**The Moment Before the Light Disappears**

Lying on the sofa, Federico likes to peer into the gaps between the cushions. There it’s dark and smells of dusty polyester. The inside is lined with black cotton quilting. Sometimes he fins lint, handkerchiefs. On a lucky day, a silver coin. Between the middle cushions the lining is torn. He looks into the sofa’s inner workings, springs and plywood boards, crumbs from the cheese-on-toast he and Sylvia eat on Sunday nights.

He picks Sylvia’s pink lighter up off the table, flicks the steel round and ignites the gas. Flame rises to a pea, orange with a blue centre. He moves slowly to his stomach on the couch, carries the flame delicate as bone china. Switches the flame low and high, low and high. The metal heats up, hurts his finger. He releases the gas, the flame disappears.

He puts his fingers down the side of the cushions and touches a coin, large as a fifty cent piece. He edges his hand and th lighter inside the gap, flicks the steel for a better look. For an instant, cotton, springs and plywood are brightly lit – a silver coin glitters, there’s a sound like wind channelling a tunnel and flame leaps up the back of the sofa. Federico jumps up, drops the lighter at his feet and watches fire spill over the cushions and arms.

Never has he witnessed such perfect lack of hesitation. Inside the boy, time slows down, halts. Grey-black smoke lowers. The room, sofa and fire become distilled as an image , loose brush-strokes in an oil painting. This is the moment before light disappears. At the centre of this – a boy, not clearly seen if you look too quickly, almost transparent, the colour of smoke.

Flames rise up to the ceiling, dance under the plastic light-shade round the light bulb. Above Federico the bulb shifts and cracks, an explosion of glass and electrical sparks fall on his head. Flame moves down the sofa legs, foam starts to drip onto the floorboards. From what seems to be outside the house he can hear Sylvia screaming, then her hand wraps tight around his wrist, time twists and rushes. A fiery tap at his woollen socks. Sylvia wraps her arms round him, carries him from the room slamming the door shut on the hungry flame.

Glossary: distilled = purify; extract the essential meaning from