

Dying Glow

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I sit with my *khanoom joon*, my mother's grandmother. I am five years old and I still believe that everyone can be saved. She is eighty-three and hasn't believed in salvation in a long time. I like to think that we're both right.

A cigarette is held between her red, puckered lips and nicotine smoke laces the air between us. She holds her cigarette between two pale fingers and takes a long drag. She looks like my mother, with her high cheekbones jutting like knives. Her skin looks papery thin, like someone crumpled it into a ball and spent the next thirty years trying to smooth it out.

Her golden hair is curled into ringlets and pinned in a twist on top of her head. She smells like stale coffee and too-sweet flowers and she is beautiful. I can tell even now, her eyes sunk into their sockets and her teeth yellowed with every bitter drag of smoke. She is beautiful.

The cigarette hangs lazily from her swollen joints, one leg stretched in front of her as she leans against the living room wall. Her eyes are lined with kohl and are sleepy-lidded. She stares at me through her lashes and her eyes are so blue it burns. If you look too closely you'll be nothing but ash.

It's clear she's perfected the stare. I stare back.

'You know, smoking is bad for you.' My voice is small, and I let out a little cough from the smoke. There is silence, followed by a throaty cackle. She throws her head back and laughs before descending into a fit of coughing.

For the first time I hear her raspy voice, like two stones grating against each other. 'Well I hope it is.' Her red lips slash against her face like a wound, stretched in a smile.

'My Maman says that you'll die if you keep smoking.' I narrow my eyes at her. I don't know why I say this. I think I want her to feel bad.

She arches a thin, drawn eyebrow at me and smirks. 'She always did worry too much, your mother. You will soon learn, girl, that when someone sets their sights on dying it is very hard to change their mind.'

I don't say anything. I let the silence wind between us as I crack open pumpkin seeds with my teeth while my *khanoom joon* coaxes her next cigarette to life with the dying glow of her last.

The afternoon sun fades into twilight and the shadows lengthen on the hand-woven carpet. I don't know how long it takes for her breathing to stop and for the hot red tip to burn out.