

## After the Fire

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Your words about the fire didn't make much sense to me at that hour.

"Uh-h." I blinked at the digital wall clock. It glinted 5:40 a.m.

"There was a fire in the house." You repeated. "A fire."

I jolted upright and pressed the receiver to my ear.

"What happened?"

"It began in the powder room and spread. Faulty electric wiring." Your voice fought to reach me against the noises in the background – of engines rumbling, men shouting, a dog barking .

"How bad – I mean the damage?"

"Quite bad." You took a deep breath, like a diver before taking a plunge.

"Listen, I know you may not want to do it," you said, "and you don't have to if you don't want to do it, but could you come over?" That was the longest sentence you had spoken to me in years.

"Now?"

"Please."

"I'll try," I said, and put the receiver down.

I wanted to tell you that the house meant nothing to me. You meant nothing to me. Nothing meant anything to me. But my hands were already pulling on clothes. I dressed swiftly, grabbed my coat and car keys, stepped into the untrampled snow to clear the windshield, and drove away.

The street I had lived on till a year ago, rose to meet me the moment I turned the corner. Then I braked. It was as if I were watching a fire on the TV. Two fire trucks

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and a police car flashing red and blue lights parked on the street. The house was a dark silhouette against the smoke-grey sky. Pieces of broken glass icicles hanging from the smashed windows, electric wires dangling like tumbleweed and firemen running in and out of the gaping front door. One was spreading salt on the wet driveway. He looked up as I neared the driveway. "It's slippery," he cautioned me. "Watch your step." Rubbing my hands to ward off the chill, I edged my way to where some figures were huddled under the leafless maple. They detached themselves from the shadows and surrounded me as a herd surrounds a dying calf. "So sorry. So very sorry," they whispered. I breathed in the acrid smoke that clung to their clothes, their hair, and their hands.

Then your voice winged its way to me. "Ah, there she is!"

Slowly, I turned around. I didn't know how an estranged husband and wife acted when they met in front of their burnt home. "Thanks for coming," you said, relieving me from the necessity of thinking any further. Turning to the man by your side, you introduced him. "The fire chief. Uma, my... my..." you faltered. I wasn't your ex-wife – not legally yet – and I wasn't quite your wife either. We had been separated for a year.

"So sorry about the house," the fire chief rescued us from an awkward situation. Maybe he was familiar with cases like ours. Burnt out marriages. Burned down houses. I waited to feel a pang, a sense of loss. But nothing stirred inside me. No lump in the throat. No sorrow. No tears. Nothing.

"It was a beautiful house," the fire chief said slowly.

Was? I whipped around to look at the house again. The fire may have damaged it, but it hadn't destroyed it.

"Excuse me!" A long-limbed woman in jeans pushed her way past us, clicking her camera. I wondered if she was going to turn around and take a picture of you and me, a grim-faced couple standing in front of their burnt house – a parody of Woods' *American Gothic*.

The firemen had begun to remove the ladders, take off their helmets, and roll up the hose. The fire chief wiped his chin with a grimy fist and handed you his card. "It's all under control now. Call me if there's anything – be careful when you go in. There might be some steam trapped under the carpet."

"Can we go in?" You asked.

"Of course. The house is all yours."

I flinched at the unintended irony. I would have said something, something sharp, had Kathy, the next-door neighbour, not placed her hand on your shoulder and said softly, "Come now. You will stay with us. Patrick is getting your room ready."

She turned to me politely. "It's very cold out here. Please come with us."

I followed reluctantly.

"These faulty electric circuits can cause so much harm," Kathy mumbled. "Glad it wasn't any candles."

"I never burn candles," you said.

I checked an impulse to blurt out, “You did, once. Don’t you remember?” It was you who had introduced me to the bewitching aroma of American candles. “So what is it going to be this evening,” you would ask, when we were newly-weds. “Lilac? Vanilla? Cinnamon? Sea Breeze?” I would choose one. Every evening you lighted a new scent. Lying in the circle of your arms, I would inhale the aroma and with sleep-filled eyes watch the wax tears congeal. How could you have erased the fragrance of memory so casually?

Seating us in her family room filled with pictures of children and grandchildren, Kathy shuffled into the kitchen, filling the kettle, opening and shutting drawers and cabinets. Patrick, her husband, was already running the vacuum cleaner upstairs. Those were normal, everyday activities. Comforting and reassuring. We sat there without looking at each other, without saying a word till Kathy brought in a tray with tea, a bowl of nuts, and a couple of muffins. After hovering around for a while, she excused herself.

I looked at you, then. Really looked at you. At your face, at your deep-set eyes behind thick glasses, at your high forehead. The sharp jaw line had begun to sag a bit, I noticed, and you had put on some weight. I pushed the bowl of nuts towards you. You picked up a handful and started munching. Cocooned in our personal solitudes, we sat there – you staring at the wall, and I, trying to read the tea leaves in my tea mug till Patrick breezed in. I had always liked Patrick. Tall, sinewy, blue-eyed, patrician, he reminded me of my late father.

He held out a sweater and a pair of jeans to you. “Put these on. Man, you must be cold.”

I realised that you were still dressed in your crumpled pajamas over which you had thrown an overcoat. Still wearing slippers. No wonder your face was grey from the cold. Later, when you were dressed in Patrick’s clothes, you sat down with him to call the insurance company.

“I think I’ll go and see the house,” I said.

Without taking your eyes off the telephone directory, you said, “You shouldn’t go in alone.”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t speak, for anger spread inside me like red wine spilled on a white tablecloth. Alone, huh? You shouldn’t go in alone, you had said. As if you didn’t know that I was alone, that I had been alone even when we were living together. Not eating together, not sitting together, not going out together, not watching TV together, we had given up on the daily rituals of living that bind a husband and wife together. Now, you had the nerve to tell me not to go in alone. Ramming the angry volley of words down my throat, I snatched my coat draped on the back of a chair and stepped out into the dead snow.

Its guts spilled out, its eyes gouged, the house stood rooted like long-term grief. Along the driveway, mixed with snow were scattered half-burnt shirts, sweaters, coats, charred shoes, file folders, notebooks, books, and much more than my mind

could register. I had always feared sights of homes destroyed by floods or hurricanes on the TV. Had always wondered how people must feel about strangers gazing at their private lives scattered around. And now, it was a part of life – yours and mine – that had been tossed out on the driveway for every passerby to see, to feel sorry about. I swallowed my sorrow, just as I had suppressed my annoyance when the divorce lawyer had asked me to produce bank statements, letters, etc. “I don’t want my private life put on display,” I had told him. And he had smiled, as one smiles at a foolish child, saying, “In a divorce case, my dear, nothing remains private.”

I stomped into the barren backyard hoping to find birds singing in the trees, hopping on the grass, pecking at the feeders. There were no birds anywhere around, except for a lone pigeon watching me intently from Kathy’s rooftop. When we had been together, the cardinals, blue jays, finches, and chickadees had flocked to the feeders filled with birdseed and the birdbath filled with fresh water. The feeders didn’t seem to have been filled ever since I left. Caught in a whirl of memories, I stood rooted in the cold, snow-covered backyard, till your voice hauled me back. You were beckoning me from the broken kitchen window.

It seemed as if the kitchen were waiting for me to wipe the counters clean, to vacuum the soot carpeted floor, and to take charge. Memory swirled in again. “Something smells great,” you used to say, the moment you entered the house. Then burying your nose in my hair, you would chuckle. “My wife is a house of spices.”

And the girls would giggle. “Ma is a house of spices.”

Snipping away the skeins of memory, I walked with you to inspect the debris. The house looked as empty as it was when we had bought it. But then emptiness had given us a license to dream. Now it left me with a feeling of emptiness – as if there were no past, no future, only a scorched present, crowded with blackened, broken wall plates and figurines – all collected over the years, stuffed in suitcases, lugged in carry-ons from India, each emblematic of a certain moment, a certain memory, a certain emotion in time. Then I remembered something. “Can I ask for a favour?”

You looked at me.

“Please don’t inform my mother,” I said.

You drew in a sharp breath, as if I have said something preposterous. You had been a faithful accomplice in the bundle of lies I had been telling my mother, back home in India. She didn’t know we had separated. She didn’t know we were going to sell the house. She would never know about the fire.

Without waiting for your response, I made for the door.

“I’ll leave you a key under the doormat,” you told me as I struggled with the clasp of my seatbelt. You spoke softly, as if we were in a room with a patient. “You might want to retrieve some of your things from this wreck.”

“What’s there to retrieve?” I sputtered, stepping on the gas pedal. The car leaped forward.

I didn't take the day off, for work provided a refuge. I worked furiously, without telling anyone what had happened. When I returned home in the evening, there were several messages from the twins. You had informed them, of course. As usual, you had stolen a march on me. As usual, you had proven to our daughters that you were the conscientious parent. I called them, seeing their faces clearly. Big dark eyes filled with a baffled concern as they tried to comfort me with the same youthful buoyancy with which they had assured me that things were going to turn out fine between us when you and I had separated. If they were near me, I would have clung to them as they had clung to me when they were small and had woken up from a bad dream.

After I had hung up, I looked out of my apartment window on a cluster of pine trees feathered with snow that gleamed in the light of the new moon. I was filled with a longing for those years when the twins toddled in the snow and when you and I had pushed their plastic sledges. Images rose and fell like tiny villages nestling in the hollow of small valleys one sees while driving along a mountain road – one minute in clear sight, plummeting, in the next. I decided not to go back to the house. I ignored your messages left on my voice mail. Thoughts of what was gone would only hurt me. But a week later, I couldn't sit in my office selling mortgages to new homebuyers anymore. I took the afternoon off and drove to the house.

Picking up the key from under the doormat caked with soot, I unlocked the singed front door tacked with wooden planks. I was aware of Kathy peeping from behind a curtained window. She withdrew the moment I looked into her direction. She hadn't forgiven me for leaving you. When I had run into her at the grocery store a couple of times, she had passed by with a clipped hello. In a way it was better that way, for back in my hometown in India, a neighbour would have never let me slip by. She would have asked a hundred questions, cast doubts on your fidelity, whispered something about men being unfaithful, and even hinted at a woman in your life. With the help of a flashlight sitting at the bottom of the stairs, I staggered my way up, and into the blackened rooms with boarded windows. The pale circle of light fell on plaster hanging like the tattered shell of a firecracker. The girls' room was empty. You had boxed their stuff. I picked up a bottle of nail polish, a melted tube of lipstick, some cotton puffs and ribbons and placed them on the grime-covered dresser. I crept around like an intruder, watched by the shadows.

The master bedroom had been damaged badly. The heat must have reached there sooner than the other rooms because of the double-doors opening on the landing. Shards of glass stabbed the soles of my shoes as I moved around, taking in the horror of destruction in its entirety for the first time. The flash light swept into view a surrealistic scene – walls streaked with charcoal stripes of wet smoke, curtains singed and lying on the floor, a mirror charred and smudged with shadows, and plastic bottles on the dressing table bent double like partners bowing to each other before a dance. The picture frames on the walls were empty, as if the people

in them had walked out. I stumbled into the walk-in closet, tripping over clothes strewn on the floor. The flashlight fell from my hand. In the violet gloom, I huddled into a corner, pulled the clothes around me, and closed my eyes.

Where did we – I – go wrong? I asked myself. Was it my insistence of working? Or working long hours in the bank? Or asserting my independence? Or wanting to be like American women that made us go our different ways? Why didn't you shout? Smash dishes? Bang doors? Take me by the shoulders and rattle me like a rag doll? Why didn't I take your hand and ask you to sit down and talk? Open the windows to let the smoke out of the room? But all we did was to skirt around the widening gap, making polite formal remarks – cold and impersonal. We forgot that once we had recounted epics to each other. Now we were like two astronauts spinning in their different orbits in space. You started leaving messages on the message board in the kitchen. I did the same. One-way traffic it was. Just information. No response intended, none given.

*"I am going on a business trip. Will be back next week."*

*"Water heater is dead."*

*"Plumber will come at 4 p.m. today."*

*"Your dentist called. Appointment at six, next Monday."*

We wrote not a word more than was needed. That's how we lived, scribbling inanities, till one day, I could bear it not more. *"I am moving out,"* I wrote.

*"I can move out."*

*"No. I will."*

*"Okay. Take whatever you like."*

*"I want nothing. Thanks."* I had underscored the words with all the strength I could muster. I moved away. If you didn't have the sense to plead with me, to stop me, then that was it. Kathy and Patrick, who had been more like family than neighbours ever since we had moved next door to them, didn't ask any questions. I was glad I wasn't in India where I would have had to give a new explanation to everyone, and listen to each piece of advice that everyone would have given without a preamble. The break-up would have been a communal affair, therefore not easily broken. But here, in a strange land, there was no one to help us patch up our differences.

The girls didn't come home that Christmas. They decided to go away on a school trip to Mexico. That made things a little easier for all of us. I moved out quietly. You stayed away from home that day. Kathy and Patrick had looked at me from their porch, as I was getting into the car. If there was sadness in the old faces, I chose to ignore it. I was sure I was doing the right thing. I was convinced I could survive without you. And I did. I proved good at selling mortgage to people buying new homes. The bank was happy with my work. I had plaques on my office walls to prove that.

The sound of wind moaning in the burnt rafters brought me back. Somewhere, a door closed. I heard footsteps climbing the stairs, coming up, and coming closer. Who

was there? The house wasn't haunted. Had someone sneaked in to vandalise? I squeezed into a corner and waited. A woman holding a candle in her hand glided in. She placed the candle on top of the singed bureau. I crouched into the corner. Was she a burglar? I watched her pick up the candle, hold it high like the Statue of Liberty, then laugh. She began torching the curtains, the pile of clothes on the bed. I tried to strangle the scream that erupted from my throat. The woman swung around. In the light of the leaping flames I saw her face. It was my face I was looking at. High cheekbones, pointed chin, dark eyes, a gash near the right eyebrow, and dark hair pushed back behind the ears. I felt the floor slipping under me. I went plunging down a dark shaft.

“Uma...”

I opened my eyes to see you peering into my face. “You all right?”

I nodded. No words came out from my parched throat.

“What happened?” You asked.

I glanced above your shoulder, into the bedroom. It was dark. Empty. The curtain rods lay across the bed. “There was a...” I began, then stopped. “What're you doing here?”

“I was driving by and saw your car parked on the street.”

Liar. Kathy must have called you. She had seen me. She and Patrick were your allies. They kept a watch on the house for you.

“I'm glad I came,” you said. “You must have been overcome by the toxicity in the house. Let's get out.”

I didn't move. I couldn't. After a moment's hesitation, you too settled down among the rumpled clothes, near me. The circle of light from the flashlight you had placed on its back on the floor flooded the ceiling and the wires snaking out of what had been a light fixture. Despite the proximity of the closet, we were separated by miles of recrimination on my side and a stubborn silence on yours. Unable to bear the void anymore, I asked, “What happened?”

You said nothing, simply leaned against the wall, your eyes fixed on the pool of light on the ceiling.

“Why don't you say something?”

After a long pause, you cleared your throat. “There were things,” you said. “Small things that should have never been ignored.”

“So much destroyed,” I said.

“So much lost.”

“Wasn't your fault though,” I consoled you. “Faulty electric wiring has been known to cause many fires.”

“I didn't know. I should have been more thoughtful, careful...”

“You were.”

You crossed your arms across your chest. "... should've known that friction causes a spark and a spark can turn into a blaze. I didn't understand the fragility of..."

"Of?"

"Of a home. Walls collapse like dreams and love..."

I was no longer sure what we were talking about.

"One minute your life, your home is there around you, all safe and whole – and the next, it's gone," you whispered.

"It can be rebuilt."

"Can it?"

"Can't it?"

I waited for you to say something. The circle of light from the flashlight was growing feeble. I waited for you to say that we must leave before the battery died out, before the evening grew colder and darker, before it started snowing again. But you said nothing. And my eyes began to sting. I had never cried. Not even when you had your gall bladder removed. Not even when I was in labour. Not even when the girls had come down with chicken pox. Not even when I walked out on you. Not even when I was lonely to my hair roots.

But now something thawed inside me. I wrapped my arms around my knees and let out a sigh in splinters. You would have never known my tears had your fingers not brushed against my wet face.

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