

Smoke

I'm on my way home from work, and I pass the same strange building I always do. The building has an ornate exterior and arched windows. The white exterior is dusted with grey ash sunken into the pores. The stone pillars beside the long windows are cracked in some places and dented in others. The entrance lies further within, creating room for a pillar-bound patio. A structure like this isn't so common in Atlanta, most of the old, otherwise beautiful, architecture was burned down a long time ago, bulldozed to make room for a highway. That, or it was replaced with sterile, reflective glass office buildings for corporations like NCR or Bank of America.

I look around to see if anyone is around, and there is no one for once. I stop and try to peek into the windows, but they are blacked out from inside. The sidewalks are empty, with only apathetic drivers on the road.

I reach for the rusting doorknob and twist it, pushing the door lightly and allowing it to swing open. Empty except for old, moldy furniture. I really should leave, but I go in and close the door. A thick silence settles and sunlight illuminates the vast amounts of drifting dust. I turn to leave, but I hear a crescendo of voices erupt into laughter from above me. *I'll look at one more floor, just one.*

The stairs are old but timeless — a spiral of dark oak with detailed railing. I study the railing as I climb upwards. How strange. I keep on, but the stairs don't end. Logically, I know there must be a second floor soon, but it never comes. I stop to recollect myself. I really should just leave. I light a Marlboro light and keep going.

I'm smoking and the nicotine twists my stomach up nasty like the time I ate five cup-noodle ramen in a row. I stop and grab my stomach, kneeling over in pain and my vision

begins to spot. Once the feeling passes, I relight my cigarette and keep on forward. I hear the laughter, up above. I'm sure I'll find it.

I'm smoking. I'm smoking with an older woman with a mullet and yellow eyes who worked as a bodyguard for the Saudi prince, but she had to stop after she found out she was dying of liver disease. I'm smoking while I watch the peach sunset, knowing I'm sleeping under vinyl and metal that night. I'm smoking and hiding behind the dumpster, because they don't pay me enough, and ignoring the "Hello? Are y'all still open?" from a van full of people looking to eat greasy 'dinner' at midnight. I'm smoking old cigarettes I found in the mall parking lot instead of going to work because my dog died after getting hit by a car while I was away from home. I'm smoking several blocks away from the dorms because the people coming in and out, laughing and talking, would ruin my ritual. I'm smoking a cigarette with wet feet after my sister was taken to the psychiatric hospital after busting open a sprinkler that 'looked like a camera'.

I'm smoking my stepdad's old cigarette. I'm seven years old and crouching behind the bushes.

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There she was. A lone stick of tobacco, already half smoked. I hated it when my stepdad smoked and the car smelled bad. I hated it because it made me smell sometimes too.

I know where he keeps his red lighter. My eyes scatter everywhere, afraid that someone may be watching, and I'd get in trouble for having a thought crime. I go back indoors.

"You're either inside or outside, don't keep coming in and out." My mother's sweeping the living room.

"Okay, mama."

I took the lighter and rushed out. I swapped the cigarette and ran between large bushes and a wall. I watched the grey smoke dissipate and sway to the light breeze. I lulled for as long as possible, watched the orange embers produce ash until the stick ran short. I had to act quickly. Sunlight shot through tiny holes between the leaves as I pulled as much smoke as I could.

It was disgusting.

I coughed and heaved at the particles scratching against the walls of my lungs and throat. The filth was cemented to the inside of my chest even after gulping down hose water. Later that summer, I had my second cigarette after I decided to get baptized to try to hear from God.

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I'm smoking and I realize what a fool I am. There is no laughter, and if there is, it doesn't want to be found. I turn back around, throwing the cigarette behind me. I peek through the front windows to see if anyone would see me leave. I hastily exit, and walk away as if I had been on my path all along. As I turn the block, I see a bellow of smoke rising up into the sky. Up, up, and forming into grey clouds. Smoke always tries to trick me, I think. It always tries to be something it's not.