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Written by Joe Hill

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THE FIREMAN

A NOVEL

JOE HILL

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For Ethan John King, who burns bright. Your dad loves you.

Inspiration:

J. K. Rowling, whose stories showed me how to write this one,

P. L. Travers, who had the medicine I needed,

Julie Andrews, who had a spoonful of sugar to help me swallow it,

Ray Bradbury, from whom I stole my title,

my father, from whom I stole all the rest,

and my mother, who introduced me to most of the mycology (and mythology) I relied on to write this story.

Although *Draco incendia trychophyton* is an invention, my ma would tell you that almost every feature of my fictional spore can actually be found in nature.

Outside the street's on fire
in a real death waltz . . .

—*"Jungleland," Bruce Springsteen*

Though I spends me time in the ashes and smoke
In this 'ole wide world there's no 'appier bloke.

—*"Chim Chim Cher-ee," Robert and Richard Sherman*

It was a pleasure to burn.

—*Fahrenheit 451, Ray Bradbury*

THE FIREMAN

Prologue

Lit

Harper Grayson had seen lots of people burn on TV, everyone had, but the first person she saw burn for real was in the playground behind the school.

Schools were closed in Boston and some other parts of Massachusetts, but here in New Hampshire they were still open. There had been cases in New Hampshire, but only a few. Harper had heard that half a dozen patients were being held in a secure wing of Concord Hospital, looked after by a medical team outfitted in full-body protective gear, every nurse armed with a fire extinguisher.

Harper was holding a cold compress to the cheek of a first grader named Raymond Bly, who had caught a badminton racquet in the face. There was always one or two each spring when Coach Keillor broke out the badminton racquets. Without fail, he told the kids to walk it off, even when they were holding a handful of their own teeth. One of these days she wanted to be there to see him take a badminton racquet in the nuts, just so she could have the pleasure of telling *him* to walk it off.

Raymond had not been crying when he came in, but when he saw himself in the mirror he lost his composure briefly, his chin dimpling, the muscles in his face trembling with emotion. The eye was black and purple and almost sealed shut, and she knew the sight of his reflection was more frightening than the pain.

To distract him, she reached for the emergency candy stash. The emergency candy stash was a battered Mary Poppins lunch box, rusting at the hinges, containing a few dozen individually wrapped candy bars. There were also a large radish and a potato in there, items she reserved for managing the most serious cases of misery.

She peered inside, while Raymond held the compress to his cheek.

"*Hmm*," Harper said. "I think I've got one more Twix bar in the candy box and I could really use one."

"Do *I* get candy?" Raymond asked in a congested voice.

"You get something better than candy. I have a big tasty radish, and if you can be *very* good, I'm going to let you have it, and I'll have the Twix bar." She showed him the inside of the lunch box so he could inspect the radish.

"Ugh. I don't want a radish."

"What about a big, sweet, tasty potato? This is Yukon Gold right here."

"*Ugh*. Let's arm wrestle for the Twix. I can beat my dad arm wrestling."

Harper whistled three bars of "My Favorite Things," pretending to think it over. She was prone to whistling bits from 1960s movie musicals and had secret fantasies of being joined in song by helpful blue jays and cheeky robins. "I don't know if you want to arm wrestle with me, Raymond Bly. I'm very fit."

She pretended she needed to look out the window to think it over—which was when she saw the man crossing the playground.

From where she stood, she had a direct view of the blacktop, a few hundred feet of tarmac marked up with the occasional hopscotch grid. Beyond that was an acre of mulch, with an elaborate play set planted in it: swings, slides, a climbing wall, and a row of steel pipes the kids could bang on to make musical gongs (privately Harper referred to these last as the Xylophone of the Damned).

It was first period and no kids were out now, the only time of the day there wasn't a flock of screaming, rioting, laughing, colliding children rushing about in sight of the health office. There was just the man, a guy in a baggy green army jacket and loose brown work pants, face in the shadow of a grimy baseball cap. He crossed the asphalt at a slant, coming around the back of the building. His head was down and he staggered, couldn't seem to hold to a straight line. Harper's initial thought was that he was drunk. Then she saw the smoke coming out of his sleeves. A fine, white smoke poured out of the jacket, around his hands, and up from under his collar into his long brown hair.

He lurched off the edge of the pavement and onto the mulch. He took three more steps and put his right hand on the wooden rung of a ladder leading up into the jungle gym. Even from this distance, Harper could see something on the back of his hand, a dark stripe, like a tattoo, but flecked with gold. The specks flashed, like motes of dust in a blinding ray of sunlight.

She had seen reports about it on the news, but still, in those first moments, she could hardly make sense of what she was looking at. Little candies began to fall out of the Mary Poppins lunch box, rattling on the floor. She didn't hear them, wasn't aware she was now holding the box at a crooked angle, dumping out miniature candy bars and Hershey's Kisses. Raymond watched the potato drop with a fleshy thud and roll out of sight under a counter.

The man who walked like a drunk began to sag. Then he arched his spine convulsively, throwing his head back, and flames licked up the front of his shirt. She had one brief glance at his gaunt, agonized face and then his head was a torch. He beat his left hand at his chest, but his right hand still held the wooden ladder. His right hand was burning, charring the pine. His head tipped farther and farther back and he opened his mouth to scream and black smoke gushed out instead.

Raymond saw the expression on Harper's face and started

to turn his head to look over his shoulder and out the window. Harper let go of the candy box and reached for him. She clamped one hand to the cold compress and put her other hand behind Raymond's head, forcibly turning his face from the window.

"Don't, dear," she said, surprised at the calm she heard in her own voice.

"What was that?" he asked.

She let go of the back of his head and found the cord for the blinds. Outside, the burning man sank to his knees. He bowed his head, like one praying to Mecca. He was engulfed in flames, a mound of rags pouring oily smoke into the bright, cold April afternoon.

The shade fell with a metallic crash, shutting out the whole scene—all except a feverish flicker of golden light, glimmering madly around the edges of the blinds.