

Ashes to Ashes

Letty Mundt

A series of memories lay in a line, and they replayed, one by one.

Somewhere on the outskirts of a sleepy, smoky city called Detroit, sometime around the turn of the second millennium, and somehow amidst an otherwise unruffled morning, something was burning.

The musty victim was an average-sized warehouse, four faces of dry wood and other flammable entities susceptible to a summer of drought. It had been smoking and flaming for quite some time now, but not a city-dwelling eye turned to observe, to assist, or even to fret. It was as if the building did not burn—for if no one could see it, did that make it unreal?

But a boy no older than eight years of age crouched inside, and to him, though he could not see much of the damage past his own ash-blackened hands or comprehend the reasoning behind this incident, the danger was as real as anything else.

This boy, as a matter of fact, had woken up to such flames.

He sat up with a start as the smoke-smell filled his nose, a signal that sent a sizzle of alarm down his spine. He stood up, ignoring searing pain from a leg likely broken, clutching a tiny blue backpack to his chest as if polyester could shield him from Hell's heat.

The world was red—a smoky, blurry agony that boiled. There was no exit; the flames were leaping from the walls in stems of yellow and orange and red bouquets, petals flying and hissing.

Why—why was he here? In what universe could he have awoken to flame and horror instead of a rocket-ship bed? Had he been there for long?

I was running, he realized, swallowing hard and trying to remember if his parents had ever taught him how to survive a fire.

His parents. They were the reason he was running. He remembered they were dead, and the killer was after him next, a familiar evil finally freed from its cage after years of festering.

He closed his eyes, lip trembling without control, and tried to remember the rest. There had been a window—looking into his bedroom farther uptown. Falling from that height explained the broken leg. Tearing through the streets in blind, agonized panic explained the unconventional choice in resting place.

The flames sprouted higher, and the boy jumped backward with a whimper. *I'm eight, for crying out loud*, he managed to think beneath the smoky roar. *This kind of stuff only happens in bad dreams, right?*

A sudden tightening of his chest dropped him to his knees, and he began to cough, body crumpling violently inward. Smoke, he remembered, was more dangerous than fire. He couldn't breathe, and such thirst for oxygen drowned him in panic.

Unable to gasp for air, to see more than a red blur, or even to walk in anything other than an excruciating limp, the boy held his hands over his nose and mouth and half-ran, half-stumbled to the building's back wall, flinching as a few yellow tongues of flame licked up toward his face, their breath reeking of devastation.

But the exit was right there, just beyond the smoke. So he closed his eyes, sticky with terror, and sprinted through the fire, leg burning, lungs burning, everything burning.

And then the fire was gone. In its place was smoke, warm and lazy, and the river, just feet from where the boy stood. He teetered with exhaustion and raw, scorched hopelessness.

The river looked quenching and safe and he staggered toward it, unaware of the dawdling but persistent current, the filthy, choppy depths, or the rocks that lay beneath the surface.

He leapt into it, seeking escape from the burning.

The water was cold and it stung him as he plunged, hissing against burnt patches of skin and shooting spray high above his head. It swept him downstream in a flurry of icy bucketfuls, downhill, to somewhere he did not know.

Then there was a rock, a rock out of a dirty blue nowhere, emerging from the waves like a lighthouse splitting the fog. It struck him as he swerved around a fallen tree, soggy backpack no longer fireproof but a weight to drag him down.

The rock he struck painted everything black and unconscious, and the fire vanished somewhere behind the sky.

Then that memory was gone, and from its ashes rose the aftermath.

He awoke to more coughing, as water and smoke poured from his lungs and out of his mouth. His head throbbed, face burned—his leg throbbed *and* burned—but he was alive.

His eyes were still clouded with gray film, so he felt as though he were watching through a storm cloud or silk screen, but something was holding him over a large bucket, hitting him inexpertly on the back until more water flew in ungraceful spurts from his throat.

“Is that all of it?” a voice asked.

The boy blinked until the film over his eyes faded into clarity. His thoughts were jumbled as broken glass. Was that voice asking him?

“Hey. Blondie. I’m talking to you, y’know.”

Apparently so.

The boy coughed a few more times, retching as watery smoke churned through his stomach and lungs. He felt like a broken washing machine.

Another boy, a few years older, was sitting in front of him, dressed in what looked like a uniform. The clothes were a dusty black that matched his hair. He was the one who had spoken.

“Smoke damage,” the stranger said, face thoughtful. “They thought this would happen. Once the doctors get here, they can help you with that. You were in that building for a while, huh?”

The little boy tried to swallow, but his throat was on fire. He wanted to ask what had happened.

Thankfully, the other boy seemed to read the trauma on his face and take a hint. “You were in a fire, remember? Some drunken kids started it at the processing warehouse. Then you must’ve fallen into Detroit River. We saw you when we were playing outside, and I saved you. Well—I mean—the orphanage did, but I was the one who saw you and dragged you out. You’re in the infirmary now.”

The smaller boy closed his eyes, saw images of the murderer, the fire, the river, the smoke. He did not want to see them. He did not want to see anything.

“Don’t worry,” the stranger replied, eyes big and dark and soft. “Whatever happened, it’s over now. We’ll take care of you. I promise, okay?”

A promise was a promise.

Then that memory flipped over, everything blurred as it raced forward in time.

“Did you bring the walkie-talkies this time?”

“What? I thought you had them!”

Years later, two boys crouched in a dirty alleyway, promise kept, friendship forged.

“If we get separated, you’re on your own with this one,” the older boy grumbled. “Since I’m assuming you don’t have your phone on you, either. You know, Hardy bought those for us for a *reason*.”

“Sorry,” the younger one peeped. “Forgot to charge it.”

“You’d better rob a RadioShack or something pretty damn quick, then, or this demon is going to catch us alone and hang you by our toes. Then I’ll have to paint a picture of your tragic death scene to explain to the others how much you screwed up.”

“Harsh,” his companion muttered. “We’re supposed to be a team, thank you very much. You wouldn’t leave me to be massacred, right? You *did* promise to take care of me. It’s your obligation.”

An eye roll. “Fine. Forget that we started this hunting business *together* then; I’ll go kill all the monsters hiding under people’s beds by myself. I’ll find and kill your murdering brother for you, too. You can just go home and charge the electronics.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t coming with you!”

“Good, because you are.” The older boy grinned. “Ghosts and goblins don’t catch themselves.”

A series of smudges, then, and when the scene switched at last, it was crying with the wind.

The boy stood on a rooftop. This would have lacked reasonability had he been acting of his own accord, as falling from a second-story window all those blazing years ago made leaning high over the blurry ground the last place he’d ever wish to be. But he was not in control of fear—something else was.

A demon.

Far below stood a smattering of faces no longer known, because the beast in control did not wish for the boy to know them. Among them was someone who might have brought light and reason to the situation—had he been more than a fuzzy face two hundred feet down.

“Don’t do this!” screamed the face, and that familiar voice was no more than a stranger’s echo. “Don’t let him do this!”

The words did shake the demon’s control a little, and the boy underneath fought and fought to punch through the ice, to surface, to breathe. But the howl-heavy wind and the shadow-thick claws pressed in, and all efforts were in vain. He would drown.

The boy’s body leaned forward and began to fall, plummeting to the earth like a missile on its strike, the world spinning in twists and curls.

As he fell, a hand he did not control seemed to flick a switch, press a button—and the building behind him became a volcano he was erupting from, shooting fiery splinters and billowing black cloud-

shapes up to the smoggy skies and whatever lay beyond. It crashed and rolled to the ground in a flow of walls and windows, in flying chairs and floorboards, and it would spare no victim.

“Don’t! Stop!”

This time, closer, the familiar voice broke through the ice for just a splinter in time, and two old friends locked terrified gazes, fire alight in their eyes.

But then the dark pulled one of them back inside.

That world faded into black, every last memory stained as if soaked in ink, and no more light, even of a fire, was bright enough to revive it.

There were, in fact, no more memories. The burning had burned them all.

In a reality and time that never existed—even seventy years past—the shell of a boy crept behind a building in a slinking shadow, weary but practiced—although, of course, he was dreaming. He was not creeping; he was locked comatose somewhere beneath the world’s ash-cruled surface.

In the dream, he was following the monster. Only one death could make anything worth what his world had given up: his mother’s aprons against floral kitchen print; wires sticking out from his father’s pants pockets; a life more than rooting for scraps of pasta behind the library on 6th Street. Casting away the shadow of the monster who had snatched that life up was all there was left. It was, in fact, all that had ever been.

And in reality, the boy was not even there to make it happen.

He didn’t care. A few steps and the monster would be backed into a corner. Just that simple.

The dream-murderer turned, and his smile was laced with gleeful, malicious surprise. “Found me.”

“Brother,” the boy said, throat dry and heart pounding. Oddly realistic for a coma-induced hallucination. “It’s been a while. You hid yourself well.”

“*You* didn’t,” his brother responded, eyes two icy daggers. “You were on the streets with that weird Asian orphan and your nobody friends, in plain sight—specializing in hunting the supernatural? Yeah, right. I’m surprised you took out more than a measly frog demon before we tore every last one of you to strips. It was too easy.”

“Shut up,” the boy hissed, and drew a knife from his blue backpack with sweat-heavy hands.

“Why? I’m not real. You’re dreaming. You never got to finish what you started. You didn’t get to kill me.”

“Wrong,” the blond boy spat. “I finished what I started—fighting *real* demons, not cowards like you. We were doing the world a couple of well-needed favors before—”

“Before one of those *real* demons—the demon *I* hired to trick you—cracked your head like an acorn on top of that building?” A sneer.

The boy ignored the goad, gritting his teeth and stifling a cough as his lungs clenched. He didn’t have time to fish the inhaler out of his backpack. “I’ve lost everything now,” he said, “so I might as well give my old life some closure.”

“*Old* life?” his brother cackled. “You think you’re going somewhere *new*? You think you can pick yourself up again after you threw yourself under every bus that crossed the street? This is your fault. You’re better off dead. How do you know you’re not dead right now? What if you never wake up?”

“No—you started this.” Two clammy hands flexed around the knife. “You killed our parents. You sent me to the streets. You sent your demon after me. That was all you.”

“Oh, boo-hoo.” Now there was murder on his brother’s face, and it was familiar. “You always play the victim. That’s why Mom liked you best. I should’ve done more than just throw you out the window.”

“I *jumped* out that window.” Now the boy was furious. “Look, you thought I had some secret darkness inside me, something you could find if you scraped at me like a lottery scratch card? You hated me for it all your life, and you were wrong the whole time. There was nothing dark in our house until you put it there and destroyed us with it.”

“What does it matter now?” Green eyes of envy glared gorges into his brother’s head. “You’ve got nothing left to gain by being here. Our quarrel is over and dead, and the city went up in smoke.”

“You killed Mom and Dad.” The boy moved forward. “That means I kill you here and now, because I’ve also got nothing left to lose.”

A knife went down, blood spattered the walls, and then something happened—perhaps a gas leak, perhaps an act of the heavens, or perhaps a last agonizing attempt at escaping futile dreams that wouldn’t stop burning—but there was a sound like Earth splitting in two and then there was a terrible light, a terrible smell, and then there was nothing left.

Time seemed to move ahead at the speed of something more than light, and each inky memory was dipped in oil and lit with a match, scorching the past in a heap of messy flames, smoke seizing anything that might’ve filtered through. Thousands of memories were gone, and so was time, as it ran ahead without waiting for its passengers.

Fire, falling, demons, green envy, a promise—just a whirlwind of white fire, then gone up in smoke.