

The N Disease



b u r n i n g t h e s i c k n e s s

The fire roared upstairs in a low breath and the building cracked and popped at the seams. The heat dried my face and eyes as if I were leaning in too close to a campfire.

"911, what's your emergency?"

I screamed and cried into the phone and told the woman the address of the burning laundromat where my sister and I were barricaded inside.

"I understand. Please miss, stay on the line. A firetruck and ambulance are en route. Look around what can you-"

I coughed into the receiver and ripped the cord out of the wall. Fucking chumps.

I vaulted up on a drying machine and perched like a hawk. The hollow metal clanked thunderously like a dropped sheet of tin. I produced a cigarette, flicked my lighter and rolled my fingers slowly through the flame one by one before lighting my smoke.

"Nikki, I can't breathe." Firefly muffled her coughs with the over-sized sleeve of her army jacket. The expanding fire crackled from the second floor of the laundromat. We waited on the back wall opposite the barricade on the first floor. The

dark room flickered a faint red. Smoke seeped through the ceiling and down the narrow staircase on the far left side of the room. The air was still breathable and everything. She was being a fucking baby about it. A firetruck would wheel up to the door at any minute.

Firefly turned twelve at the end of summer and I'll turn sixteen at the end of winter. We're runaway girls from different cities and we met up a little over two years ago, more or less accidentally. She ran away because her home was a terrible place. I ran away because it seemed like a good time.

The room was a war zone. A stack of heavy laundry machines clogged the glass entrance and an overworked rickety hand truck sat off to the side. Chairs were strewn about and stray leafy drier sheets glided around on the floor, carried by some unfelt draft.

"Quit worryin and shit."

"I don't know what you're thinking, but it's a dumb idea," she said and cuffed her sleeve over her mouth again. "I just know."

"Shut up, you don't even know what it is yet. Just wait." I pushed up my hoodie sleeves.

"Are you sure?" She dropped her hands and sighed. Her worried face appeared golden and fluttering. The fire light danced around the lean smile lines on the corners of her mouth. I'd never noticed those lines before. It made her seem older. Her brownish blonde dreads and braids draped in her squinting eyes. She combed the ropey mess back and it fell freely again.

Ever since last year we dreaded one another's hair. It's sloppy and wild on both of us—probably even worse on my black

mop, but I don't check it much. It's the fault of her weird love of reggae. I don't get that shit...people all smiling like idiots, happy to be dicking around in the sand and patting on drums and whatever. I tried to explain that we're pasty bitches who have no rhythm, but once she got it in her head that she wanted dreads, she whined at me day and night until I gave in.

A giant gust of smoke puffed down into the room. The railing on the staircase ignited suddenly like a trick candle. I hopped down from the drier and stood between Firefly and the flames, peeking upstairs and breathing wafts of tarry blackness.

"How can you breathe?" Firefly said into her sleeve.

"Didn't anybody tell you?" I looked back at her over my shoulder. "I'm a motherfucking dragon." I blew the smoke into the air with a half smile and she stared at me with open mouthed admiration.

She shot an awed smile and then suddenly her face drooped and she teared up as if someone had socked her in the gut. She turned away and coughed. A rolled-up comic book was stashed in her back pocket, just barely visible under her heavy coat. I grinned like a jackal.

"I really think we need to go soon." Her wet lips quivered and she scrunched her brow.

"Are you still reading that shit?" I licked my teeth. Her eyes went wide.

"No! It's mine!"

I flicked my smoke onto the floor and reached for her back pocket and she pulled the book away from me and held it an arm's length behind her. I spun her around and snatched it from her hands. I held her back with one arm and flipped through the

pages with the other.

"Really? What the fuck do you see in this crap? It's going to rot that mouse brain even more than it is already."

"Just lemme have it! Don't tear it up, I haven't even finished it yet!" She flailed her arms.

"Didn't I give you a real book a couple days ago? Like one that's made up of words and shit?"

"Nikki, I can't read like you. It's boring! I bought that with my own money. Give it!"

"Your own money? So you're holding out on me?"

She looked away, struggling for an answer. She took a deep breath and raised her brow like she was about to say something but then she coughed. She held her hand over her mouth to stop herself, but she coughed again and again. I let her go and she collapsed. I reached down to touch her shoulder but I stopped short.

I set the comic in her lap. It really was her money. She was a much better pick pocket than me. Sometimes I just give her a hard time. I don't even know why I do it. I'm not somebody who apologizes, so each time I wrong her I strike another silent tally and promise myself that I'll be better to her--that I'll make it up to her next time.

She pocketed the book and looked up at me. Her chest spasmed as if she were a regurgitating bird. She swallowed, took a composed breath and then started another coughing fit. I held her, planting her face in the crook of my arm to shield her from the smoke.

Really though, her pained hacking had nothing to do with the smoke. The fits had been with her at least as long as I had.

They had always been bad, but had grown much worse over the last couple months. She was sleeping more than ever. Her normally tanned complexion had become pale and she shook with thick, full-body coughs that surfaced veins over her face and neck. Sometimes there was blood. I stole cough drops from a Rite Aid a couple of weeks ago, but those worthless fuckers didn't do shit for her. I ended up eating most of those delicious little cherry bastards myself.

Something upstairs collapsed and bright ashes rained down from the shaking ceiling. I climbed up onto the barricade and stared into the few-inch space between the machines and watched the street for the fire truck I knew had to come soon. A thin misty rain floated down outside.

All day a storm had been gathering over the city. In the morning it crept in from the sea. It was one of those rumbling gray days that smells of rain and even sometimes convinces you that it has rained already. Clouds as thick as snow drifts and as dark as night had been bulging on the horizon. Clouds that make you think of Armageddon. Throughout the day low thunder drummed in the distance.

The thin vapor drifted side to side and the wind carried swooping gusts of it seemingly back upward. A distant rain pattered slowly at first and came down in sudden concussions like falling shrapnel from some thumping explosion. I climbed back out.

"When do you think they'll be here?" Firefly said with desperate eyes.

"Really soon."

"What if they don't come?"

"It'll be fine. They'll come."

"But I don't want you to get hurt."

"It isn't about me," I scoffed at her.

"But..." Sirens echoed in the distance and she pursed her lips.

There are all sorts of sirens in the city. Different ones depending on where you are and in some cases what time it is. I like those drawn out ones that make it sound like there's an incoming bomb raid. I saw one of those sirens up close before. It's just a box with a handle. When you spin the handle the sound starts, slow at first then it picks up. I really never heard the spinning before I saw the thing but now the spinning is all I hear. The longer it drags on the more it makes me think of a bomb raid and the buildings all around me crumbling to ash. I'm not sure why that's a comforting thought. The city's fire trucks have pretty stupid sirens. Those ridiculous fuckers sound like retarded elephants huffing on giant kazoos.

Masked firemen stormed the building. They hurled the washers and driers out of the way with impressive speed.

"What if they find out you set the fire?" Firefly whispered and clenched her teeth.

I winked at her with the boldness of an astronaut. She grinned and I knew that because she believed in me, she had faith that everything would be okay. And it would be okay. They'd take her to the hospital and fix whatever was wrong with her. Then maybe I could get some sleep at night.

I held her close and then a fireman snatched her from my arms. Moments later another man lifted and cradled me. I instinctively threw my arms around his neck.

The man carrying Firefly turned her lengthways through the door and for a moment I looked her in the eye. It couldn't have been for very long but it seemed like the moment kept going like we hit just the right combination of events to glue the world in place. Heavy boots crunched through glass like dry bones. The dinged shininess of fire axes reflected like mirrors that made the room bigger within its dark prism void.

Firefly smiled at me. Her eyes were drowsy and resigned. It felt like I'd locked eyes with a stranger before a car crash. There was a fondness and sad longing in her wide pixie grin. Something about the look made me imagine her staring up as she was lowered into a deep black well. Her nearly closed eyes lingered on me until she was carried out of sight.

My fireman carried me outside. I suppose he became mine when he picked me up. The rain swooped around the bronze streetlights and bled down upon rubberized fire suits and the grim unshaven faces of men loitering on the fire truck. The men were smeared gray and they had lethargic expressions as though they had been doing this very thing every night for the last hundred years. They seemed more like a chain gang, telling inside jokes that were lost on me, forcing their cigarettes to burn in the rain as they cupped them one handed and held them low by their sides.

A police officer wearing a long raincoat took notes and glanced right at me. I faked a cough and looked away. I tilted my head back and closed my eyes in the cool showering rain.

"Where's my sister?" I said to the man carrying me. I swallowed the rain from my lips and it tasted like ash.

He lifted his mask like in some lame fucking romance novel.

Handsome fucker. I cleared my throat.

"Everybody leaves in an ambulance. Just a precaution. Everything will be fine." His voice was calm and smooth.

"Right."

The other fireman walked up holding something.

"Your friend dropped this. Didn't know if she'd want to keep it." He held out the comic book. It was wet but I put it under my hoodie anyway.

The ambulance drove away with the siren going and the lights spinning and everything. Supposedly Firefly was inside but it's one of those things that I had to take their word for. For all I knew it was filled with tires and soda cans.