

Aly Hughes

March 3, 2017

English 4760

### Fire in Paradise Valley

The summer dawn creeps above the Okanagan valley. The light starts cracking through my red curtains, making my room fill with a shade of maroon. My hands grab the sheets, curling my-self in a ball, and watching the day come into fruition. I am frustrated with myself, with my mind. I haven't slept, and my eyes burn from fatigue. During the night, thoughts of my possible future races through my brain, an end that may come in only thirty years: a death I cannot escape. I sit up seeing the new day shine, awaking me from my restless night. I am calm like Okanagan Lake at six am on a summer day. The blue water is like fine silk, moving gently through the slow breeze. Small animals swim on the surface: loons, geese, and ducks, all dive and hunt for fish before the crowds appear. Small fishing boats drift off shore, silent and aware. The day starts early for the Okanagan, the place I call home. A place of solitude and peace, where one can live with no regrets. But this paradise is not where I want to remain.

Darkness lingers this summer, bringing a force of reckoning. In the summer of 2010, the mountains to the west are covered with dancing flames. Trees – burnt - crack and fall from the pressure of the heat. Animals are forced from their homes. A black cloud hovers over Vernon in a hellish atmosphere, blocking out any source of sunlight. Black snow falls in the middle of July, creating a thin layer of ash. Most people have to

cover their mouths or risk getting sick. My throat becomes scratchy and sore, and I am forced to stay inside.

The rolling hills and mountains in the east are covered in green pine. They remind me of who I am: fresh, full of life, with years still possibly ahead. However, someone who I hold dear has been taken prisoner by the forest fire that attacks the western mountains. Scars of black soot draw on the mountain sides. Tall, thin needles stand in the dead field where the fire was put out. There is no life. No birds flying or singing their songs. The once active place is now a lifeless piece of land. I can no longer hold their hand without tears rolling down my cheeks. I can no longer speak the words "I love you" without a crack forming in my voice. They are alive, but like the dead forest, they aren't. They sit on the couch, with their thin body dying before my very eyes. The fire moves through their body, killing their mind. A soul trapped in a prison of a slow, burning fire. All I can do is watch and wait until the fire devours them completely.

This fire is a disease that has been destroying my mother's mind for decades, and I am angry at her because of it. Not because she was a horrible mother, but the opposite. She dedicated every hour to me, to make sure my life was as calm and peaceful as ever. In my early childhood days, I knew she wasn't like other mothers. Her body would do strange movements. Her toes and fingers would often twitch every few seconds like she was agitated. But this was the spark of the disease that runs through my family, the small flame appearing only to spread wildly in years to come. She took care of me the best she could. Even though her body betraying her, she made cheese and crackers for me after I came home from school. She did the laundry, putting every ounce of energy into making my clothes soft and warm - a mother's touch. She cooked,

like every mother, putting love into every meal, making the juicy taste explode in my mouth. She looked after me more than she did herself. Her smile would always be bright even when the fire took over inside of her.

The view from my house says it all. The mountains on the right, painted green with trees; and grassy fields opposite of me, a popular place for cows, coyotes, and deer to graze and hunt. Below, the busy town of Vernon goes about the day, regardless of the blaze to the west. Cars crowd the four lane highway, going in and out of the city. People walk on the sidewalks towards their destination downtown, covering their mouths with a cloth or mask. The reddish cloud hangs down, covering the city in a dry, unbearable heat. But at times, I look upon this city where my mother and I grew up, wondering if I could ever escape. Throughout the calmness of the landscape, I find a dark layer of fate. My mind wanders to: "If I leave, will I come back like my mother did?" And I get scared. The green forest is at risk for fires every summer like who I am to this curse. Once ablaze, it will take hold of the land and devour it like this curse has done to my mother.

During that summer, I spend time looking at old photographs from the summer of 1976 of my mother in her prime and compare them to myself. Her body is model like – thin, tall, but she's wearing thick rim glasses. Yellow bellbottom pants hug her legs tightly, showing her curves. The brown vest hangs from her shoulders, matching her Okanagan tan, and covering a paisley peach blouse. She is with her friends, partying, and her smile is large, bright, and showing the happiness during the moment of capture. A part of me wishes I could be like that, but other times, I don't. My body isn't like hers. The yellow bellbottom pants wouldn't be considered "cool" during 2010. The brown vest

doesn't match my pale skin tone, and the paisley peach blouse would never accept my figure. It's not my style. I am not my mother. I am myself. And I often deny I will be like her because of the disease.

Today, the fire across the lake is covered in tall, dead trees now, standing like a forest of needles. The tops of the black bark are sharp, piercing the air like it was skin. The air cannot avoid it, but lets it poke through the invisibility.

I've never been afraid of needles. Even today, I have tattoos etched into my skin. I've had IV drops, and blood taken from me on a monthly basis. I should not be afraid of needles. And yet I am. I am afraid of the needle poking into my skin like a dead tree. I am afraid to watch the red blood flow into the small, clear vile. I am afraid of the sour taste of vomit that may occur from the butterfly-like feeling in my stomach. I am afraid of the test results returning to me in a months' time to tell me if I am half way through my life span. My palms sweat every time I think about the long process for one, simple test. Every time I take a trip to the doctors, I go in telling them the issue I have but wanting to tell them something different. I want to shout to them about finding a cure for this disease. I want to hear the reinsurance in their voice, saying I probably don't have it. But they don't know I don't. Only in my genes will they find it. But I don't want them to draw something to determine my fate. I am a simple pine forest that is at risk of a blazing fire.

But now when I walk through the forest to the east, I become a part of it. The rough feeling of the bark against my hands and the sticky sap connecting with my skin is a reminder of what life is like. The crunching sound with every step echoes through the tall, natural sky scrapers. I will sit in the middle of these places, imagining the sweet

scent of these trees through my nose. The calm muscles of my body when I control the movements myself are like the trees growing in the soil. There is no burning fire rolling through, destroying the mind and body. There is control.

Reality settles in when I leave my comfort zone. The disease possibly hides itself in the darkness of my brain, waiting for the moment to strike its first symptom once I hit my early thirties. From there, I will watch from my prison as the fire destroys my mind slowly. My muscles will deteriorate like my mother's did. I will forget faces, names, and places. The only familiar place will be the paradise valley of my hometown, with the pine forest to the east now scarred from a massive fire. My mind will play tricks on me, showing me images of dreams, confusing me about what reality is. Chorea will take control of my body, making it dance. I will lose the ability to walk, talk, and, near the end, swallow. I will have to rely on others to dress me, feed me, and bath me. I will not be a child, but a woman in her fifties only wanting to escape this imprisonment. I will cry, laugh, smile, yell, but it will not be me who creates these actions. This disease lives and destroys the brain.

It's been two years since I last saw my mother. Seeing her was too much for me. Her body has probably broken down. Her hair is probably gray. She is bound to a wheelchair. She won't remember me. My memories of my mother are dated from when the curse took hold of her body. To take a time machine back to her prime years, watching her ski down steep slopes with a first-aid kit would be all I wish for. To see her smile, watching the wrinkles around her eyes form from the action would be all I wish to see. To taste her delicious food, savouring the soft texture of her cookies is all I crave. For this disease to leave is what I pray for. But it won't happen. The summer sun sets

behind the grassy hills of the Okanagan and I look towards the burnt forest across the silk lake. Memories of my mother ripple into my mind, as well as the fragility of her body due to the burning fire of Huntington's disease. Like the fire that has taken life from the forest that burned, this disease has taken my mother from me. But I will walk away from it, breathing in the summer air, and heading towards the mountains, covered with the fresh life of a green forest.

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 2017, my mother passes peacefully away into the morning dawn. Her spirit has been freed from this treacherous curse, and she will live on in my own heart. That night the stars are brighter, the air is warmer, and I can feel her through the passing wind. There will no longer be a fire burning anymore. It has been put out, leaving behind the memories of a beautiful life.