Incendiary (Burn the Disco Down)

It’s addicting. It is painful, and sorrowful, and addicting. And as I lay on my bathroom floor watching as my house turns to ash and dust, I wonder how long it will take. How long it’s been.

It started downstairs, in the laundry. It wasn’t noticeable unless you really, truly, looked. Nobody ever looks. A single spark flickers and ricochets until the entirety of the small room is engulfed and spiralling. Smoke billows out of the doorway and floats its way up the stairs; banisters scarred and steps collapsing under the weight of themselves. The handle at the top is hot to the touch, scalding. If I were to touch it, I’d burn. I’d want to.

The hallway is black when the door finally crumbles. Melting frames have fallen; pictures reduced to kindling against the charred carpet. Flames lick each corner of the wall, waltzing up to the ceiling. Beams are cracked and bleeding heat into the kitchen. Metal appliances creak as grey vapour surrounds them, the oven ruptures. I feel the floor beneath me shake and the tiles are starting to heat up now. My knuckles are scarred, my mouth is dry; my face is swollen, and my throat is raw.

The stairs leading to the second floor are alight now, blistering collapse rages on as my ears fill with acid and I kneel on the floor. The comfort of acceptance is setting in now, as the fullness of the fire crosses the threshold of the second floor. I can hear glass windows shattering from all around me, and, sickly, I wonder if I would bleed if I stepped on them, if I tried to make it out. I don’t think I want to.

My house is burning. My house is burning, and it has been for a long time, I think. My house is burning, and I am buried under rubble and ash so thick I cannot breathe. I start to wonder what it would feel like if I let the flames consume me; would anybody miss me if I were to leave them? I think of how badly I’ve wanted to burn in the past. I know it’s getting closer, now. I’m sweating and I can hear the flames quickly approaching the door. I can almost hear them knocking, waiting to be let in.

I wonder how differently today would have gone, had I not been here alone. If somebody were here to catch the first signs of a spark and snuff the flame before it had the chance to ignite. I think of my father, who would’ve been outside in the garage. I wonder if he would have seen red-hot anger through the deep basement windows, if he would have had the chance to extinguish it. My mother, who would have been in the laundry when it happened. I wonder if she would have prevented it from ever happening at all; I wonder if she would have been the one to start it.

I think of my siblings, next. My older brother and younger sister. I wonder if they would both be holed up in their rooms during the spark. Would my brother get out? Would my sister follow me?

I wipe my nose with my shirt and move towards the bathtub, the sleeve stained with soot. The slip mat feels tacky under my bare feet, and, belatedly, I realise the black smoke is so thick that I cannot see, the window covered and the door dwindling in haste. Embers are flying through the splintered wood, sparking against shag beside porcelain. One lands on my arm, another on my bare leg, and I realise this is it. For years now, I have been anticipating this. The collapse of support beams, this house reduced to a ghastly shell. The house I grew up in. The house my parents work to support, the one my mother diminishes whenever she gets the chance. The house my sister and I play fight in, the house my brother and I shared haunting secrets. I never shared this one. I begin to wish I did.

My father helped build this house. And I… Well. I let it burn. I sickly, achingly, hauntingly, infuriatingly, let it burn. Is this truly what I wanted? To burn under the ache of my own collapse? Weakly, through a blackened cough, I gasp out, “Mum.”

Despite the state of my house, my body, I think I hear a faint sound coming from somewhere outside. A high-pitched screech, or a squeal, maybe. I wobble to my feet in the tub, tiptoe to reach the recess in the wall in which the small, frosted sliver of a window resides, and wipe the ash away with a closed fist. It looks like a small gathering of people out there, yelling. The screech becomes louder, and I realise, through the haze of smoke and the stench of burnt skin, it’s not a screech at all.

Red and blue lights flash to a stop in front of the crowd gathered beneath my bathroom window. Rising to my toes once more, I pound on frosted glass. I don’t care about the pain anymore, I want out. I want out of this blistering bathroom, out of this hell of acid-stained teeth and swollen throats and dented knuckles and calloused knees. I wish I never let the spark in the laundry ignite. I wish I never kneeled in this bathroom.

I strike the window harder with every new thought. And the glass cracks. And the shouts get louder, pointed now in my direction. And I hear the loud *clank* of a metal ladder fall against the side of the house; a muffled yell coming from behind me.

And when I finally, *finally*, fall, it is into a thickly gloved hand, scruff material scratching my thin skin, with a heavy mask placed over my face.

My house was burning. Was.