

February Burning

No one was really all that shocked that Colton stopped talking—it was understood that he'd have to deal with this somehow, and it didn't look as if it would involve much screaming or crying. Two months of silence—a silence so complete that even in the dead of night, when the world was completely still, the sounds of his nightmares would be nothing more than aborted whimpers. Puffs of air—air that would have reverberated against the stark hospital walls had they been born of sound—passed through his lips into the night. The street lamps cast their orange glow through a slit in the blinds, nearly slicing Colton's face clear in half. He watched the lights dim as dawn began to break, and wondered if today would feel any different from the days before.

Today was the day he went home.

Coming home wasn't all that different from what he'd been expecting. Colton knew that there wasn't going to be a special "Welcome home Colton!" surprise party huddled behind the brown leather couch, impatiently waiting for the moment they could all spring up out of that uncomfortable crouch and suffocate him with their goodwill. No, he knew his return home would be more of a tentative ("Well, looks like you made it out of there, huh?") kind of greeting, wrought with the type of sympathy you'd receive when your family no longer knew how to look you in the eye.

Colton knew the burn marks drawing patterns across his back, and the lashing prints across the left side of his face, would be enough to remind his family of how badly he'd messed up—of how much he'd lost. And as much as he'd like to look his mother square in the eye and say, "There's still hope, Mom. She can still wake up," Colton didn't think he believed it enough himself to find the words. So he kept quiet. His mother held her gaze, however, and Colton could feel it searing into the side of his skull, enveloping itself around his scars—her

personalized version of a comforting hug without the embrace, because Colton shirking away each time she reached to wrap her arms around him was enough notice that hugs would not be accepted here. He wanted to ask her to quit staring or to focus her gaze on the unmarred side of his face.

Colton opened his mouth to speak but a burning fist clenched itself tight around his throat and bells went off in his head. The pounding bells left stars of white behind his eyes and he knew he'd screwed his face up when he felt his mother lay a hand across the back of his neck – just as she would after a bad day at school, or simply in greeting. Her hand was cool and soft just as it always was and Colton was glad that at least some things had remained the same.

The house hadn't changed much, structurally. The foyer still opened up into the living room and Colton could still navigate his way around the couches and the coffee table. He could still find his way to the kitchen without knocking over his mother's favorite plant, or stepping on Huxley's tail—his sister's favorite cat. "*This could still be home,*" he thought as his mother sat him down at the kitchen table, peanut butter and nutella sandwich already waiting for him.

"Are you hungry honey?" Her movements were stuttering and cautious, as though Colton were a wounded animal poised for the defense rather than her son. "Your father's put your bags in your room already, so you can relax, tuck in if you're hungry. Are you hungry? Colton?"

Colton peered at his mother and wondered if this was the sort of homecoming she'd been hoping for. He took a bite of his sandwich and watched as his mother's expression calmed with the realization that although she'd have to deal with "a mute", ("*He's not a mute Charlotte. He's just in shock. That'll change once he's home, won't it Colt?*"), at least he wouldn't starve. She sat with him a while, watching to make sure he'd keep everything down, and that this wasn't a one-bite affair. Once she was satisfied she went about preparing dinner.

Colton continued eating, though to him the bread tasted of sandpaper, the peanut butter of cardboard, and the nutella of dirt. He rolled it all around in his mouth, hoping to produce enough saliva to force the ball of mush down his throat. He got it down but choked a bit, coughing as a small crumb of something fell down the wrong tube. His mother was at the ready with a full glass of water and a firm—but careful as she minded his scars—pat on the back. After swallowing down the entire glass, and undergoing a thorough once-over by his mother, Colton began to make his way up to his bedroom, only to be stopped again by her mid-step.

"Wait a second — Dr. Morris asked me to give this to you." She dug a thick white tube out of her purse and placed it in the palm of the hand she'd raised from Colton's side. "It's for the burns—for the scars."

Oh right, those. As if I'd almost forgotten.

"I can help you with your back if you like?" One last attempt to get him to talk before dinner, but Colton simply closed his fist around the tube and made

his way upstairs, unable to stop berating himself for being rude to his mother, and unable to stop telling himself that February had it worse.

His room hadn't been altered too greatly during his time in the hospital. The thin dividing wall between his room and February's managed to keep most of the damage on her side. The curtains had been replaced, along with the bedspread—everything in a pale grey-blue, to match his eyes most likely—his mother's doing. There was a new coat of paint covering the walls that was a deeper shade of blue, navy almost. That task would have been left to his father, as the walls were too long and too high for his mother's short stature to handle. Besides, chances were she had been at the hospital while all the renovations had been underway. She preferred to walk to and from intensive care rather than to oversee a few shelves being installed.

He didn't want to see February's room, not just yet. He wouldn't be able to see past the flames in his eyes—to see where Huxley would be spread out on her bed, waiting for her to come home—to wake up. But he needed to go to the bathroom and her room was on the way. Colton had been hoping that the door would be tightly shut, maybe even locked, but it stood ajar. It needed to if the smell of smoke, charred furniture, and fresh paint were ever going to find their way out. Colton cursed the masochist burrowing a home inside of his brain (maybe even his parents, just a bit, for leaving it open) as he glanced inside.

At first the normalcy of it struck him like an over thrown lacrosse ball to the face. A new set of furniture in such a deep mahogany that it was almost black—the more 'adult' set Feb had been begging for—stood in place of what had been lost. Her bed stood higher on its new frame and the floral sheets and pillows looked lush, fit for people one hundred times richer than his family. Her walls were painted in her favorite shade of maroon—deep and full, like vintage wine—and Colton's entire body tensed as he watched plumes of smoke billow up from the ground. Creeping tendrils wrapped themselves around his nostrils and Colton gasped, searching for breath. It wasn't until Huxley wrapped himself around Colton's ankle, mewling for attention, that the smoke cleared and Colton closed the door.

They'd let Colton see her before Dr. Morris cleared him for discharge. Neither his parents nor the doctor knew how he'd react, or if he really even wanted to see her that way. He'd made it about as far as the doorway.

Colton could see the tubes running in and out of his sister, chasing each other round and round till they met at the base of the machine keeping her alive. Her head was shaved where the surgeon had sewn the gash in her skull. Her face was pale and her eyelids were translucent blue. February's arms were covered by the blanket a nurse had brought in earlier, but Colton could see the burns weaving up her forearms as though they were unveiled and on display for all to see and gawk at. His stomach began to curl and his face and back felt white-hot, the patterns of scar tissue reminding him that he should have done better. He

should have kept her safe.

He walked out of the doorway. It wasn't until his father walked after him, laying a heavy hand—just this side of reassuring—on his shoulder, that Colton even realized he was shaking. “It's going to be alright Colt. Feb's going to pull through.” Colton shook harder. “Son... son? It's all right Colt... Jesus Christ, c'mon son, please snap out of it!”

It took a round of sedatives to get the shaking to stop.

Colton noticed the duffle bag placed neatly at the center of his bed; he stepped back into his room to unpack it, trip to the bathroom forgotten. As he went to put his few mostly threadbare, mostly worn, shirts and jeans in their rightful spots, he noticed all the new additions to his wardrobe. Most of his clothes hadn't made it through the fire, and those that did didn't make it through the firemen's hoses. He considered maybe looking through the new pieces of clothing, as any self-respecting sixteen year old would after realizing their mother had once again been delegated the task of dressing them, but an insistent buzzing heaved it's way into Colton's ear. It was coming from his desk, from a new cell phone (well new to him, it looked as though it might have belonged to his father before the new model came out) and as he approached he could see “HOME” flashing across the display.

“Colt? You there? It's Dad—just making sure your phone's on and ready. The guy at the store gave us a pretty hard time setting it up.... Can you hear me?” Colton could hear his mother puttering about in the background, her voice ringing through the receiver, “*Is he saying anything? Mark is he even on the phone? Maybe we should just go up there?*” He could hear the tell tale scratching of cotton against plastic as his father moved to hold his cell against his chest, while he pleaded for Charlotte to just give this a try.

“Hey why don't you come down and have dinner with us? And maybe after you can come with us to the hospital—try seeing February again?”

Colton hung up the phone.

Somewhere deep in the back of his mind, Colton knew they didn't blame him, and that February wouldn't—once she woke up. But that was difficult to remember when all he could see were flashes of his sister stuck under that damn bookshelf (it wasn't ever stable enough for all the stories she'd loaded it with), and the tear streaked frowns his parents had worn at his hospital bedside after his first skin graft.

It was even more difficult to see when his mother and father treated him with the careful paranoia often geared towards unbalanced war vets with gun collections. They did all they could not to mention the specifics of what had happened—at least not until February woke up, Colton guessed—though it's not as if Colton needed the reminder. He hadn't forgotten. Colton even saw their precaution possibly veering towards a point where his mother would end up steering him out of the kitchen if one of the stove's burners were on. He

didn't want it to have to come to that.

"Oh, honey!" his mother started, one hand clasped to the kitchen counter as the other lay across her heart, once her ear caught the cadence of Colton's breath. "Dinner's not quite ready yet, and your dad just went out to grab some dessert. Why don't you set the table hmm? ... Don't bother with the candles though, we don't need them at every meal after all." Her smile was as loving as it ever was, but Colton could see the sadness hanging in the corner, the fear.

The entire ordeal was exhausting—too exhausting to even drudge up words in explanation of his exhaustion—and Colton found himself setting four places instead of three.

"Colton..." His father looked at him, gaze saddened, and his mother sat, quietly encouraging Colton to do the same, but he moved to put the fourth plate back in its cupboard.

"No" his mother said "Leave it, it's alright. She's here in spirit." Colton found it funny that his mother would put it that way, as if Feb was actually gone. As if she'd caught his train of thought, her eyes widened and she reached quickly for his hand. "Oh no! I don't mean it like that. She's going to be fine, I just mean... having her plate here... it just feels more like she's late coming home from a friend's..."

"It's alright, Charlotte" his father interjected in that soothing tone Colton has heard him use countless times—especially on the women in their family, never the one to want to see them hurting. "We can talk about it you know, Colt... about the fire. It's alright."

From the moment he'd sat down Colton had felt stifled, the air in the dining room heavier than usual, but now it was as if someone had steadily been stuffing marshmallows down his throat for how sticky and congested it felt.

It was simpler for Colton to return to his room after dinner, trying hard as he went to look past his parents' faces, past the worry and disappointment there. He wanted to tell them that they were jumping to conclusions. He did want to see his sister, *just not like this*. He knew he needed to face her, to make sure for himself that she was recovering, but there were times, much like right now—right before fitful sleep claimed him, spread out over his duvet, instead of under or inside of it—where he would imagine standing over her, watching the respirator push her chest up and out, filling and refilling her lungs—clearing out all traces of smoke. He would say something—he couldn't decide what ("I'm sorry," felt like too little, and "Forgive me," felt like too much).

Her eyes would open and she'd take in his face—the scars marring the line of his left brow, nearly touching his eye, and the way they stretched all the way to his full bottom lip—and instead of recognition, or relief, her eyes would melt into something along the lines of hate. Colton couldn't take the chance of this being the sort of thought that turned into a premonition. He wanted to remember the way she looked up to him but still managed to be mature enough

to hang out in his room with him, even when he had friends over. He wanted to remember the way February would get the most curious look in her eyes whenever the woes of being thirteen settled themselves on her mind.

He wanted to forget that there was a chance February would never creep into his room after lights out to poke him in the side and ask, “Colt, why would Jimmy Brewer ask me to the spring dance if everyone knows he’s already seeing Molly Shea?” Colton wanted to forget that he’d have to make up an answer his mother wouldn’t punish him for later.

But most of all, he wanted to forget that he’s the one who left that Zippo out in the open.

On his second day home, Johnny came to see him. Colton knew that Johnny had been allowed visitation in the hospital a handful of times—the first being when both Colton and February were quarantined behind glass—for fluid replacement they’d said. No one had been allowed in the same room as either of them until the skin grafts had started. The surgeries hadn’t been very extensive—the burns were superficial, just barely crawling into the second degree. But Colton figured it must have seemed eerie to Johnny to have your skin replaced—to have what was once part of your thigh placed upon your back, face, arm. But as Colton watched Johnny walk into his home, a place that had once been so familiar now marred by the lingering stench of smoke (Colton realized his mother was doing her best to neutralize it, the increased number of *Glade Plug-Ins* lying around being any indication), Colton was glad the doctors had done it.

In right profile Colton knew he looked about the same. His hair was still cut in that way where it was buzzed in the back but longer and spiked up at the front. The strength he felt in his jaw hadn’t lessened, but his eyes seemed dull—a shade of blue he can’t remember having seen before. Colton knew Johnny would notice, that he’d ask about it, and in such a way that a nod of Colton’s head wouldn’t be enough. He’d try and get him to talk—maybe even joke about that time Colton face planted on the lacrosse field, too distracted by his cheering family to notice the other team’s attacker heading straight for him.

Colton, perched in place at the top stair, saw his parents greet Johnny as they normally did, with a firm handshake from his father, and a hug paired with a sweet “Hello Aleshenka” from his mother.

Johnny gave his usual grimace at hearing his first name, “Oh, c’mon Mrs. H, you know I hate that name!”

She raised her eyebrow; a laugh hidden in the corner of her mouth, “Why? It’s yours, isn’t it?”

Colton’s father laughed at the exchange, and let Jonny make his way up to see Colton. The creak on the first stair only lasted a second as Johnny paused, then sounded again as he turned back towards Colton’s parents.

“He’s... okay isn’t he? I mean, I know he’s not talking or anything but he’s

fine, right? Still the same kid I met in the sandbox?"

In the silence following Johnny's question Colton imagined his father had put an arm around his mother's shoulder—a comfort to both of them as he forced out an answer. "We're not so sure, Johnny. It's been... difficult for him."

Johnny, visibly steeling himself ("Okay. Okay.") climbed the rest of the way upstairs, and Colton rushed back to his room, unsure of whether he could handle being caught eavesdropping.

He sat on his bed, waiting for the door to creak open and for Johnny to poke his head in, doing his best to keep his left side out of sight—out of mind. "Hey man, can I come in?" Colton nodded, shifting forward to pull out his desk chair, a silent indication that he should have a seat. "Okay, so I know you're still not talking, and I'm not going to force you to. Besides, I'm used to it—doing most of the talking. I don't even get sent to detention anymore, but then again that could be due to you telling all our teachers I had a condition..."

As Johnny prattled on, Colton took in his face. It was as pale as ever, and unmarred. His dark hair was cropped short all around, the same buzz cut he'd been sporting since they were twelve. Johnny's eyes betrayed the comfortable posture he held, the nerves dancing behind his irises, and Colton looked away. He focused his gaze on Johnny's shirt, a baseball tee adorned with palm trees and a setting sun, the words "Welcome to Honolulu" emblazoned across the chest. It had been a fifteenth-birthday gift from Colton—a thrift-shop find—and the last time he had worn it Johnny handed Colton a gilded Zippo, offering a spare can of lighter fluid along with it.

"Hey remember that winter it snowed so bad we got like, a week of snow days? *The worst snowfall Long Island's ever seen*, my dad says. You remember right? We spent all week sledding and telling Feb we'd bury her in the snow if she didn't stop following us around. Man, I think we were—what, like eleven maybe? Your mom threatened to send us back inside if we didn't let her play along, so we had her make snowballs while we built that huge snowman. God, that thing was gigantic. I think I kept slipping, and knocking it over, so you made me trade places with Feb. I swear your mom has a picture somewhere of me sulking while you picked her up to stick the carrot-nose in. God that was great." Colton flinched when Johnny's voice broke towards the end and their hands mimicked one another's—clenched and writhing in their laps.

"I'm sorry man, I shouldn't have—" Colton reached out and wrapped his hands around Johnny's stilling them. His gaze held strong and locked on Johnny's and he hoped his friend would understand that this was not his fault—that he's not the one who filled the lighter and practically handed it off to February.

Johnny left a little while later, "Homework to be done, ya know," but not before panhandling his friend into an embrace. Colton was never the type to hug—he'd only ever hugged Feb and that was back when she was four and scraped her knee—but he let himself fall into it, if only for a moment, before

letting go and seeing Johnny down the steps.

Most days after school, February would go straight up to Colton's room, Huxley in tow, and work on her homework until he made it back from school. Once he got in she'd listen to him complain about how long the bus took (how Mom and Dad should just cave and get him a car already, which would work out for both of them since he could just swing by the Junior High...) and drift off for an hour or two. February knew he'd still be there when she woke up, hunched over his desk working on his Calculus homework, or fooling around on his laptop. But today she awoke to Colton sitting back in his chair, relaxed as he watched a movie on his laptop, flipping a golden lighter open and shut on his thigh, its flame a beacon in the evening dimmed room.

"Where'd ya get that?" At the sound of her voice Colton hit the pause button. As he turned to face her where she sat on his bed, there was a moment where the screen of his computer was right in February's sights. It was paused on a still of Colton's favorite character from that ghost hunting show, making a less than handsome face. She giggled to herself and Colton gave her a funny look. "Where'd I get what, kid?"

"The lighter, duh. Mom and Dad know you're gunning for lung cancer?" Colton scoffed and a smile cut across his face. "I don't smoke, you know that. Johnny gave it to me—late birthday gift."

"That's a pretty lame gift."

"Hey! I like it. Besides if Johnny were here you'd be singing a different tune. Don't think I don't know about your little crush."

February's face heated and shone scarlet, "*I do not* have a crush on Johnny! He smells like a sweaty jock strap!"

Colton chuckled as he got up to scruff a hand through February's sleep tousled hair—hair as chestnut brown as his own, "Of course Feb. I'm making pizza bagels, want one?"

"Two please. Hey, why don't you let me hold that lighter of yours—just 'till the parental units get in?"

"Not a chance, kiddo."

In retrospect, Colton should have known to put the gilded Zippo back into his pocket, instead of his desk drawer.

Long after Johnny had gone home and his parents to bed, Colton decided to attempt the same. His fitful sleep turned to a waking terror that had to be seen through to its end, as though his mind refused to leave him be in what was meant to be a pleasant afternoon.

In his mind's eye he could see February reaching into his desk drawer as he fuddled with the pre-heating oven. He watched as she tip toed across the hall to her room, Zippo like a secret held close to her chest. Filling in the blanks he missed, his unconscious offered up images of February sitting at her desk, testing out the lighter's potency on pieces of crumpled up paper—most likely

torn out diary entries about Johnny (Colton was on to her after all). He saw the panic that spread like wildfire in her eyes when she realized the paper burned a lot quicker than she thought, especially when it was in the same trash can as a half empty bottle of nail polish remover.

As Colton twisted in his sheets, February's face twisted in his mind, fire scorned and hysterical as she backed away from the growing flames—now tall enough to catch her curtains alight—right into the bookcase. Colton only remembered hearing it fall, but trapped within his mind, he saw the bookcase fall and heard the crack of February's skull—image moving much too slow for the sound—as it made contact with the shelf's edge.

The dream version of Colton never managed to get the bookcase lifted in time to save them both from the flames. Colton figured he should be thankful that wasn't actually the case.

Colton woke to a cool breeze dropping stealthily through his open window, gently lapping across his cheek, the way Huxley would whenever he missed February enough to pay Colton any mind. When his nightmare passed, his visit with Johnny had started replaying through his mind—enough to find itself woven into his dreams against a background of smoke. Colton, the only one choking on it. As he blinked, bleary and sleep confused, he couldn't help but realize that Johnny never mentioned his scars—not even to comment on how “badass” he probably thought they were—and Colton wondered if his attempts to remain in-profile actually worked. Chances were, Colton knew, that Johnny was just a better friend than he realized. Dawn slowly made its way across the sky, fighting what seemed to be a losing battle with the night. Not yet ready to face another sunrise, Colton huddled beneath his duvet—the near-black of his under-covers too dark to let him take refuge from the remaining twilight, but still too light to hurl him back into the night and all of its burning.

The phone his parents had given him began buzzing on the nightstand Colton had placed it on the day before, so wildly it almost fell to the floor. This time the display read “Dad” and the clock behind it read 3:02am. A rolling wave of dread settled itself deep within his gut, nearly forcing out the dinner he'd forced in. Colton tapped the screen's “answer” button, held the phone to his ear and waited for his father to realize the phone had stopped ringing.

“Colton, you there?”

Colton's breath stuttered—something that would have been an “*Oh God, is she-*” had his mouth been able to twist itself into the necessary shapes.

“I think it's time you come see your sister, Colt. I'm coming to pick you up. Your mother's here with me. We would have woken you... but it looked like you were finally getting some sleep.”

The dread in Colton's stomach hoisted its flag and claimed this new land as its own.

“She's been asking for you, Colt. She misses her big brother.”

The ride to the hospital made the place seem farther away than it actually was—the never ending line of trees and wild brush along the freeway almost maddening. Colton fidgeted in the passenger seat, and couldn't find it in himself to be upset with his parents for waiting this long to come get him, or for leaving him home in the first place. February had been awake for two hours before they'd called him—his parents much too nervous about this fragile bout of good fortune to risk accidentally knocking it off its stand. His father told him that they'd waited until Dr. Morris had checked February over and made sure everything was still functioning properly. February had a tough rehabilitation period ahead of her—her legs had grown weak from disuse, and the scars on her arm and head would take a great deal of getting used to. Colton, too, still needed to come in periodically—just until his grafts fully healed and his skin settled. And as much as Colton wanted to concentrate on his father's words, he couldn't stop his head from swimming.

To Colton these were nothing more than technicalities. February had finally come out of her coma, and even if she had come out of it hating him, at least she'd been given the chance to do just that. The realization that could actually happen didn't hit Colton until he stepped into the doorway of her room, nerves tickling his spine and coating his palms in a sheer sheen of sweat.

His mother noticed Colton's hesitation and reached out to him, tear-coated tissue still clutched in her hand. "It's okay. Come in, it's okay." Colton took a step into the room, grabbed his mother's hand, and as if he'd been pulled into February's orbit, found himself standing above his sister, looking at pale-blue eyes. Eyes so much like his own, but with that curious glint, which he hadn't seen in two months. He replaced his mother's hand with February's and jumped when her fingers tightened around his own, surprised she hadn't pulled away. The weight inside of him let up a bit.

"Colt?" Her voice was faint, quieter than he ever remembered it being. Her lips were slightly chapped and Colton thought that if she could manage after having had a tube stuck down her throat for two months, then so could he. Managing his forgiveness, however, seemed like a task only February might be capable of, given enough time.

"Hey kid." His voice was just as faint, dusty and rough from disuse, the vice grip his throat had upon his voice loosening.

"I missed you, doofus."

"Yeah, Feb, I missed you too... I'm so sor—"

"Hey Colt...?"

"Yeah, kid?"

"You didn't tell Johnny I've got a crush on him did you?"

Colton breathed a laugh as he reached to run a hand through February's hair.

"Wouldn't dream of it, Feb."