

Peter Brown
from *The Great Hollandville Fire*

On Monday, 4 a.m., the morning of the fire, Oleg Johansen hit the gas and brakes in no discernable pattern. He hurried and then slowed down. He hated driving in the dark and every few minutes twisted his neck to gaze skyward through his windshield. His brain hurt, as if swollen inside his too-small skull. He worried, with reason, that he was bound for hell. Such foreboding pressed on his shoulders and he sped up. He was thirty-three already, the age of Jesus, but a girl less than half his age, the sister of his boss had overrun the mighty fortress of his soul like an army of infidels. Guilt and relief and joy turned his heart this way and that as he followed the winding road into the mountains. He wanted to confess to her that he had never been with a woman--not really--or even a girl, before. He ached to tell about his loneliness and capacities for love. His head pounded from the racket of his dying Nova. The heater blew noxious fumes. The faster he went, the sicker he became.

How could he tell Smithie what he'd done? He took a sharp bend at high speed then braked and peered down at the gas gauge. He muttered to himself, preparing his confession. "It was her that started it, Smithie, honest to God. How could I say no?"

He coughed twice, then rolled down his window and spat. The mountain air was too cold and he swore. He said a prayer and rolled the window up. He saw Millie the first time six or so weeks earlier, in a powder-blue sun dress, a straw fedora and white tennis shoes, pedaling up to the site on her Schwinn. When she called up to them and waved, Oleg whispered to Smithie, "Who in the hell is that?"

"My sister," Smithie said and stared him down. Oleg never mentioned her to him again but the girl came by every day afterwards, waving to them and after a week or two stopping in to prattle with Oleg and bedevil her brother, complaining aloud to Oleg as if Smithie weren't there at all.

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“When is he going to see I’m not eleven anymore?” she wondered aloud, and crossed her arms. “I need a car of my own. I need friends of one kind or another, too. It isn’t normal for a girl to have no social life at all. If he doesn’t want to buy me a car then I’ll take a job and buy my own.” She shook her head. “I don’t mind.”

Smithie never smiled at such childishness and never said a word when Millie and Oleg began to wave to one another every time she went by. Soon she had become as buttery as a French pastry. She started bringing the extra sandwiches. She stayed around even longer, ignoring her brother and coming to sit by Oleg

Smithie should have noticed, too, when she began to come down early onto the front porch in those summery pajamas and bare legs, a fresh stroke of makeup under her eyes, to flirt with Oleg and watch them load the truck. Smithie said less and less to him in her presence. Something about her disturbed Smithie—he always looked away when she arrived or he blinked and told her in an exasperated whisper that *no*, they didn’t need a thing from her and suggested she go on back to bed, as if she were even more nerve-wracking to him than she was to Oleg.

One hot Friday afternoon, almost at quitting time, Millie had come up to the Palace and climbed the scaffolding with a clutch of wildflowers in her fist--an Indian paintbrush and a few stems of bluebells. She sat on the planks next to him while Oleg blasted the plywood with the nailer. He stopped every few minutes for her questions, he smiled at her sometimes, sometimes he ignored her, hoping Smithie, who was above them marking out the roof, would see his indifference towards the girl, but then she got up, paced back and forth along the planks and stopped to frown at Oleg, the flowers in a state of strangled panic on her hip.

“Why don’t you get yourself a better car?” she said. Oleg removed his goggles and rearranged the pressure tube, thinking the question over. Her lip turned closer to a smile now as she watched him.

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“What’s wrong with the one I got?” he said when he stopped again, the compressor coughing on the ground below. “It starts right away most every morning. It gets me up here every day on time, more or less. Go ask your brother. Maybe it’s not the swiftest car in the county--”

“Nope, it certainly is not. And besides--” she said. “It stinks of gasoline. And it leaks. Every day it leaves a new black puddle in our driveway.” She pointed down, for emphasis, at the dirt.

“I bet that car wouldn’t even make it to California,” she said.

Something in this suggestion set Oleg’s invisible antenna into motion.

“Maybe you ought to have your brother increase my wages,” he whispered. “Maybe then I can fix it.”

His joking vexed her and she began to pace again, her eyes averted as she worked Oleg over inside her head.

But Oleg had no plans, as he rumbled uphill into the morning, to take on such a long drive any time soon. He blinked into his rearview at the column of dense smoke scattering into blackness. He couldn’t deny the girl’s point. The evening before he crawled underneath the Nova and confirmed what he knew: oil had poured into a slick on the street and blackened the oil pan. It wasn’t just oil, though, as she said. It leaked gasoline, too. It had been dark and he had no flashlight, so he almost lit a match to see, but Saint Someone delivered him from foolishness. He figured he would check his dipstick every day and keep an eye on the gauge. With this in mind, Oleg continued on his way into the mountains. He was three hours early, expecting to park two-hundred yards down Smithie’s dirt road and sneak up to Smithie’s house and climb the back porch then up onto the seat of her bicycle and reach up to tap her window.