

Up in Smoke

Prose — Shi Pope

The rough smell of smoke woke Cade up from his sleep. Sniffing the air, he could smell burning wood. He sat up quickly, seeming to trigger the fire alarm as he did. The siren began blaring through the house causing him to cover his ears and cringe. Before leaving his room, he bolts back to the bed and grabs his beloved stuffed teddy bear. Cade holds the bear up to his face allowing the softness of the fur to calm his nerves.

Before exiting the room, he remembers what his grandfather—a retired fire marshal—taught him. Cade uses the back of his hand to feel how warm the door is. The wood of the door was hot, but there was no burning sensation. He opens his door slowly and looks around. Black smoke is filling the house, seeping into his lungs so much he can taste the fire on his tongue.

The little boy crawls on the carpet, his elbows and knees burning from the friction of the rough shag material. As he's making his way down the hall, he passes the kitchen. Smoke is billowing out from the oven into the air. He squints through the smoke and sees the clock on the microwave flashing 4:47 am.

"Cade! Cade, where are you?" His mom's voice is frantic as it carries through the small house.

"I'm in the hall Mommy, beside the kitchen." Cade is quick to reply, already feeling safer knowing his mom is awake and alert. He stays low and put, knowing better than to move locations. It is only a few seconds before the face of Cade's father appears on the ground in front of him.

"Cade! Good job son. Okay, we're going to crawl to the front door and stay as low as possible."

"Where's Mommy? She yelled for me, but I don't see her." Cade chokes up from crying and the smoke affecting his lungs.

"She's already safe outside. I sent her out to go to the neighbors to call the fire department. They should be here any minute. Let's go honey."

Cade began crawling behind his father staying low to avoid the smoke and gripping his bear tightly. The smoke was becoming thicker and darker, making it harder to see his dad in front of him. The fire was roaring louder as they got closer to the front door. Glass on the photo frames hanging on the wall beside the stairs shattered and clanged on the hardwood as they tumbled down the steps. Cade's tears picked up speed

as they fell from his face. The tears made his vision go blurry and he stops crawling to rub his eyes. He is able to slow down the tears and begin crawling again. As he looks up, he realizes he can no longer see his dad.

“Daddy! Daddy, I had to stop because I couldn’t see, and I can’t find you. Wait for me Daddy, I’m scared.”

“What?” His father’s voice is frantic as he calls out to him, “I’m going to stop. I’m right by the steps, son. Please move as fast as you can, okay?” His father knows the fire is devouring their house quicker every second. The smell of the wood and carpet burning is making him feel sick to his stomach. If they don’t get out of here soon, they could both pass out from the smoke.

The crackle of the wood is growing louder and louder and his father stays put waiting to see Cade’s face before he begins moving again. He has turned himself around so that his feet are facing the front door. Smoke has clouded the entire house and Cade is pulling himself across the carpet as quickly as possible. His father’s face comes into view covered by a thick haze of smoke.

“Dad!” Cade rejoices and waves.

“Good job, son! Okay, I’m going to turn around and we’ll start moving back to the door. While I’m turning come up here and get beside me, so I don’t lose you again.” His father—though remaining cool and collected—is growing weary knowing that the delay to wait for Cade has potentially hindered their ability to make it out of the house. He begins turning himself around with his elbows and knees, feeling the burn of the carpet tearing off layers of skin. Cade has become exhausted from crawling and is moving slowly on the ground. The creaking of the wood is escalating until there is one final deafening crack.

Cade jolted upright in his bed as sweat rolled down his back. He sighed deeply while reaching to grab the inhaler off his nightstand. The wood headboard is cold against his back working to cool down his smoldering skin. His inhaler only has 15 remaining clicks before he will need to get a new one. The oxygen is relieving as it courses through his lungs to soothe his erratic breathing. This is the third time this week he has woken up like this. Always the same crack and feeling of heat against his skin. It’s coming up on the 13th anniversary of his father’s death and his mother’s disappearance. The events of the fire all those years ago keep him up at night and the pharmacy bill through the roof. After the stairwell crashed down on his dad, Cade’s memory blanks.

A knock on his bedroom door pulls him out of those dark memories. The door slowly creaks open and a plate with a muffin topped with a candle makes its way across the threshold. Miss Mamie, the sweet old lady who has taken him in for the last 10 years of his life, smiles so

wide her eyes almost crinkle shut. Cade blushes deeply.

"Miss Mamie, I told you we didn't need to do anything for my-," She shushes him and plops herself onto the end of his bed. The plate is thrust in his face as she winks at him.

"Oh honey, did you really think I was going to let today be a 'normal' day? It's your eighteenth birthday darlin', this is the very least I could do for you."

Mamie took Cade in three years after the events of the fire. Her son died in a car accident just before his eighth birthday and she has poured all her love for him into Cade. She first noticed him on her way to visit her son's grave. Cade was sitting outside the orphanage drawing on the sidewalk with chalk. A butterfly landed on his chalk flower and he began cackling. Mamie felt her soul light up with the sound her house had been deprived of for the last nineteen years. She spent her visit with Cash telling him all about the little blonde boy and his infectious smile as she placed flowers on his grave. Deep within her heart, she knew Cash wouldn't mind her bringing in another little boy. After a few long months and mounds of paperwork, she finally welcomed Cade into her home.

Cade laughs gently and peels the wrapper off the muffin as she begins singing the Birthday Song. Her voice is quiet and soothing as it echoes throughout the small room. She finishes with her signature jazz hands and he blows out the candle. He breaks off a piece of the muffin and places it in his mouth before passing the plate to Miss Mamie.

"So, when are you going to work today?" Pieces of blueberry muffin hang off the edge of his lips as he breaks Miss Mamie's number one rule.

"You're lucky it's your birthday, boy," she swats at his leg playfully and dabs her mouth with a napkin. "I'm actually not going in today. We have something we're going to do today for your big day." Mamie grows nervous as she reminds herself of the "gift" she has for Cade. The emotional turmoil she went through after being given the box all those years ago has snuck its way back as she pulled it out of her closet last night. She has kept it away from him, waiting until the right time but also fearing how it will affect him.

"Finish your muffin and get changed and meet me in the kitchen." Miss Mamie slowly stands up and pats Cade's head as she heads towards the door slowly pulling it shut. She makes her way slowly across the hall into the kitchen and pours herself a cup of coffee before sitting down at the old table. The wood is cold on her arms as she places them on the table before peeking into the box filled with so many nightmares. She shakes her head and pushes the box towards the other end of the table and rubs her wrinkled forehead. The coffee is bitter and cold on her

tongue and she scrunches her face up in response.

"I've never seen you shove aside a cup of coffee Miss Mamie; you must have really messed that pot up." Cade chuckles and grabs a banana off the table and sits down across from her, "What's in the box?" He begins opening the lid and is met with a slap to his hand. He quickly withdraws it and rubs over the crevices and scars across the top of his hand.

"Shoot, I'm sorry. Boy, you are just about as impatient as any man I've ever met. I've got to tell you a few things before you open it." Miss Mamie gathers herself, slightly stunned by the feeling of his burn scars against her palm. She's held that hand more times than she can count but the shock never goes away.

"Cade, this gift isn't particularly something you're going to be happy with. I'm sorry about that, but I've waited too long to let you see. It's not going to be easy for you to accept—and I'm not telling you that you have to—but you need to know. All those years ago when I first brought your sweet face home, the orphanage gave me this box. They told me to look through it and then make my decision. I knew long before I walked in there that day that I was gonna take you home, nothing they could tell or show me was going to change that. With that being said, honey, this shook me to my core. You are a strong boy and I know you are ready for this. I'm going to leave you alone to look through everything, but if you need me just yell, I'll be in my bedroom. I love you, sweet boy."

Mamie finishes up the speech that she lost sleep over trying to perfect. She stands up and kisses him on the head before grabbing her coffee cup and leaving the kitchen. Cade has started breathing heavily as he stares at the box. He racks his head for thoughts of what could be inside, but nothing stands out to him. He closes his eyes and breathes deeply before sliding the box closer to him. His hands are shaky as they work to remove the lid off the old shoebox.

He drops the lid immediately back onto the box after spotting the first item in the box. A polaroid image of him and his family from his first day of Kindergarten burns into his brain. His eyes sting as tears pool into them.

"Mamie! Mamie, what is this?"

Miss Mamie emerges from behind the wall and sees the box still shut, "Honey, I told you this wasn't going to be easy. I know it hurts, but I think it will be worth it. I'm going back to the room. This is something you should do alone."

She quickly moves into the room and shuts the door. Cade's confusion and pain only grow as he continues to stare at the box. He sits

with his head in his hand and works to control his breathing. Hot tears roll down his cheeks and drop onto the wood beneath him. He rubs his eyes harshly and lets out one huff of breath before snatching the lid off the box once again. The picture still lies on top of a folded-up piece of paper and a ring.

Cade grabs the photo and studies the image carefully. His floppy hair is covering his eyes and his mom and dad are standing proudly behind him. As he lets the image soak in, he notes all the ways he resembles his parents. The crinkles in the corner of his father's eyes matching his own and the red color of his hair and brown eyes put off the same glow as his mother's. He sits the polaroid down on the table and slides it away. Seeing his parents brings back feelings of comfort but also horror as the image of his father's body being crushed forces its way out.

He shakes his head and pulls out the silver ring lying at the bottom of the box. The ring is cold in his hand as he turns it over on its side. The inside of the ring has a small inscription, and he squints to read the words, "Forever and always," Cade whispers. He feels the groove of each letter before sliding it on his ring finger. The small size of his hands pales in comparison to his father's, evident by the space between his arm skin and the cold metal. He pulls it off and squeezes it tightly in his hand before setting it down on the picture.

The folded-up letter lays in the bottom of the box itching to be picked up. Cade peers over the box before grabbing the letter and sitting it in front of him. It is folded in threes and the edge of the paper is fraying on the side from where it was torn out of a notebook. The paper is rough against his hands as he unfolds the edges. He breathes deeply one final time before he begins reading the letter to himself.

Darling,

This world is cold and cruel. It promises things to the weak to give them hope and once the hope is burning brightly like a flame, they extinguish it. These things are hard to understand, but one day you will see what I mean, and maybe then you won't believe me to be a monster. What I am going to do is wrong and I know that. Everything I do though, I do for you. Your father and I have been struggling for quite some time. Anything I do is never good enough for him. Our life is not what you see. We spend more time fighting or giving the silent treatment than we do just having a civil conversation. It's not entirely his fault, his father was the same way.

He is going to leave me soon. I can feel it coming. Last week he hit me for the first time, and it won't be the last. The alcohol has become the only thing that can keep him happy, besides the mix of prostitutes he brings into our home while I'm gone. I have nothing outside of him.

No family, no friends, just you, my darling baby boy. But I won't take you with me. I can't. I am not that selfish. You deserve so much more than me and what I can give you. I know you don't understand, I don't expect you to until you are much older and have a family of your own. I promise you this is what's best.

Tonight, I am going to set our house on fire. Your father is going to take you to the neighbor's house for a sleepover while I run to the store. When I get back, and you are safe away from the house, I'm going to slip your father some sleeping medication so that the fire does not wake him. When everything is said and done, you will be the sole inheritor of everything your father and I have. It isn't much, but because of the tragedy, the state will take care of you. Everything for you will go so smoothly because of this.

I know it's hard to hear, and I'm sure you're feeling a storm of emotions, but I am not the bad guy here. I am doing you a favor. One day you will understand and even if you don't, I hope you can forgive me.

I love you forever and a day darling,
Mom

"Miss Mamie!" Cade yells urgently for her as he stands up from the table. Mamie enters the kitchen just in time to witness Cade falling quickly to the tile floor and landing with a thud.