

## **Pyromania**

**by Brian Rappatta**

The demons were finally gone when the boy appeared in town.

He walked casually down Main Street, giving the scattered corpses and rubble a perfunctory glance; the carnage of a barely escaped Apocalypse did not seem to impress him much, however. He merely stepped over the mutilated bodies when they were in his path, seemingly unaffected by the grisly scene. He was heading north.

Rosie Thatcher, still bent over the disemboweled form of her husband, straightened up at his passing, gazed deep into his captivating purple eyes, and gasped; for the first time in hours her tears of bereavement stopped. Elmira Judd, whose thirteen-year-old son had been ripped apart by a demon, thought that the boy with the purple eyes looked somewhat like her Johnny, and she almost smiled. Even Dale Thorpe, the

town's sheriff, noticed the boy, though he was involved in removing a badly damaged corpse and didn't give the boy's appearance much thought.

At the end of the block, the bodies began to thin out somewhat. Frank's Diner, a soda shoppe in imitation of the old fifties' models, stood on the corner just outside the epicenter of the horror. A charred and blackened husk in the middle of the road -- an as yet unidentified body -- did not seem to deter the diner from its daily routine: a fading plastic sign hanging in the door proclaimed YES, WE'RE OPEN! When the boy saw the sign, his gaze wavered between the mass of burnt flesh in the middle of the road and the inviting facade of the diner. After only a slight hesitation, he pushed open the glass door and went in.

There were no conversations going on inside, but as he entered all three pairs of eyes in the room ceased their downcast contemplation of the tables in front of them and fixed on him. Buddy Hawkins, sixty-three years old, had taken his morning coffee in that diner every day since its opening -- come hell or high water, he was fond of saying, and now that both had come to town at least once, everyone knew it was no idle boast. Merle Pinkerton, sitting in the corner with a cup of coffee, was also a regular; he regarded the boy with the same mistrust as he had every newcomer who had ever pushed open the glass door seeking to travel back in time, however briefly, to the fifties -- *his* decade. And Sally Burton, the waitress on duty, put down the crossword she was working on and stared unabashedly at the boy, captivated by the harsh beauty of the deep purple eyes set against his otherwise delicate features; she was past her prime and her breasts were sagging, but the arrival of the boy with the exotic eyes jump-started her long-

dormant sexuality, and she found herself inexplicably breathing heavy.

The boy took a seat at the counter. After a moment, Sally remembered her job and plopped a menu in front of his face. "Special today is pita gyros," she said. She was staring shamelessly into his eyes. She wondered briefly if the soul underneath was purple, too.

The purple eyes studied the menu for a moment, then looked up at her. "I'd like a cheeseburger," the boy said simply, "and a Coke." Sally breathed a sigh of relief: she had somehow been expecting the boy to growl and leer and order his food with the authoritative voice of a demon; it was a relief when the kid's voice came out as nothing more than the voice of a normal kid his age -- maybe about eleven or twelve, Sally guessed. And he was polite: "Please," he added for good measure.

Sally absently wrote his order down on her pad and handed it through the window to the cook. Then she returned to her seat and her crossword puzzle, but she didn't pick up her pencil. Instead she gazed across the counter into the boy's eyes. They were really purple, she noted -- not just rimmed with a tinge of lavender around the edges or a vague hint of violet reflected in the lighting; they were profoundly purple, the color of an emperor's robe or sparkly grape juice. Sally thought they were the most beautiful thing she'd ever seen.

Sensing her scrutiny, the boy looked up nervously. He did not say anything, but she could tell that he felt embarrassed by her attention. She felt a guilty obligation to say something. "You -- you have beautiful eyes," she stammered. "I've never seen anything like them."

The boy flushed a bright shade of crimson, and Sally was immediately sorry for having caused him embarrassment. She

changed the subject quickly. "So -- ah -- you new here? I don't remember ever seeing you around."

"Just passing through," the boy said meekly. He never lifted his gaze from the polished black marble of the counter.

"Where ya headed?" Sally asked conversationally. She knew she was on the verge of prying, but she couldn't help it. She felt an instinctive need to know everything about this strangely beautiful boy who could flutter her pulse with just a look.

"North," the boy muttered.

"North?" Sally exclaimed. "You mean up to Concordia? Or New Canaan, maybe?"

The boy shifted uneasily on his stool. "Naw," he said. "Just north."

Sally took the answer in stride. "You with your mother or something?"

The boy shook his head. Still he did not look up from the counter.

Sally sensed that the kid wanted to be left alone, but she could not just shut up. Her curiosity drove her to talk to him. Perhaps she was just giving herself an excuse to look at him, she thought. "You headin' north all by yourself? On foot?" she exclaimed.

"Yup," he muttered.

"Why, whatever for?"

His eyes darted to the glass door, as if contemplating escape. "Just 'cause."

*Peculiar*, Sally thought. She was about to ask the boy another question when Dale Thorpe, the town sheriff, walked through the glass door. He took a seat at the counter three stools from the boy. It was the seat he always sat in when he stopped for donuts and coffee. Sally went to him. "What can I

get you, Dale?" she asked, already knowing what his answer would be.

"Just a plain donut n' coffee," Dale answered.

She got his plain donut from behind the counter, wrapping a thin sheet of plastic tissue around it. She set it down on the counter in front of him, then went about drawing his coffee from the machine behind the counter. "Hell of a day, huh, Dale?" she said conversationally.

"Sure is," Dale replied, and she noticed the same haunted expression in his eyes that everyone in the town was wearing. "I've lost count how many bodies we've shipped off to the morgue today, and we've still got plenty left," he continued. "Most of 'em are ripped up so bad you can hardly recognize 'em."

Sally set the coffee down next to his donut. "At least it's over now," she said. "That's the most important thing. Right, Dale?"

The sheriff sighed. "Yeah, it's over. For now, at least."

Sally let him eat his donut in silence. She'd almost forgotten about the boy with the purple eyes, but a few moments later a bell rang from the kitchen: the boy's order was finished. She took it over to him, setting it gently down on the counter under his nose. The boy looked up for a second, and in that moment Sally saw the captivating purple eyes once again.

The diner started to fill up with the lunchtime crowd. Townspeople filed in by twos and threes. All of them wore the same faraway, haunted expressions of people who had almost seen their town annexed by hell, but Sally also saw an underlying glint of gritty determination: they had all survived the onslaught of the Abomination. That was the most

important thing. Now they were beginning to bury the dead and pick up the pieces of their lives.

Sally lost track of the boy in the bustle of midday, but during a lull she heard a thin, reedy, "Excuse me," and she turned to look once again into the boy's beautiful eyes. When she did not say anything, the boy repeated, "Excuse me, ma'am. May I pay?"

"Sure." She shook her head to clear it of the spell he had cast on her. She whipped out her pad, found his bill, ripped it out, and placed it on the counter in front of him. "That'll be \$3.59," she said.

The boy handed her a five-dollar bill. "You can keep the change," he said timidly, as if he was afraid she would laugh at him.

"Thank you," she said, and prepared to take her last look into the boy's eyes. "Stop by again if you're ever in the area."

The boy smiled; the effect on his face, coupled with the allure of his exotic eyes, was nothing short of angelic. Sally instantly found herself wishing she had a son like this boy.

He made to leave. On his way out the door, Dale Thorpe looked up from his coffee and caught a glimpse of the boy's deep purple eyes. Such was his amazement that he nearly spilled his coffee all over his neatly pressed sheriff's uniform. "Excuse me a second, son," he said, quickly standing up to stop the boy before he left the diner.

The expression on the boy's face grew desperate, like a trapped animal. "Yes, sir?" he said, his voice a raw squeak.

"I don't remember ever seeing you around here," Dale Thorpe said. "You new around here?"

The boy shook his head. "Just passing through."

"Where you headed, son?"

"North."

The sheriff scratched his chin. "North? You mean up to Concordia? New Canaan, maybe?"

"Nope. Just north."

Dale Thorpe mulled this over. "Are you traveling with somebody?"

The boy looked as if he was about to burst into tears under the onslaught of so many questions. He shook his head miserably.

"Do your parents live anywhere around here?" Dale pressed. "Somebody has to be responsible for you."

The boy was silent. He looked at the polished tile of the floor, disconsolate.

Dale Thorpe was silent for a moment, contemplating the strange boy before him. The kid was definitely weird, he decided, what with those damned spooky eyes and a face that looked terminally on the verge of tears.

Merle Pinkerton, still sitting in the corner nursing his cup of coffee, took advantage of the sheriff's hesitation. "He's a demon!" Merle shouted, punctuating his words by pounding his fist on the table. There was a metallic clink of jumping silverware. All conversations in the room stopped; all eyes darted between Merle and the boy. "He's a demon, I tell you!" Merle continued. "Just look at him. I knew it from the moment I laid eyes on him. He's got them damned eyes like they got -- just look at him! They all looked like that -- right before they killed our families."

Sheriff Thorpe looked at the boy curiously, then at Merle. "You could be right," he admitted cautiously. The boy did bear a striking resemblance to the infernal creatures that had rolled through town. He looked around the diner and saw the faces of the townspeople alight with fear. They were all convinced the boy was a demon.

"I say we burn him!" Merle Pinkerton thundered, and there were many nods of assent from the townspeople gathered in the diner. "Burn him!" Merle shouted hysterically. "We'll show those goddamned demons they can't mess with us! We beat the lousy bastards once before, and we can do it again! It's time those lousy motherfuckers went back to hell and stayed there. I say we burn him alive!"

There was an echoing cheer from the patrons, and then a tidal wave of people flowed toward the door. Sheriff Thorpe and Sally and Merle Pinkerton and Buddy Hawkins were swept out the door by a flood of townspeople, who began lustily building a bonfire in the middle of the road. There was still no traffic on Main Street in the aftermath of the town's ordeal, and the body burnt to a crisp still lay untouched in the middle of the road, serving as incentive to the people's desire to reap justice on the demons that had obliterated their town. Slabs of wood from the wreckage of a nearby house soon formed the base of the bonfire; a large beam was lugged in by several men and set up in the center of the pile of kindling. The townspeople went about their work happily, and the boy was soon lashed firmly to the beam in the center of the bonfire. He did not cry or exhibit any outward signs of terror; he merely cast his purple eyes steadfastly on the ground. His despondency only infuriated the townspeople all the more.

The diner's cook joined the festivities, pouring a large bucket of cooking grease over the kindling at the base of the bonfire. He stepped back.

"Light it!" shouted one of the townspeople, and soon everyone was echoing the man's words in a simple litany.

Merle approached the boy exultantly, holding a book of matches like a weapon. "Any last words, my boy?" he cried out.

The boy did not answer.

"THEN GET YOUR ASS BACK TO HELL!" Merle shouted, and lit one of the matches from his book. He bent down and touched it to the edge of the pile of kindling.

The fire, aided by several gallons of cooking grease, caught quickly and soon spread toward the small figure of the boy bound in the center. Flames sprouted up, licked at his feet. Sally shut her eyes, imagining what the boy's scream would sound like, sure to come only a few seconds later as the fire worked its way up his body. She imagined the boy's flesh flaying in the flames, his face blackening and sizzling, the delicate features around his purple eyes turning to nothing but ash.

Nothing happened. There was no scream as the flames touched the boy's body. Sally opened her eyes, saw the boy entirely engulfed by fire. His face was not contorted in agony, however. Instead he merely looked sadly at the throng of townspeople. His eyes seemed to flash an even brighter shade of purple, and the townspeople stepped back in horror.

He was not consumed. The heat melted away his bonds, and he brought his hands to his sides to stand in the fire, impassive. Then, with a slow, sad smile on his lips, he stepped down from the pile of kindling and turned away from them. He started walking, his body still ablaze with flames. Unaffected, he headed north. The townspeople watched him go until he was nothing more than a bright glare at the vanishing point.