



Firelight

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“Firelight,” narrated in the first person, describes a cold Seattle evening spent by a mother and son much like Wolff and his mother. The boy is old enough to imagine that he can pass for a student when the two of them walk around the local university. In fact, they are out investigating possible apartments to rent, looking forward to the time when they can leave the noisy boardinghouse that fits within their current limited budget. At their last stop of the day, they encounter an intellectual couple and their teenaged daughter, who is lying by the fire reading. The boy is drawn into the warmth, almost mesmerized by the firelight as the couple discusses the apartment with his mother. From time to time he realizes that the man is bitterly criticizing the university. Later he speculates that perhaps the man had been denied tenure and that was why the family was giving up the apartment to be rented to someone else. He falls into a dreamy state, almost imagining that he lived there and had a family larger than just himself and his mother. At the end of the story, the narrator shifts to his adult life, when he does in fact have a wife and two children and a fireplace to call his own. He is content and yet a fear nags at him that if he becomes complacent, he will wake up and find his happiness a dream. Perhaps he identifies with the man in the apartment who had a warm home and a happy family yet had turned bitter. Perhaps he simply remembers the time he had to leave the firelight to walk back into the cold, facing another night at the boardinghouse.

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