

Initially published in 4'33", an audio journal, and republished in the chapbook Heard Around Town.

Erica Plouffe Lazure

Black Cats

Tyler's dad's car is an ancient Volare and from it we throw firecrackers. I am not the best match lighter among us—if my recent failed foray into cigarettes says anything—but Tyler and I are going together so I get the front seat. I control the roll-down window. And the tape deck, from which of course blares an alternating stream of Siouxsie and The Smiths. I keep the Black Cats on my lap. Abi folds her arms over her flat chest when she's not pretending to pull down her cutoffs that have no chance of covering her ass. She's been all high and mighty Priss-ville since Tyler gave me and not her the pack of matches to light the Black Cats. True, she bought them off her big brother and by all rights should be in charge of our firecracker toss. But her pride works to our advantage: we can do what we want. As she fumes about fireworks, I hope in the meanwhile she forgets that I am wearing her white-on-white, high-contrast Bad Brains T-shirt, a T-shirt that she coaxed off some weenie waiter last month, a T-shirt that I fill out in ways she never will. I detangle the firecracker wicks as Tyler drives down Main Street in search of people to throw firecrackers at.

And oh, but there are so many! The scraggle-haired lady pushing a real carriage with a fake baby! The angry old man in a three-piece suit and Fedora! A clutch of brainwashed leafleting people in robes! Brownie Scouts! The paper-bag toting wino who shakes his fist at the car, exposing a row of toothless gums. Tyler and I attack all, hit none. Laugh wickedly in their bewildered wake. Keep repeating the joke, "Yeah, I gotta match... your face and a gorilla's!" to Abi's annoyed snorts. The Black Cat wicks link up together, forming a firecracker brick designed to be set off all at once, fifty at a time like a clatter of shattering dishes. But because our targets are plenty, we light and toss two at a time, more often than not their pops explode mid-air, startling people more than anything else.

"You're not doing it right," Abi says, after my last issue bounces off a car fender and into a puddle, not only dudding out, but missing our target—a guy in hospital scrubs—completely. I know she's right. She is the star JV pitcher with a nose ring and I am a puny-armed sloth with green hair. But I like the front seat too much. I like the nest of Black Cats in my lap.

"There's another one," Tyler says, slowing down so I can take aim at a mother holding three red balloons in one hand, and her little boy in the other. "Do it!" I hold the strike pad of the matchbook between my fingers and try to get the match to light. It doesn't. "C'mon, Rachel," he says. I strike again. Dud. Nothing. Again. Nothing. On the fourth try the match takes but it doesn't matter because Tyler has just rear-ended the van in front of us, and I have dropped the flaming match onto my lap and somehow it aligns perfectly with the twined up wicks and begins to pop-pop-pop on my lap. It's louder than you'd think in the car and the bursts of heat and smoke from the remaining thirty Black Cats won't stop until they're gone, as we heave forward from the impact. "oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit..." Tyler repeats. He can't stop repeating himself as the ancient Volare fills with smoke and the man gets out of the truck scowling at Tyler, assessing the damage. On the front of my shirt, the kneeling skull holding its brain is full of single hole scar marks. My thighs boast little red welts. "I told you," Abi says. She leans forward to inspect the welts. "Is that my shirt?" she asks. Tyler opens his car door, patting down his back pocket for his learner's permit. Abi finds the front seat release and follows him.

"Where are you going?" I ask. Abi doesn't answer and I don't insist. As she walks up the street, pulling at the butt of her cutoffs, scot-free from certain punishment, I open my car door, too, shaking off the ash and firecracker scraps from my clothes, more than ready to take the fall.