

What She Remembers

What she remembers is the carpet against her skin. With worn, woven fibres that shifted shades when she stroked her hand against it. It was an off white. Stippled with spots of stains that couldn't be cleaned off. She loved lying on it, with her bare soles pressed into the fabric, the material rubbing in between her toes as she wiggled them, and it'd tickle ever so slightly. Her hair would billow out from her head with her cheek pressed against the carpet. The tangled locks like tentacles, reaching and splayed out, snagging on what it could. There were the windows to her left. Large, wall sized windows, the balcony door creaky and stubborn and stuck no matter how hard she pulled. Light filtered through the glass. Glass smudged with fingerprints and smears and water spots that had been overlooked or deemed unimportant. She loved to watch the dust motes dance in the sunbeams. Like little angels trapped within.

Sometimes she'd listen to her parents in the other room. Her mother's voice, grating and screechy, broken up by her father's baritone. His voice smooth and comforting like the hot chocolate he'd make for her sometimes. The ones out of the blue crinkly packets. But she mostly blocked out their voices and instead hummed or sang quietly to herself. She pretended not to have heard anything when they came out. There was her mother, with her shifty eyes and twitching hands, her father's paw-like hands around her shoulders. Sickeningly floral, her mother's perfume wafted over to her and she switched to breathing out of her mouth. Though she imagined she could taste the smell, bitter and musty at the back of her tongue. Then they'd have lunch. No breakfast. Breakfast consisted of the lone smell of burnt coffee and stale silence. She loved the mornings, with the quiet and the birds, even with the skyscrapers towering outside and the spanning highways. But she usually hid under her covers and waited.

Lunch would be fairly simple. Macaroni, noodles, anything quick and instant. Sandwiches. Spread thickly with peanut butter. Fried rice. It rarely would be enough for her and she'd sneak into the kitchen and scavenge for whatever biscuit boxes they had in the cupboards. She'd cry, at times, when the family was seated at the cramped table, her mother across from her, staring with that scrutinizing look of hers. Then the jabs would come. Subtle at first. Then a barrage, calling her a pig, commenting condescendingly on how much she swallowed, on how much pudge she had. She learned to cork the tears and willed the anger down into the pits of her stomach where it smouldered but was never put out. Her father would say something to her mother- in low tones, but that would make her shut up.

Then she'd run into the bathroom and locked herself in there and forced a finger down her throat. The puke would burn as it came out, and she was careful not to splatter any vomit anywhere but the toilet bowl. Under the sink was that white square. A little dusty, but working fine, a digital scale she came to hate. She'd take it out of the

shadows and stifle back the tears when she read the numbers. Then she'd nudge it back and rinse the taste of bile out of her mouth.

That was near the time of her eighth birthday.

There was no party, because there was no one to invite. So she sat in her room and ate cake though she thought it was too sweet and she ate too much. So much that she felt sick, but she kept it in, and later that night she cried herself to sleep. Her head on the pillow with images of bright banners and smiling faces swimming in her mind. The tears were salty and stung at her cracked lips.

Her mother and father disappeared more and more after that. They didn't tell her where to, or what they were doing. She came to love their absences more and more.

She'd go running everyday, rain or shine, running through the blisters and the chafes and the searing cramps. She ran until her skin flushed red from her face to her fingers and she'd heave and gag whenever she stopped. She willed herself to slim down, to shrink, so that she could blend even more into the shadows, or maybe so they'd love her. Though eating made her feel full and warm, she cut down on it immensely and spent the time sprinting distances and biting her lips until the taste of blood was in her mouth.

It wasn't a problem. Her parents barely looked at her anymore. At mealtimes, they'd talk softly to each other as she picked at her food. Where had they gone?

She pictured early summers of repainted playgrounds and the smell of hot rubber. The slide, scalding in the full glare of the sun. Her father and mother watching her, laughing with her, wiping the sweat from her after she'd run in circles and swung around the monkey bars. She laughed even as the bars aggravated blisters. And her legs over her father's shoulders, as he carried her, her mother walking happily beside them. She recalled how tall she felt. How she felt as if she could reach the sky. That dazzling, brilliant blue. She'd point out the clouds, shouting how they looked to her, and her parents would laugh at her creative quips.

Now all she had were her books. That hadn't changed. From stories that made her fear the dark, to stories that made her laugh until her belly ached. During the lazy days, when she was a touch drowsy, she'd dream up her own characters and situations. Monsters that she tamed. Time travelling. Mystical futures, kingdoms, and royalty. She loved dreaming and her imagination rewarded her for it. She drew the princesses she designed. Damsels not in distress, but damsels in shining armour that fed the princes to the dragons. She read and she absorbed and she wondered if anyone would ever love her. She wondered if she'd ever love herself.

The years passed by and her family seemed to fade. Her mother would cry frequently, and her father would isolate himself in his study and give half-hearted and distracted answers.

She'd take off her shirt and stare at her protruding spine in the mirror. The vertebrae curled beneath the skin of her curved back. Her forearms so bony that she could easily encircle two fingers around them.

They talked less and less. She wasn't stupid, she knew something had changed, and that something was wrong. Since a long time ago. How no one had laughed in their

home for a long time. How tears had replaced words. How when, and if she approached her mother, for her mother never acknowledged her, she'd be met with a vacant stare. One not unfriendly, but one that wasn't warm either. Sometimes she'd hear the wails and shattered glass upon the floor. Her mother would be trembling, staring at the shards that littered the floor. Soon the tinkle of breaking porcelain and glass shifted to the thud of plastic.

They started taking her along. After school, she watched the groups of girls talk amongst themselves and leave together, and she envied them. All she had to go to was the hospital. With its sterile halls and cheery nurses and the unmistakable smell.

One afternoon, she arrived home and was met with her mother standing by the door. There was a puzzling expression on her face- hostility and suspicion.

Who are you? her mother asked, in a shaky voice.

She ran to her room in tears and the last thing she saw was her father with his arms around her mother.

She learned that she could've been an elder sister, but her baby brother hadn't made it past birth.

She wondered if her parents could love that boy like they couldn't love her.

She began to understand the walls of pain and bitterness behind her mother's falling tears.

She was an orphan.

Though her parents were still breathing.

She had lost them long before her mother had forgotten what year it was. Long before she struggled to eat, to survive. Long before she felt as though the ground shook when she walked. It began when the tumour grew, and that was when her mother died, and all that remained was a shell.

Parents were filing in, ready to collect their kids. Class was over. The toddlers were running around in excitement, calling out for their mothers and fathers and recounted the events of the day to them. One mother had pulled up a chair at her desk and they'd talked, the minute hand of the clock inching around bit by bit.

"Are you ever going to have kids?" the mother asked, a sweet smile on her face, when their conversation had reached that point. "I can tell you love kids."

"I do love kids," she said, "and that's why I'll never have any."