



# Burning

**Director:** Lee Chang-dong

**Country:** South Korea

**Date:** 2018

A review by Peter Bradshaw for *The Guardian*:

Lee Chang-dong's *Burning* is a superbly shot and sensuously scored movie, a mystery thriller about obsessive love taken from a short story by Haruki Murakami but with something of Patricia Highsmith or maybe the kind of Ruth Rendell novel that Claude Chabrol might have filmed. It's a psychological drama set in the modern consumerist Korea of the callous Gangnam-style rich and poor young people who often go invisibly to ground, pursued by credit-card debt.

*Burning* is based around an enigma – a vanishing – whose solubility or otherwise becomes progressively less important to the protagonist than his hurt feelings, his wounded love, his damaged soul and his toxic male envy. Yoo Ah-in gives a tremendous performance as Jongsoo, a country boy from Paju, near Panmunjom on the 38th parallel, a rural area where you can hear the echoes of propaganda announcements from the North. He has an open, friendly, slightly goofy face that belies a thoughtfulness: Jongsoo wants to be a writer and admires American authors like William Faulkner and F Scott Fitzgerald. His mum walked out when he was a kid, and his angry, lonely farmer dad – a military veteran with a fierce collection of knives – is in legal trouble for assaulting a government inspector.



Now Jongsoo is a graduate, living in Seoul with no obvious prospects, when a young woman doing a department-store lottery catches Jongsoo's eye as he slopes past and fixes it for him to win a prize. This is Haemi (the excellent Jeon Jong-seo). She tells him he knew her in high school – that he was mean to her but on one crucial occasion helped her. Jongsoo has no memory of this, but things take their course. After Haemi has taken off for a planned trip to Africa, Jongsoo is excited when she calls, asking to be picked up at the airport. But when Haemi comes out of Arrivals, it is with her new best friend, Ben (Steven Yeun), a rich, handsome young man, well-travelled and worldly, who greets the stunned, dismayed Jongsoo with frankness and charm, utterly unintimidated.

Poor country-mouse Jongsoo doesn't know what this means. He certainly can see what he perhaps always suspected: that Haemi is way out of his league. But he is permitted to hang out with Haemi and Ben à trois, and Haemi is often impulsively affectionate to her devoted ex-beau. Jongsoo quickly discovers that Ben is a creepy sociopath whose hobby is arson. Then Haemi vanishes without trace.

Lee creates a sense of mood and place with masterly flair, and the film uses such a gripping musical soundtrack; at one stage, Lee uses the heady Miles Davis jazz score from Louis Malle's *Lift to the Scaffold*. He is great at showing the numbness and stunned, cowed acceptingness of Jongsoo's existence. His sex scene with Haemi is outstandingly constructed: Jongsoo can't believe he's gotten lucky, but during the act he stares dumbly at the wall – the camera takes his point of view – and we can sense how weird he finds this mysterious and almost anonymous hookup. But then we can see how from this silence grows Jongsoo's indignation, beta-male resentment, horror and rage – a rage maybe inherited from his dad. Obsessively, he drives around in his old pickup truck, trying to find evidence against Ben, and then to find evidence of the "well" that Haemi claims was the site of a key childhood memory – and whose significance he can hardly bear to consider. Jongsoo dreams of the burning greenhouse: it is a great hallucinatory scene and it heats the entire film with menace and fear. This is a gripping nightmare.

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