

Smoke on Your Skin

By Ong Zhe Min

You're eight and daddy's got a pro-moe-sion. Daddy's happy and buys you ice cream. You couldn't be happier. Mommy isn't, though. She keeps asking about Daddy's "een-teh-greety". Daddy kisses her, and she's quiet. Mommy's crying but she says it's because she's so happy. Daddy buys barbeque that night, and the smoke smells good. Mommy pulls you aside later that night. She makes you promise to be honest. She makes you promise not to lie or cheat. You slide your pinkies together and promise. She kisses your forehead and tucks you in. You can smell the smoke on her skin.

You're eleven and you're almost at the bottom of your class. The teacher calls your mother and they talk. Later, when you smell and hear the frying of vegetables you pop your head out the door and you hear mommy talk to her friend on the phone.

"He asked me," she says, "If I want to see her do well in class. I said yes, of course. And he says, 'well, you have to persuade me'. It's disgusting! I will never give a cent I own to a man like that. I should call the principal on him! What do you mean the principal won't help? What do you mean it's harmless? You're doing it too? No, of course not. I won't... honesty isn't outdated. I'm sure she'll do fine on her own. I'll call you back later." You hear mommy put down the phone and you hear her swear.

The smell of meat frying interrupts your thoughts. You soon forget about that call.

You're thirteen and you're an outcast. You're at the bottom of your class in a new school, new class, new teacher, but with the same motives. Your classmates excel in what they do but you're scraping through. Your teacher has stopped asking you if you want "extra credit work".

You regret not accepting.

You're thirteen when you go home one day and the police are outside the door. They make way for you and all you hear is the crackle of static and the sound of a dog barking two houses over. All you hear is white noise.

They make way for you and you see mommy clutching her head, slumped over the table.

"I told him... I told him so..." She's muttering and you don't know if you should ask her why the police are here. You look for daddy. He's not here. The police are

asking mommy to go with them. Tears are streaming down her face and her face mirrors yours. You're clueless. Motionless.

You feel dread bubble at the bottom of your stomach when mommy returns without daddy. You feel it well up in your throat when she opens the wine chiller. It's coming in waves, the uneasiness, the numbing feeling at the back of your throat. You run and it's coming, the only way out is to ride it out. You flush the toilet and press your head against it.

Mommy doesn't make dinner that night. She pours a glass of wine and raises it high. She laughs and you're scared.

You're thirteen and you see your mother drunk for the first time.

You're thirteen and you're tucking your mother into bed, making sure she has a bucket near her head and water on the bedside table.

You kiss her goodnight. You can smell alcohol on her breath and smoke on her skin.

You're fourteen and your father has been charged with corruption. You're not going to see him for a long time.

You're fourteen and you hear your mother cry herself to sleep every night.

You're eighteen and working three jobs to stay afloat. You're a waitress in the morning and a convenience store cashier at night. You're a caterer on weekends at high class meetings and parties, handing food on trays to people who say, "I've never had anything set in front of me on a platter."

You're eighteen and you haven't heard from your father in two years. You're eighteen and your mother is in Alcoholics Anonymous.

You're eighteen and you know how money is involved in everything. It's in the way your co-worker gets a promotion that was meant for you. It's in the way your classmates in college get "extra notes" from your professor.

You were fourteen when you found out life wasn't fair. You were fifteen when you found it disgusting. Life isn't fair, and it will never be. Money runs deep and corruption even deeper. It's the only way to survive, but you'd die over a hundred times before you'd sink that low.

You're eighteen. You were eleven, twelve, thirteen. You're eighteen and when you go to bed, the sheets smell like smoke.

But your skin doesn't.

And that's enough.

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