

Swetha Amit
Flames of the forest

From my room, I could smell the fumes. I checked the kitchen to see if Ma had left the stove on, as she sometimes did while hurrying to complete other chores. There wasn't anything on the stove. I stepped outside the front door. The air smelt as though someone was smoking a thousand cigarettes. I glanced up at the sky. It was hazy and orange like the Gods had lit a bonfire. And I always thought the sky was blue with specs of white floating clouds.

I went inside and heard Ma dusting the living room's bookshelf. I called out to her.

"The sky is orange," I cried.

She came running towards me and stared at the sky.

"Oh my God," she exclaimed.

I noticed how everything around us appeared orange. The trees lost their sheen, and the flowers lost their resplendence. The neighbors were gawking and taking photos of the surreal sky from their phones.

"Spillover effect of all those fires in Santa Cruz. So devastating." I heard one of them say.

I couldn't sense what time of the day it was. It felt like a perennial twilight zone.

I ventured indoors with Ma. She switched on the television and watched the news streaming in. Images of raging flames, people sobbing over their burnt homes, evacuation orders, reports about the devastating forest fires preying upon Northern California, and canceled flights. Ma punched the keys on the phone, trying to reach Pa.

"It keeps going to his voicemail," she bit her lip.

I glanced at the television again—images of furious flames devouring trees and forests.

Last summer, Pa took Ma and me to a state park with towering redwoods. It was a hot day, and I forgot my hat. I walked on the patches of green and brown, taking occasional breaks under the trees. They shielded me from the sun's harsh glare while I rested my tiny legs under them. Pa said the trees were old.

"How old?" I quipped.

He pointed to one tree and said it was over 1,000 years.

I stared at the tree with its trunks coiled to the ground. They reminded me of my dead grandma's wrinkled hands.

Later that afternoon, I threw up near the bushes. The hot chocolate I had on the drive up the winding roads of Santa Cruz mountains swirled in my stomach. I held on to one of the redwoods while the yellowish-white liquid gushed from my mouth. I took a short nap under the tree. I felt a sense of comfort, cradled amidst its sturdy trunks while it contin-

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ued fighting the sun's orange rays from harming my tender skin. During the drive home, I asked Pa if the tree would have felt offended. He shook his head and mentioned how nature would always protect pure souls in trouble.



I continued looking at the ghastly images on television—the canopy of trees burnt like charcoal. The green leaves evaporated into smoldering ash while the fury of the flames transcended limits. I felt a swirling feeling in my stomach. Why wasn't anyone there to protect the trees? What caused the fires? I wondered if there would be anything left when I returned to the State Park with Pa and Ma again.

Meanwhile, Ma's phone rang. Pa called to say his flight was canceled and would return after two days. When Ma handed me the phone, Pa asked if I was okay.

"The redwoods," I said, my stomach feeling squeamish again. My eyes stung with unshed tears.

There was silence on the other end. I could hear Pa's heavy breathing.

"We need the rain," he mumbled.

The images of the blazing orange continued to dominate the television screen. I looked outside at the sky again. It was still orange. All I could do was pray that the hazy orange sky would turn into puffs of grey clouds. I prayed that the grey clouds would send torrential rains to extinguish the flames and save my redwood trees.