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A Lament for Plumas County

Becca May

It was the perfect house on the perfect property. It had a large, open kitchen with white cabinets and granite countertops suited for a woman who loved baking as much as my aunt Alicia. It also accommodated my uncle Brad's inherited disease—cerebral ataxia. It was a three-bedroom house. One of the bedrooms was utterly untouched since my childhood. Two twin-sized beds on mahogany bed frames, the bedsheets unchanged. Under one of the beds were all the notebooks I wrote in, pictures I painted, scrapbooks I made. Although I stopped sleeping in the twin beds when I moved to college, it was always my room.

Brad and Alicia never had children of their own. While Brad had a niece and a nephew on his side of the family, they infrequently visited and detached from Brad as his disease progressed. Brad and Alicia were my second set of parents. Their home was my home. Greenville is just forty-five minutes away from my dad's house, so I spent countless weekends, summer days, Thanksgivings, Christmases, and birthdays in their home in Greenville. On the weekends, Alicia and I would play house and sometimes we could get Uncle Brad to play school. Occasionally, if I was lucky enough, I got to decorate the Christmas tree with Alicia. The best parts were in the morning, though. Alicia would make coffee for Brad and hot chocolate for me. She would put a SpongeBob straw in my cup and a Patrick straw in Uncle Brad's cup. Together, we would drink our morning brews out of SpongeBob and Patrick straws while watching the morning news.

My dad built the house with his bare hands during my senior year of high school. He's the best contractor in both Lassen and Plumas Counties, and he knew that no one could build his sister's home better

than himself. The new house was still in Greenville, just a few miles from the old house where my most precious childhood memories were made. Often, I would visit my dad as he was building. To get there, I had to drive along drive Highway 147—a long, meandering road that follows the eastern shore of Lake Almanor. Both the lake and road sit just southeast of the 10,500-foot volcano, Mt. Lassen. Every time I drive this road, my childhood memories ambush me. Memories of learning how to swim, learning how to drive, eating deli sandwiches along the lake shore, fishing with my best friend, boating with my dad, summiting Mt. Lassen, hiking my first 20 miles of the Pacific Crest Trail consume my thoughts so intensely during this drive, I struggle forcing my conscious back to the present. When I reached my father following these long drives, he was always so excited to show me the progress of the house. At first it was the framing—giant wood blocks that were the skeleton of the home. Then, when the plywood was up, he showed me each room, pointing out where the laundry room and the living room were going to be. Even while incomplete, the unpainted plywood and 2x4 frames felt like home. By the end of 2017, the house was complete, Brad and Alicia had moved in, and the house was a forever home, until it wasn't.

It started on July 13, 2021. It burned for 103 days straight. It burned 963,309 acres of my life. Nine hundred sixty-three thousand three hundred nine acres of everything that I called home. It took more than half of the acreage of county that I was born and raised in. It took the lake, it took the town, it took the vegetation that surrounded the volcano. It took every little piece of bark, pine needles, pinecones, gas stations, pizza shops, trails, bushes, and plants that I considered home. The Dixie Fire—the fire that burned 963,309 acres for 103 days straight in Northern California—took from me the most sacred piece of my heart. It took my childhood. It scalded my memories. It incinerated my place of love, exploration, humility, dignity, birth, innocence, and maturation.

It began in the evening. The Plumas County Forest Service and CalFire were regularly posting on Facebook. Around six o'clock, the Forest Service posted that all remaining persons in Greenville needed to leave immediately. When Brad and Alicia left, they said they heard

propane tanks from the outskirts of town blowing up. I imagine it sounding like the firebombing we learned about in US History. Unknown, unsuspected, terrorizing bombs going off one by one. The Dixie Fire was claiming Greenville as its own. No less than an hour later, the Forest Service announced that all fire personnel were evacuating the Greenville area. Anyone with a glimmer of hope in their heart knew that Greenville was gone.

I don't know if I got more than two solid hours of sleep that night. I woke up a lot, but I specifically remember waking up at 1:32 in the morning. As I laid in my bed staring at the ceiling fan rotating again and again and again, all I could picture was the inside of my aunt's basil green home taken away in flames. Every decoration on the wall, the pictures of me growing up, the Christmas decorations, the photos, the same little twin bed I slept on, the SpongeBob straw that Uncle Brad and I would drink out of every morning, my aunt's sourdough bread, her vegetable garden, the books, and the dog toys. I watched the house burn at 1:32 in the morning. I witnessed the cremation of my family's life through the window. Date and time of death: August 5, 2021, 01:32 a.m.

The next morning, we didn't know if the house was really gone. We just knew that we'd be the one miracle. We knew we'd be the only house standing among the remnants of those that were not as lucky. This couldn't happen to us. Things like this didn't really happen to people, did they? We were so naïve, all in denial. I sent my dad a picture that I had of him and my aunt in their thirties. "In case everything is gone, just know I still have these." He called me sobbing. Later that day, a family friend stopped by to see if the house was still there. Nothing but the pump house remained.

Alicia didn't call me for two days. When she did, she would cry and then she wouldn't cry. The shock was still not gone, the reality had still not sunk in. Her sobs were the undigestible emotions she could not consume. Each moan a reminder of the hope lost to flame, each tear a memory ripped from the location it was taken at, each howl a request for her home back.

Today, that exact house, that exact highway, that exact lake, that exact volcano, are incinerated. The lake shore houses that my father built in the 1990s are nothing but black, toxic dust. The trees now stand as gravestones for the memories of thousands of people—black, scarred, lifeless. The town cannot be rebuilt. The trees cannot regrow in my lifetime. My childhood cannot be repaired to what it once was.

I thought that growing up was defined at a specific age. When I could vote at 18, I was a grown-up. I thought that when I drank my first legal drink, I was a grown-up. Or maybe I'd be a real grown-up when I could rent a car or when I was kicked off my parents' health insurance. I was wrong. I grew up the moment my aunt called me after the house burned. It was the first day of my life where I was forced to put myself aside and take care of my family—I had to take care of her. In that moment, my aunt, the woman I called for relationship issues, family drama, valuable conversations, a safe place to sleep, a warm meal, a delicious birthday cake, and life decisions was no longer the unbreakable hero that I had recognized. Since then, I have had to step up and return the love, kindness, and compassion Alicia and Brad had given me for 21 years. I try to call every other day. I send text messages filled with hopefulness. Sometimes I send photos just to get it off their mind.

Nobody prepares you for this. There is no exam, no due date, no warning or signal. Even now, while I have been living and breathing this feeling for months, I still don't know how to describe it. Maybe I do. Maybe I'm scared that I will be weak if I really talk about it in detail. Maybe I'm scared that no matter how much I write about it or how much I talk about it, nobody will care. The world moves on, and I am stuck. I am stuck in a home that no longer exists, and everyone else is just walking past. Some people walk past as I scream for help with a sympathetic look on their faces. Some turn their heads and pretend they didn't hear me. Even my own father. He's found his way out of our incinerated home and he's leaving, with or without me. I am begging him to stay and just wait a minute. Just wait a goddamn minute, Dad. But the new house has already been purchased. He gave me my time

to say goodbye to the only stable home I had for years, but after that, there is no returning. Right now, home sits as a pile of ash surrounded by half-burnt pine trees. In a matter of days, home will be a distant memory, a sad ending with a hopeful beginning. How do I ask people to understand this? How do I ask the world to stop just for me? How do I ask people to help me grieve?

It all feels draining. Every dinner, every text message, every email, every assignment. I just want it all to stop, for just one second. I want to gather my thoughts. I want to gather the ash in my hands. I want to sit in the forest and remember the way the wind felt against my ears. I want to hear the silent voice of the Plumas and Lassen National Forests. I want to gather with my family and cry. I want to say goodbye. I want it all to stop just for me. But it won't. I knew when I woke up this morning, and I'll know when I wake up tomorrow morning, that I have no choice but to get out of bed and start again. The world has never stopped for me, and it will not stop now. I'll find the small section of time to be sad. I've learned to grieve that way. I will write my frustrations in my exams. I will proclaim happiness to keep the atmosphere in the room fresh and lively. I have to move on with the world, even if I don't want to move with it. I will accept that there is no returning. My memories are now sensitive reminders of what has been stolen. Home will have to be where we make it.



Brad and Alicia's house days after my father completed it. Photo credit: Alicia Dalton.



The remnants of the house after the fire. Photo credit: Harry Rogers.



The photo I sent my father the morning after Greenville had burned. Photo credit: Becca May.



Greenville as it was burning on August 4, 2021. Photo credit: Stuart Palley.

Becca May is a geology and environmental studies undergraduate student at UND. She is passionate about environmental mitigation and solutions and hopes to one day pursue a career in public policy for watershed management. In her free time, she enjoys caring for her three birds, baking various desserts, and learning culturally diverse recipes. She is an avid outdoor enthusiast that has summited two 14ers and Mt. Lassen. Her next destination is Mt. Whitney.