johnny, how much we had in common now, and what it would be like to go home tomorrow and watch my father lie.

I wanted to be back in my bed at home, before the fire, before everything got so complicated. I looked at Charmaine and tapped her on the shoulder. "Tag. You're it."

140 I ran through the woods as fast as I could, hearing the comforting sound of her breath as she ran behind me.

(2020)

¹⁵ ved at falde i

¹⁶ vaskemiddel

¹⁷ BH