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Ashes

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Ashes

Leslie Hancock

His eyes were the color of crystal clear water in a pond, untainted by moss or mud. The brightest of blues, similar to the June sky hovering above us. Birds twittered excitedly in oak trees. The blades of grass surrounding our tranquil bodies sighed with satisfaction, basking in the summer rays. Liquid yellow poured over our bodies, skin still damp from our dip in the sparkling creek.

“Do you think it’ll be different when summer’s over?”

His gaze was fixed on the few clouds that hung precariously in the sky, about to be dissolved by the blazing sun. Of course everything would change when summer was over. In a sense, these were our last few days as kids.

“No: We’ll still see each other,” I replied somberly, brushing fingertips along whispering grass.

“Yeah, but it’ll be different.”

He turned onto his side, focusing those orbs that were now more like midnight on me, absorbing my attention like a thirsty desert.

“You’ll be at college, and I’ll be stuck here in this little town.”

His fingers reached for my hand, skin soft and tempting. I watched, mesmerized, as he toyed with my palm. “I’ll call you every night. I promise.”

“It won’t be the same.”

He was right; he was oh so right. But I didn’t want him to be. His tone changed as he caught the look in my eye. “Let’s not worry about it now.” He stood, pulling me up with him. The grass lapped at my bare calves like kittens at milk. “We’re eighteen, its summer. We need to go out and live.”

“I’m pretty sure I’m breathing. And my heart’s beating.”

His grin was lopsided. Without warning, he scooped me into his arms. He kissed me, lips soft and inviting. Drowsy from the sultry afternoon, I laid my head against his shoulder, eyelids drooping for what seemed like only a moment. But when I heard his voice again, speaking my name, my eyes cracked open to peer in the harsh sunlight.

The deserted house looked back at us, windows staring like lifeless eyes, white exterior faded like the complexion of a corpse. The porch, wrapped tightly around the lower level, no longer looked inviting. The front door was like a mouth, waiting for some unfortunate soul to grace its threshold so they could be swallowed by the dark, musty innards. The grass, unattended to for a month or so, was unkempt and wild. It swayed toward us, as if attempting to draw us in.

“I don’t like it here anymore.”

Gently, he set me down on my own feet, my legs like jelly. Without explanation, he took a few daunting steps toward the abandoned building. “What are you doing?” I hissed. He continued up the path, not even sparing me a glance. I clawed at his arm, snatching air, and bounced on the balls of my feet quickly.

“Ryan, come back!!” He paid no mind, disappearing into the mouth as the house swallowed him whole.

I stood, fidgeting and shaking through the tedious moment, until I could bear it no longer. Ignoring the screaming protests echoing in my mind, I forced my legs to move, feet as heavy as anchors. Somehow, I avoided the weeds sprouting up from cracks in the cobblestone, and made it to the stairs. The tongue of the monstrous house. My hand trembled as I reached for the doorknob. The coolness of the metal seeped into my skin as I turned it with a quick jerk and pushed it open.

The floorboards groaned under my weight as I stepped into the gloom. Shadows penetrated the room, stretching across the timber surface. White sheets were draped over the ruined furniture left behind. It was all too quiet; where had he gone? Dust particles colored the air, caught in a ray of sunlight from the sooty window. There was a distinctive musk in the air that made it thick, and I felt as if I was suffocating in the memories of this place.

“Babe, come here!”

The sudden voice startled me, my adrenaline spiking, and I turned around to face the direction of his panicked voice. Something
within me – common sense, perhaps – prevented me from moving my feet. But he must be hurt, in trouble, something...

I forced one foot in front of the other until I stood in the doorway of the dusty room he had called from. Shadows were strewn over the unsound floorboards, littering the ground with pale sunlight. My breath stuck in my throat.

The room was empty.

I retreated from the house, standing amongst the weeds, alone. The house loomed overhead, windows gazing like giant eyes down at me, watching my despair. With an angry cry, I grasped for a rock and hurled it at the building. It bounced off the charred wall. The second thrown rock hit its mark, shattering the window on the upper floor.

That night had been a cold one. We stayed up late, talking on the phone, huddled under my blankets with a good book, and he, sprawled across his sheets, playing Grand Theft Auto with the sound turned down low. I was in the middle of complaining about cross country practice when he interrupted me quietly.

"I gotta go, I think my mom's up. I don't wanna get caught. I smell something burning."

We both laughed; his mother was terrible at cooking, and always burnt everything from cookies to steak. Neither of us questioned why she would have been up at midnight cooking something. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. We said our "I love you's" and "goodnight's. I slept fretfully that night, tossing and turning.

"I'd woken up to my little sister shaking me, babbling on about smoke and the news. Groggily, I sat up, rubbed my eyes and looked out the window – something I never do.

I would never forget that black smoke, billowing over the trees beside his house, tainting the air with an ominous onyx haze that choked me as if I was in the midst of it.

I'd run out the door. Sprinted there in bare feet and my pajamas. Why hadn't my parents woken me up? A policeman caught me before I could blow past the fire truck toward the flaming house.

"Jessica?"

Whipping my head around, I caught sight of my dad and his friend, Joe. They were both tall men; my dad sporting a thicker beard and thinning hair. "What are you doing here? Your mother is worried sick." He stepped forward and took my arm, pulling me up from the mud silently. We walked home.

After gently nudging me up the three stairs into our off-white chalet, my father turned to Joe. I heard Joe's words just before I shut the front door. "Wasn't that the Gibson's house? The one with the fire a few months ago?"

My father nodded grimly as I stumbled up the stairs, out of earshot now. "How come it didn't burn down?"

"The firemen got there before it spread," my father murmured, leaning on the porch railing.

"Did everyone get out okay?"

I sat on my bed, glancing out the window at the two men conversing, and then raised my eyes to the trees. No smoke. It was all just a bad dream. I smiled. I couldn't wait to see him tomorrow.

"Didn't their son die in his sleep of smoke inhalation?" Joe persisted.

"Yeah." My father's answer was quick and short; a hint Joe should have picked up on, but either the man was too interested or oblivious. I picked up my phone and dialed, holding it to my ear.

"What was his name?" Joe stared intently at my father.

"The number you are trying to reach has been disconnected," the dull female voice droned.

"... Ryan."