

DENISE

ON FIRE

She is working on *Forest Fire II* when her phone rings. She leans over and looks at the screen on the Caller ID box; it says "Pay Phone." Who the hell is calling her from a pay phone? She decides to ignore it, goes back to painting.

She looks at the thick wall of color in front of her. She has never worked so long on a single canvas before. She has never produced something this dense. She adds marks and then she adds more marks and the more she adds the better the painting looks. She wonders if there is a limit to this process, if there will ever be a point where she will need to stop and say *it's finished*. It doesn't seem like she's anywhere near that limit. The painting just sits there and absorbs the marks she adds to it, quietly accumulating her energy. Her attention. Her love. *That's what love is*, she thinks, *attention*. Sometimes she wants to run her fingers over the painting. Sometimes she wants to rub against it with her body. She has raised an entire landscape out of paint, mountains and plateaus and canyons, and she wonders how it would feel to smear it all flat beneath her skin. Color on her flesh: she and the painting a single thing now (in this dream), a thing orange and red and black, a woman on fire.

They burned her father's body when she was nine, after the accident. They kept his ashes in the house, in a box. She has a feeling (she would never say this to anyone) that if she could only *understand fire* somehow, this would connect her to her father. Inside fire is a clue to that which he has passed through.

Her kettle rattles, then begins to whine. She fixes herself a cup of tea and decided to check her voicemail, to see who called.

Denise. It's me, Johnny. [A small chuckle here; he must realize what effect hearing his voice again will have on her, he must understand that hearing his voice again for the first time in years will send a feeling through her, a charge, that might make the hairs on her arms stand on end (it does), and he must understand that there's some incongruity between the mundane character of the four words he just uttered and the physical potency of the feeling that they will trigger, and so he chuckles, as though

he's bemused, once again, at the way that the world works.] I, uh, I hope this is the right number; I got it from Information. Um, listen, I know it's been forever. But I'm in Chicago for a couple of days, and I was hoping I could see you. I'm crashing with Rick and Gerhard—I don't know if you have their number—I don't have it on me—I'll, uh, I'll try to call you later on tonight. OK. Bye.

She puts the phone down on the countertop and thinks. She doesn't have Rick and Gerhard's number (she can't even summon up their faces—she just remembers they were two guys Johnny knew back when they were at SAIC). She's supposed to be working tonight, closing the store with Joshua.

She calls in. Gets Freya on the phone. Says the only thing she can think of.

—I can't come in tonight, she says. —My father's been in an accident.