

Know Your Fireworks

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Sondra heard the doorbell ring and shortly afterwards the sound of laughter. Downstairs, Billy and his friends, Buzz and Luke, were watching some kind of reality show. Next, the sound of the fridge opening. Beer.

Sondra stayed upstairs out of the way, listening to some music. The kids were playing with Legos and eating ice cream. The kids were named Billy Jr. (after Billy, of course) and Rosa (after Billy's mother), but Sondra always thought of them as "David" and "Lily," the names she had hoped to give them. Billy appeared in her doorway. His face was red and he was already pretty tipsy. He came right up to the bed and cupped her breast in his hand. "We're heading up to Luke's house for a while. See ya' babe in the sweet by and by." She heard Billy in the bathroom, then the sound of the screen door slamming, laughter, the truck backing up into the road.

Luke had been their next door neighbor but he now lived a good hour's drive away. Who knew what happened there. Luke held an attraction for women that mystified Sondra and there had always been plenty of unfamiliar girls at his place when he had lived next door. A few months ago, Billy had returned from a night tying one on at Luke's and had thrown a condom down on the bed. "I brought you a present. You might be needing this." Although she had learned to look impassive and unruffled much of the time when he needled her, something must have poked through this time. "Just a joke, babe. Women just don't understand hu-more no more."

When he next approached her for sex, she was compliant as always, but fear spread over her immediately afterwards and she rocked on the porch, shaking, regretful, trapped. The testing had been reassuring, that time.

The kids had begun to bicker. Sondra went into the room where they were playing. 'We never go anywhere,' thought Sondra. Out loud she said: "Let's go watch the fireworks at the town beach."

David and Lily seemed pleased. Sondra gathered up snacks and blankets and piled the kids into the car. It was a clear, starry night. Many years ago, she had carried the sleeping kids to the car on a clear, starry, sultry night such as this. She was taking them to visit her mother. Just as Sondra had closed the back door of the car on David's side, she picked up the smell of beer and felt Billy's arm encircle her waist. He was barely able to stand up straight. "Don't try to run, babe. I'll always track you down. Like I always say: that's because I love you so much."

The town beach was five minutes away. Most of the beach was already occupied but Sondra found a patch of sand just next to a sand dune covered with long grasses. People were dressed in red, white, and blue, wearing hats and fluorescent necklaces. Out on the barge, Sondra could see the men scurrying about, setting up the fireworks. David and Lily were quiet and watchful.

A man Sondra did not recognize sat down on the sand beside her. He took out a sandwich wrapped in wax paper, peeled off the paper, and began to eat.

"Know much about fireworks?" said the man.

"Not really," said Sondra.

"Name's Mike," he said, extending his hand.

"Sondra."

The sky grew darker. The mayor stood up and blew into a small tin horn and the fireworks began. The kids leaned back into Sondra's lap and looked up at the sky.

Mike nudged her in the dark and pointed at the sky. "This one's called falling leaves." The red and yellow and green shapes did look like falling leaves. Mike pulled another sandwich out of his bag and held it out to her. She took it from him and began to eat. The rye bread was fresh and sour. She caught the sweet smell of David's hair and she felt Lily's hand grab her own as green and blue and yellow lights shot into the air all around them.

White and red exploded in space. "Chrysanthemum," said Mike as he pointed at the lights streaking down toward the water.

In the dark lit up by the fireworks, Sondra could see Mike's face. His face looked kind, then slightly menacing, then kind again.

"Falling leaves," she murmured into David's ear.

Circles twirled in the air. Mike was either stumped by this pattern or too caught in his own thoughts to comment. "I shall call this one 'horseshoe toss,'" thought Sondra.

White lights rippled down from the sky. Mike took her arm gently and pointed with his other hand. "Weeping willow." Weeping willow was lovely, perhaps the loveliest of all. Green and white swirls of jagged light tumbled to the ground.

Lily's hand grabbed hers tighter.

Blue and yellow lights streamed outward. Mike leaned against Sondra for a few seconds and said, "Flying fish."

"It's so beautiful," said Lily as she burrowed further. Sondra whispered "Flying fish, falling leaves, weeping willow."

And then, it was the finale. Someone turned on a CD player and "Born in the USA" rang out.

As they packed up their stuff, she thought of giving her secret email address to Mike. But no good could come of that. She waved goodbye and led the kids to the car.

The house was silent and peaceful when she returned. Billy was still far, far, away. She led the kids up to their beds. In the living room, she found the Springsteen album. She whirled around the room singing out loud to "Dancing in the Dark" as flying fish, falling leaves, horseshoes, chrysanthemums, and weeping willows filled the air.