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## Fire and Rye

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## FIRE AND RYE

Kevin Kane

Henry tried to take 17 kilos of China-white heroin across the Missouri river in a canoe. Four years later he walked back into Eliot, his small home town. It had been over six years, but an amount of time couldn't illustrate the distance he felt; although, the box-tether itching at his leg helped. At 26, Henry's eyes were sunk, his hair stretched to cover open ground, and he moved in slow-motion on his right leg. He spent two and a half years in maximum security prison, but, the second day after finally transferring to minimum, a gang war exploded between the blacks and Hispanics. Caught in the middle, the fight destroyed his chance of ever walking normally again. He found early in maximum that prisoners are either on one side or the other, so he joined up with the Hispanics because he bunked with a few Snakes. When he moved to the new prison, he was alone again amidst the deafening noise of hundreds of strangers.

Coming in to Eliot on a Sunday, Henry limped off to a reunion with friends at the pub as the town slept in heavy sunshine. He wanted badly like a craving that, if never satisfied, keeps growing. Prison didn't allow for much else and the feeling added to his already broken step. While locked up, there was no doing allowed, only a constant wanting and missing and forgetting all those trivialities of life as a regimented clockwork of events ground out days and nights into oblivion. All that existed before was held in stasis until life began again, and only a tiny side-of-the-mouth smile remained when time started up for Henry. Now in Eliot, there was a lot to do. His parents promised him dinner. His pastor promised confession. His friends promised a drink. But Henry made no more promises, to anyone.

A lot of people wrote to Henry, at the very least sporadically. Letters effused with support and empathy formed a pile like a stalagmite in his cell. Henry replied to every single one and framed the returns with words of hope and progress and determination so they might believe in him again. So maybe he would believe in himself again. Drawing on the hope that reintegration was possible and everything would be right as rain when he got back, he shaped the letters sent back to relatives and friends. Really, he just waited for them to see his eyes and hear his voice to know what he lost.

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Like other small Midwestern towns claiming a rich history, everything downtown was once something else. The Chimney, where his friends waited, carried its name from being the old foundry or at least what survived after a disaster during the Depression. Henry liked to think about the men tanned from the glow of the stoves sitting with friends and drenching a day's labor. Those men didn't need letters. All they needed was fire and rye. A small plaque detailed the history of the building and explained that the blaze ravaged in 1937. The spirit of the men still working molten metal in invisible shifts haunted the bar. They wouldn't have read the plaque, just touched the pock-marked brick laid like their grandfather's used to. He imagined their fingertips touching crumbling masonry, but without sound, like he used to do in his cell when he thought of this place. He would close his eyes and try to push through the brick. It was private and secret and all Henry wanted was to fall inside of the stone and let the wind brush dust from his surface. When he thought of it now, it made him want his cell back, for a second. There was just enough room under the bunk to fit his body tightly underneath.

Henry observed his broken gait reflected in storefront windows and closed signs. The only things open were churches and bars. In one shop, an antique weathervane rooster pointed against the wind toward The Chimney from behind the display glass. Henry thought everything in the shop looked old and worthless. He turned from the shop with the rooster and walked diagonally across the road. An '83 gray Taurus huffed along the street; he used to own one and it would have reeked like cigarettes in this heat. The kids in the back, well-dressed and uncomfortable from church service, tried to watch him out of the corners of their eyes, and hide their curiosity of the lonely man. He figured the family must have stayed late after mass. When he tried to follow the car with his eyes, the sun pushed into his vision, temporarily blinding him. Outside The Chimney, he stopped and waited before pulling open the heavy door. He stepped into the stale afternoon air. It was darker than he remembered. Pockets of light from lamps and neon signs guided him in. A mirror stretched the length of the bar and

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Henry watched himself moving in it. By the jukebox in the corner, three heads at a table turned toward him. They all got up and those guys were so damn pretty to see.