

A Foreign Toxin

Mom was crying in my room again. I can hear it from the other end of the hallway. Her's is on the other side of the house, grand and ignored.

The noxious voice inside my head tells me not to get closer, to run while I can. To run like Dad did, like Apollo did.

I tossed that day's mail onto what used to be the dining table but had long since become a catch-all for abandoned projects and neglected trinkets. When one falls into my path, I step over it and all the others, continuing my way.

I drag my feet against the brittle carpet and scream internally. I was already so tired from school, I hadn't had lunch, and dinner wasn't going to make itself. I just wanted to come back to the house, change into comfy clothes, and relax, if only for a few hours. She was supposed to be at work, why was she here?

Mom's sobbing grows louder. I stopped in front of the door, unwilling to take the last step needed to breach the perimeter.

"Oh, Yuchen?" Mom's voice trembles and cracks, as if she wasn't expecting me to come home at this exact time.

Liar. Every single day, at the same time, the same routine. The same draining tears and conversation.

Instead of voicing my mutinous thoughts, I cross the threshold of my room, settle my bag on the floor, and gently sit on my bed. Even before she speaks, I have placed an invisible respirator against my face, a poncho over my skin; protection against what is to come.

She snuffles and lets out a pitiful smile, “Sorry sweetie, sometimes I just can’t help thinking of how old you’re getting. Two years and you’ll be off to college, just like your brother.” She strokes my frayed pillow, as if recalling fond memories of days long gone. I watch as she unravels a seam and mentally set a reminder to fix the soon to be hole.

I ignore how she doesn’t say his name, like a forbidden curse that could damn a person just by whispering it.

When I don’t say anything to soothe her, she starts to tear up again, poison dripping from her eyes. A small pang of misery shoots through me at the sight. The foreign toxin has made its presence known.

Was I a terrible daughter? A terrible person for wanting to leave so badly?

Mom had already been abandoned by dad, who ran away long ago and never returned. Then Apollo graduated high-school and bailed. Went no contact with no way to get in touch for three months. He came home once, and the entire affair had turned into a screaming match that still rang in the back of my skull.

I was it, the last one here. I wanted to leave, to find freedom wherever I could go. But I couldn’t leave her, not like that. She still felt too new to the community to go out and make friends.

New? What a pathetic excuse, five years isn’t new, she had time, now she has excuses.

I push the cruelty from my mind and thread my fingers through her hair, the same way dad used to do when I had a headache that just wouldn’t go away. I couldn’t leave her behind like they did, without a thought of the consequences that followed behind them.

If I left, she would wither away, alone in a house that is too big and too empty for a single person.

She starts up again, only this time she spits venom out as she does. This is familiar to me. This toxic thing she drapes herself in, pressing it against her wounds and sewing it along her arms like tattoos that were meant for infection and rot. She hisses and bites at her wounds, as if they are attackers worthy of the destruction she can bring. Except she attacks herself, at her misery, or her crushed dreams. At the things that she is stuck with because of the failure of others to help her.

“I can’t keep doing this,” She whispers, guilt wrapping around my throat as heavy as chains, “You’re a child, I shouldn’t be talking to you about this anyway. How could you even understand?”

It is manipulation. A trap that dangles my insecurities above me and tells me to jump and jump high.

Her infectious misery spreads beneath my skin. I listen, as I have always done. I am ashamed to say I don’t know how to stop that poison from infecting me. Her burdens are now mine to bear, to carry and support till my legs go out with the rest of my strength.

Hollow platitudes drip from my mouth, “It’s okay, mom.”

- I like that you trust me enough to talk to me like an adult. I’m glad I can be someone you can talk to about these things. -

-

-You always tell me how mature I am for my age. Besides, you don’t have anyone else to talk to -

My reassurances fall flat from my lips. But she soaks them up, like sweet honey to sooth her aching soul, seemingly glad that I don’t think she was a horrible person just for daring to exist.

And she wasn't horrible, not really. She was a mass of trauma and pain she hadn't - *wouldn't* get over. She just needed a "*little help*" now and then to get through. And it wasn't like she could trust a therapist, she wasn't crazy after all. Nor could she take medicine, because only drug addicts did that kind of thing. She was an adult; she knew how to handle herself.

Instead, she just gives it to the person least equipped to take care of it for her.

I continue humming and stroking her hair, waiting for her to fall asleep like she always does, so that I can start dinner, maybe start the laundry. A list of chores filters through my mind. Her room might need to be cleaned, depending on whether she got angry and trashed her room before coming to mine.

Except she doesn't fall asleep.

She wasn't looking to drown in her poison alone today. No, she needed company, so that she wouldn't be alone. The self-made cancer needed to be shared. And who better to share it with than her doting daughter.

When she finally looked at me, it was with eyes so clear and lucid that I couldn't help but freeze. She didn't look like that unless she was poised to wield a venom so deadly, it would leave lasting marks on her target.

I had seen them on Dad, even as he left for the final time, his weary look as she reared up to spit once more in his face, even as he slammed the door closed.

I saw the marks on my brother, Apollo. Saw how stood in front of the mirror, clawing and picking at the scars our mother's words left behind. Watched as they ate away at him over time.

When they were still here, I never became a target. Or maybe because I was as much of an afterthought as I was a nuisance.

Now? Now I was the only target in sight, and I was trapped by her weight against me.

She opened her mouth, and I knew, even as the words stumbled over themselves to escape, that this was a strong venom, aged to perfection and ready to be inflicted upon the world.

“I never wanted you,” she admits, so casually that she might as well have been mentioning the weather. “Keeping you was a punishment I gave myself for thinking I could ever be happy. A reminder of everything I’ve done wrong.”

The respirator cracks and noxious spores flood in.

She cries to herself and exhausts herself into falling asleep.

I mechanically maneuver myself off the bed, sink to the floor and grab the packed suitcase that has been hidden under it since Apollo first left.

I whisper my father’s address repeatedly, trying to drown out the agonized screams originating from my heart.

I close the door to my room and head to the front door, a taxi already called to pick me up.

I can’t stop moving, there would be no one to save me from this moment, this revelation. I was on my own, as I had always been. I can see that now; I could never be blind to it again.

She never wanted me. Just a punishment.

I cling to this. A new truth that felt like a tragedy on my lips, a confession meant for those dead, swallowed as it follows behind.

Truly mom never disappoints, this new poison was debilitating, the effects left me numb and reeling.

The drive is a blur of dissociation and tears.

My eye catches the stuffed full mailbox as I pound against the door. The harsh light coming from the window slices into the creeping night. My throat tightens. I knock faster. The cracked respirator goes down.

He answers. He clings to his door like it is the only thing keeping him up and his eyes reflect mine.

They were filled with the noxious liquid my mother poured into him. There is a red-watery quality to him and he smells liquor. His new poison, chosen against my mother's. Perhaps softer and more comforting.

I've pulled myself from her snake pit, but I am poised to fall back in at any moment. The only thing keeping me from falling was him.

He drops me without remorse.

"I can't take care of you and myself at the same time," he tells me as he drives me back to the venomous hold. "I don't need your mother coming back in my life either. I refuse to do that again."

Can't.

Can't.

Can't?

Won't.

He won't love us, won't take us in, won't take responsibility for the thing he created.

He drops me off outside the driveway and speeds away without checking to see if I make it inside.

I turned and ran again. I refuse to go back to that house, so full of negativity, it chokes the air from the lungs. I would live on the streets, roam the world until I found a place to call my own. I was going to be free.

I was finally going to be free.

I was gone for a week.

Mom screamed at me for leaving her alone, for abandoning her to solitude for the rest of her life. Then wept and I soothed her, guilt crept in, an old record on repeat. The cycle begins anew.

There is poison in my blood. It flows thinly through my veins, colored more like my mother's venom than my own. It is my mother's poison, but it changes and thickens every day, looking closer to mine. One day, it will be. Like a slime, it oozes itself into new parts of me, waiting for openings to sneak further past my defenses. It will infect me as it has my brother, as it has my father. I will drown in it until it is all I know.

There is no escape, no antidote that can heal me. I am drenched in acidic hate that eats through my defenses and flesh. It burrows its way into my heart and makes a home.

I had tried to escape it and ended up back where I started.

If I stayed, I was going to die, the same way Mom was. By a slow agonizing death that wasn't. A kind that poisoned the breath and stopped the victim from even realizing they had been killed at all.

I was going to die the same hollow death as my brother, clawing myself apart till there was nothing left. I was going to be addicted to it, like my father.

Worst of all; I was going to be killed and kill others, a perfect reflection of my mother.

There is poison in my blood.

It isn't as foreign as I thought.