

The Fire of Life

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Her feet hit the solid floor with such speed that an unexpected twinge feathered across her toes. With a groggy mumble and sleep-smudged eyes, she hobbled toward the window. The noise grew louder as she pressed her head against the fresh morning glass while each breath held onto the faint popping noise that threatened her from below. Perhaps, it was the weight of her dreams or the serenity of the night that plagued her body, for at that moment the sound of a starting fire did not register as threatening but merely a nuisance that held her from sleep. Whatever the reason, as her feet traveled unconsciously down the stairs, her mind drifted consciously back to bed. That was until she saw the smoke.

Thick, voluminous clouds attacked the glass with such virtuosity she stumbled backwards, not by the smoke's force, but of her own materializing fear. The sleep in her body was drowned in adrenaline, and within seconds, a siren melody kissed her ears, and the presence of red and white softened her breathing. Outside, tarnished yellow coveralls speckled the lawn and clumped together around a smut-blackened box that dangled open, dejectedly. Exposed wires glinted with such urgency that it was almost as if the singed, thick wire resting at the edge of the box was trying desperately to hide its ugliness by melting away from its onlookers. Amongst the dull yellowness, her father appeared. His hair stood on end, and whether it was from the narrow escape of a near electrical fire or bed-head, she could not tell. His naturally loud voice offered moments of a serious conversation as he spoke to a burly man that introduced himself as the Chief firefighter. A freshly-lit cigarette dangled ironically from Chief's lips.

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"That was a close call," Chief mumbled thoughtfully after a lingering puff. "Usually electrical fires are so quiet people never know that they're in danger until their house is burnt around them."

It seemed as if her father offered a spiritual explanation for their safety, yet only small words of faith and miracles drifted toward her.

Chief nodded, gesturing to the burnt carcass of the electrical box. "Whoever heard this needs to be rewarded because a minute later this whole side of the house would have gone up in flames."

Her father agreed solemnly, his attention now attracted to the scorched siding encasing the box.

Chief shifted his stance in deep consideration. His eyes roamed the house almost as if searching for a soft spot. He pointed the smoldering cigarette to a single wall above the box. "That

section would have been the first to go."

Her heart stopped. That was her room.

The first time that I ever felt remorse was a few years after I quit ballet. I quit on a lazy whim with the thought that perhaps after ballet I could do something greater than leg exercises. However, I forgot to tell myself ahead of time that I would not even make an effort to do anything worth mentioning. I spent my free days immersed in books, and at the time this seemed as if it was a larger investment in my future. I was later diagnosed with asthma due to scarring on my lungs as result of a terrible case of pneumonia I contracted when I was five and half. Following my diagnosis, I was prescribed the universal treatment used to counteract any ailment, which is also known as exercise, the very action that I assured myself I could give up. Perhaps I should have ignored myself.

I spoke with one of my friends in the previous year. She was a very headstrong and liberal-minded individual in high school. She had always been known for speaking out even when her thoughts

were not welcome. However, after seeing her, I noticed a dullness that had settled in her soul and a sadness that strangled her movements. While walking from class, she often spoke of world issues and generally rude people, but it was almost as if spite had swallowed her whole. One day she spoke of God whom she believed was genderless and purposeless. I looked away, afraid to even breathe wrong, and said goodbye as we approached the parking lot. I dove into my car and prayed all the way home. I still regret my silence that day.

I used to have a small group of commonplace friends who grew with me throughout childhood and into our teen years. We shared general secrets but never true, personal ones. The week before graduation, one of my oldest, and upon reflection, sincerest friends invited me to her graduation party a few days before she planned her trek to a distant university. I lied and told her I could not go, but I could have if I wanted to, if I was a true friend. I chose to watch a pathetic film in theaters instead. I should have gone because I know I will never truly see her again.

Another wave of cigarette smoke slipped through the air creating thick tendrils of what she never had, and like life, the gray turned to nothing. Perhaps at that moment she understood what it felt like to have one's existence ripped at the seams only to be sewn back again, so that the lesson of not taking life for granted could be learned and never forgotten. Waves of realization and perspective mixed with rivers of gratitude and disappointment, for she had never thought about the life of her mind and soul until now; therefore, she stood rooted in wasted time. She had never made an effort to improve when needed. She had never spoken through the silence. She had never made time for those who mattered. No, she would not have died during that fire. She was already dead.

The cigarette fell from Chief's fingers as a black sole smeared its remains into the earth. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. ❖