

Smokes on the Water

Written by Catherine McCulloch

The silence is tense as we approach the dingy gas station surrounded by nothing but a few scraggly bushes and a rusty water tower. The glaring sun highlights the grime and dead bugs inside the crooked sign. Gravel crunches under my flip-flops as I hop out of Sam's truck. I follow him and my cousin, Rick, towards the gas station door, treading silently in their shadows. Inside, despite the air-conditioning, my hair clings to the back of my neck. Rick dashes for the slushie machine humming in the back while Sam saunters behind him. With an unsettling groan, the machine begins spitting out red and blue and white into a jumbo cup as Rick watches with wide eyes and twitching fingers. Sam, on the other hand, doesn't seem to care. His eyes flick around the store, searching for something less juvenile, something more forbidden. I trail up and down the aisles, past the layers upon layers of plastic-encased chips, candy, chocolate. But my hunt for a snack is cut short by a tug on my ponytail and Sam's impatient huff. The cashier checks out the slushie and a pack of gum. Rick jangles the bit of change left in his pocket with one hand and slurps from the dripping cup of slush in his other hand. The rickety bell above the door dings a goodbye.

Outside, the heat has turned the air into honey. I grow slower and stickier as we trudge back across the gravel parking lot in silence. The truck sputters to life and the sudden volume of the radio makes the frame of the car vibrate until it settles. Sam always drives like this; his music is distractingly loud and his foot presses a little too readily against the gas pedal. Now, he fiddles with something I can't see in his pocket, cranks open the window and slings his tanned arm out of it. If I crane my neck, I can just make out a cigarette dangling between his fingers, dangerously close to slipping from his grasp. I gasp. Would he actually have stolen cigarettes as a minor? My doubts are erased as the wind carries his rank smell and acrid smoke back into my face.

“What are you looking at?” he sneers around his cigarette, startling me. I look to Rick, hoping he's the victim of Sam's sudden foul mood. But he merely slurps away at his slushie. My wide eyes meet Sam's narrowed ones in the rearview mirror.

“Pardon?” I stutter, feigning confidence.

“You were staring,” Sam grumbles, his eyes finally returning to the bumpy road ahead of us. “You got a problem?”

This taunting question brings me back to our argument from earlier, much like the ones we've been having since I arrived at my cousin's house three days before, much like the one we are about to have now. Our group chemistry from when we were kids has fizzled out; Sam has hardened like his father and suddenly everything I do is out of place to him.

“If you got nothing to say, then you better close that dumb mouth of yours.” Blood creeps up my neck and face, an ugly, red tattoo of anger and shame.

“What's the matter? There's no need to get all emotional,” Rick teases, snickering. When Sam doesn't laugh along, Rick nudges him in the ribs, seeking approval, but Sam only takes another lazy drag from his cigarette.

“I'm not emotional,” I spit, trying to shift my hair to cover the red blotches on my skin. “I didn't even say anything.”

Sam scoffs. “You didn't need to. I can see you judging me, all prim and proper. You're just like my mother, up on your high horse, pretending that I'm rotten because of my preferences.”

Despite the years, I can still picture Sam's mother, my cousin's sweet neighbour, who had made us sandwiches after a long day of playing. A brutal divorce forced her from the home. She was devastated her son refused to leave with her. It is no secret Sam's father let his son fall into some bad habits since then, habits that have gotten him into trouble on numerous occasions.

“I haven't said a word about any of the illegal activities you partake in,” I start, fingers trembling, raising my voice over the blaring music. “But maybe if you thought about something other than yourself for once, you'd realize that *your preferences* are the reasons why you can't get a job like all the other kids our age.”

I suck in a breath. Regret pinches the inside of my chest as I watch Sam process my words. Rick's slurping stops. All I can hear is my blood pounding around my body.

Sam's eyes are like angry pits when he spins around to look me dead in the face. The smoke from his breath tastes bitter. “*What did you just say to me?*”

My mouth opens to say a response I haven't yet thought of, but I'm cut off by screaming. Sam's face is gone. All I can see through the windshield is the bridge we're about to strike and the dark water beyond. The impact throws me against my seat. We're flying, spinning in the summer air, hurtling towards the water below. I brace myself and the car plunges through the surface. Immediately, cold curls around my toes and ankles, stealing my flip-flops from my feet. Panic makes my head spin. My fingers fumble with my seatbelt buckle for too long until it releases. They find themselves at the door handle, pulling and pushing until it snaps off, but the door won't budge. Water and wet leaves slosh around my waist and make my movements sluggish. Blood smears the window where I punch it, but the glass holds, and soon the water level rises and washes the blood away. I gulp in my last breath of air as the water climbs up my neck and swallows my head.

The sudden silence is deafening. Through the darkness, I can see Rick floating with his arms raised, motionless, anchored only by his seatbelt. My chest tightens. Sam yanks on his seatbelt but it seems to tighten with each thrash. Behind him, his window is open. I push against my seat towards

it, reaching for the murky green beyond. I pass through easily and begin to swim with the last of my strength and hope towards the light above me. I jerk back when my leg is caught. Fingernails tear through the bare flesh of my leg, pulling me back down into the darkness. Through a sea of bubbles, I can see Sam's wild eyes, begging me to help him. I reach down to grab his hand. I twist his fingers back as hard as I can and kick and kick and kick until his hands are gone and I am alone. My lungs are fire in my chest. I flail my limbs, pushing myself towards the light ahead of me, faster and faster and faster. Finally, noise and air flood into me. Gasping, I blink until the water is gone from my eyes. All around me, people are yelling, waving their arms frantically, but I can't make out what they're saying. I look down as the last few pockets of air break the surface next to me. Through the ink black water I can see Sam's wild eyes as he sinks, alone, helpless, to the bottom. His cigarettes bob lifelessly around me.

Many large hands drag me towards land. I tell my rescuers that I tried to help. I tell them Sam pushed me towards the surface to save me. At the funeral, I tell them how much the world will miss those two kind, brave boys. The raw claw marks on my leg sting with every word.