

# Time

By Eliza Thwing

It was a normal middle school day. Me and my two friends were working on our Humanities project and cutting out some photos. Everyone was laughing and talking. The teachers were trying not to fall asleep. Everything was fine. We were all fine. That's when the fire alarm went off.

*Beep, beep, beep! Beep, beep, beep!*

The teachers looked at each other in confusion. It was clear: This wasn't a drill. I stood up being one of the last out, everyone was already running out the door. Once in the hall, you could smell and see thick black smoke. It felt like we were in the mists of a violent thunderstorm. Teachers were yelling instructions but all I could hear was the constant beeping of the alarms. Confusion and fear hitting me like a hammer.

I scrambled around looking for Elena and Graham in fear of losing my only friends, but with all the bodies it was all a blur. Inhaling smoke I could feel myself getting dizzy. I looked around desperately for help, everyone else was already down the stairs or heading for the doors. With no teacher in sight I looked around for a closer shelter. Red, yellow, and orange flames all around me. The fire had already made it upstairs.

I made a run for the stairs but my legs gave out, collapsing before I could make it. I tried to get back up. I needed to, if I were to survive. As I tried to get up, the floor collapsed under me. Everything went dark, everything was gone.

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I couldn't remember what happened. All I knew was I was hurt and scared. After that day Elena and Graham wouldn't leave my side. Everyone acted like I was a little kid. It worked because I felt like one. I never left my mother and friends' sides. Every other day I was in the hospital for another check up. I hated all the gained attention. And trauma.

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Two months later I stood outside the burnt down school. I felt the burn on my arm that still hadn't gone away. Elena put her arms around me. Tears filled my eyes, the thought of that day, that moment. I felt so helpless, lost all over again.

It felt like I was all alone in that hallway again. Trapped, alone. They said that I was found under the collapsed ceiling by a firefighter. That no one knew where I was. They thought me dead. *Gone, forever.*

Elena gave me a tight hug. "I'm sorry. We should have stayed together." Tears slowly fell down our cheeks. I was lost for words. I didn't know what to say, so I cried instead. I was a wreck ever since the fire. I cried all the time. I couldn't be in a hot room alone. I hadn't been in the kitchen for months! It was like I was trapped in time, never able to leave. No matter how much I tried.

The community gathered in front of the burned down building. It felt wrong for the sky to be a brilliant bright blue. It felt wrong for the birds to be singing and for people to be talking and laughing. It all felt so wrong.

Our head principal stood on the stage in front of a wooden pedestal. She had her light brown hair in a bun and wore a long stunning black dress. "If everyone could settle down now, we'll get started." My mom and sister came beside me. Mom put her arm around my shoulder and my sister held my hand.

"This fire was a tragedy. Students were injured... We weren't prepared." She implied softly into the microphone, looking at me. Her eyes felt soft and saddened. "The fire, caused by a student in our lab, burnt our school to the ground." She said as she looked over to her left, at the remains of the school. "This was a horrible mistake. And it won't be forgotten. We will rebuild and continue to learn from our mistakes. The student was talked to and dealt with." She said looking down at what must have been the kid and his family. They looked ashamed, abashed.

"We are grateful for how fast the first responder showed." She waved at the firefighters in the back with a worried face. "Even though this was... a horrible mistake we can't just cancel the future. We must look forward and rebuild, together, as a community." She said as she revealed an AI drawn photo of a new school.

The school wasn't the same. It clearly was going to be made for more of a modern generation. But even the parents seemed to like the newer look. What they didn't like was moving forward. "How do you expect us to just... forget, huh? People got hurt! And you want us to leave that behind?" A parent behind me angrily yelled.

The head principal looked down at him, understanding his anger. "I understand many don't want to brush off our shoulders and move on. But if we get stuck in this... time loop

of replaying this event in our head, we won't be able to move forward. We'll be time's prisoners."

Those words stuck with me. It was like she was explaining everything I had been thinking and feeling. Everyone else around me seemed to understand because they all nodded and whispered.

The principal then turned to the next big picture. This picture was of a hallway in the front of the school. "This is where we want to showcase the students who were injured, and the people who would like to help us move forward." This seemed to change the parents' mind behind me because when we got in line to help he was there too.

The rebuild was long and tiring. It took us two long years, making me a sophomore. When the front hall was finally done, it read:

How the people of West Town moved forward as *one*.