

ORIGINAL BEGINNING OF BURN BABY BURN

It was Hector who broke the news that Freddie Prinze had shot himself.

I was lying under the covers that Saturday morning, too frozen to move, even though I'd slept in socks and sweatpants. January 1977 had been the coldest start to a new year that anyone could remember, and while we hadn't been buried alive in snow like those suckers in Buffalo, the mercury in New York City had dipped to 18 degrees overnight. A blustery chill seeped through the rolled towels Mima stuffed in windowpanes, , and the steam radiator between my bed and Hector's was ice cold, of course. Manny, our super, had put a note in our mailboxes that week. Gas shortage, reduced heat during the workday hours, and all the usual bull that meant we were going to wear coats inside and have lukewarm water at best. I'd balled up the notice and tossed it before Mima got home. We'd been getting lot of notes from him lately, mostly about overdue rent, and they always wound her up. Why deal with that when we couldn't change it?

So there I was, trying to remember if I'd seen the gas truck that week when Hector yanked off my covers and stood at the end of my bed, smiling in victory. My brother was 13 – a full four years younger – but a growth spurt had turned him into a pimply ape, and one with nerve. He'd pulled up the hood on his ratty sweatshirt, too short in the sleeves, *a lá* Rocky Balboa, and he stank of the cigarettes he'd recently started smoking. His breath made little white clouds as he laughed.

"Get out!" I said, grabbing at the edges of my blanket.

"Your boyfriend, Chico shot himself," he said. He put his two fingers to his forehead and mouthed *pow*. "Brain-dead."