

Now Give Me That Fire
burn, burn, burn

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In 2018, your junior year of college, you spend the beginning of the fall semester watching images on social media of your home state drowning. Fortunately, your own home city is mostly unaffected by the floods, but it is only three hours away to Houston, Texas, which is submerged in water. Your boyfriend goes to school in Houston. You text him frantically, checking in. If he responds at all, his texts are short. He's probably just under a lot of stress, you tell yourself. People's houses are ruined. The big looping highways in the sky now barely peek above the brown muddy water. The videos that break your heart were of people on makeshift rafts rescuing abandoned dogs or other pets, the family members people left behind by people in their haste to save their own lives.

You think the floods were bad until a month or so later when the fires in California come. This is a relatively common occurrence on the West Coast, but this is first time you've experienced it. Until they come, the fires are an abstract concept to you. Something you realize is terrible but in a removed sort of way. Now you are realizing just how naive you were to the pervasive nature of the flames.

Your boyfriend doesn't check to make sure you're safe. You assume he isn't aware of the news. You text him about it. He writes back *Wow that sucks*. You feel like he isn't as concerned as he should be about you, but then you realize he, too, is probably naive about how bad the fires really are.

The only previous experience you have with wildfires is a foggy memory from your childhood. You're riding in the car down to Corpus with your parents when up ahead they spot a fire or maybe first smell it. Someone must have thrown a still-lit cigarette out a car window, catching the grass on fire. The fire is tall and orange, quickly growing in size. Your dad moves over to the left lane, while your mother pulls out her phone and dials 911 to send a fire truck over. Though the car is now in the farthest lane from the flames, when the car eventually drives past, you feel the heat licking at the right side of your body. It's similar to when you open a preheated oven and an overpowering burst of heat that, makes you choke a little.

The fires are not as close to you now as that highway fire when you were a child, but they are still everywhere. Fires to the north and south of you. California ablaze. Again. None of the fires are close enough to cause panic or require you to pack up and evacuate, but that could change any minute. Firefighters work tirelessly to contain an uncontrollable force, barely making a difference. We need rain.

The first morning of the fires, you wake up and walk to class. There is a scent of campfires in the crisp autumn air. It reminds you of being in Scouts as a child, learning to build fires during camping trips. You don't think anything of the smell until you're in class and you hear about the fires. The next time you step outside, the campfire smell has taken on a more sinister scent. You realize you aren't smelling campfires at all, but people's houses burning. Forests and the animals living there are burning. Everything is burning.

You wish Thanksgiving break was already here. You feel desperate to escape the smoke and take refuge far, far away. You're also beginning to realize something is up with your boyfriend. You convince yourself that seeing him will make everything better. It's just been a stressful year for everyone.

Every day, the smell gets worse. It burns your throat and eyes when you walk outside. Classes aren't cancelled, but the health center hands out face masks and you get emails from the school telling you to keep your windows shut. Outside it looks like the campus is covered in fog, but you know it's smoke. Dense and stinging. Inside the buildings isn't much better. This is Northern California. There is no need for air conditioning. To cool a room down, or to get some fresh air, you open a window. This option is no longer on the table. As the air outside grows less breathable, so does the air inside. It is stuffy and stale. You begin to worry about the oxygen depleting in your room.

Panicked, you try calling your boyfriend, but he doesn't pick up. You need someone to talk some sense into you, but he never calls you back or answers your texts. Your paranoia about the fires and him grows. You try to convince yourself things aren't so bad. So many people right now are so less fortunate than you.

You feel lucky that your home is not in California. Many of your peers walk around carrying the fear that their houses might go up in flames any minute. That their loved ones aren't safe. For some people, those fears are realized, and there is a collective sorrow and hush over the entire campus. Additionally, the pictures we're seeing taken from where the fires are being fought look like the pits of hell. The sky is completely black with smoke. The only light provided is from the ever-growing fires.

You feel like the world is ending. First floods then fire, and now your boyfriend breaking up with you. He calls you up all of a sudden. You answer so happy to hear his voice. You don't feel so happy after a few minutes. Two and a half years you made long-distance work, but now it's over. You aren't listening as he talks, instead you begin to piece things together in your mind. That's when you start yelling at him. He'd been cheating on you. He doesn't even try to make excuses. He just hangs up. You sit yourself down and cry big cleansing tears.

It's almost a full week of suffocating before the rains finally come. It pours while you're sleeping, so when you awake, the sky is clear blue again. You walk outside to take in big gulps of clean air. The news says the air is still far from breathable, but to you it smells and tastes so sweet and fresh. You walk around the still damp campus, marveling at how crisp and clean everything looks. You've all survived, but how long will this peace last? You don't linger on thoughts of the future too long, though. Instead, you soak up the beautiful present.