

ICE

I tighten the tourniquet. It takes longer than last time for my veins to swell. I can feel adrenaline trickle through my body—it's been waiting for this ritual. I hold the syringe over the crook of my elbow, my pinpricked skin reminding me of constellations in the night sky.

My hand shakes, feeling the weight of my decision; tremors of anticipation, fear and disgust. The diminutive prick of the needle is a welcome, yet condemning experience. I drop the syringe to the floor, hearing a soft clatter as the liquid pulses through my veins. 'Better than sex,' someone once told me. It felt like it was at first. I'm not so sure anymore.

Usually I smoke it, but lately I've preferred injecting. It comes on fast, but not fast enough. The high and my shame can never be separated, like a parasitic relationship, they are mutually inclusive. *Thank god*, I think, as I'm finally taken over. I slip into oblivion, away from self-depreciation, to the hypnotising lullaby my mind creates.

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He was always such a good boy, really. I know sometimes he got a bit down and that he didn't eat well—just take-away garbage. That's why he looked and acted the way he did. He began to lose weight. His cheek bones stuck out, his lips were dry, cracked and scabby and he took on the appearance of a malnourished child, his once proportional features too large for his shrunken face. He always had lovely eyes, though; a deep hazel with flecks of orange and gold. But I suppose, being his mother, I would think that anyway.

The apartment he rented was bloody awful. Always a pig-sty, with week old pizza boxes left to become breeding grounds for bacteria wherever the owner decided to dump

them—usually nowhere in the vicinity of a bin. Behind the musky smell of unhygienic males and rotten food, was always some other strange aroma. It was unfamiliar and caused me to worry. He didn't let me come inside very often; to his apartment or his life.

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A dreamy smile spreads across my face. I feel my lips split in a couple of places, and let my grin broaden—I'm immune to pain now. I lean forward in my chair, rubbing my eyes; it's taking too long for me to regain focus. I feel a soft vibration through the floor, creeping up my legs, seeping into my bones. The walls of my apartment are shaking. I squeeze my eyes shut, rubbing them harder this time. The vibrations are stronger, the walls are still shaking. I panic. It's an earthquake! I jump out of my chair and run, but before I can get to the door I trip and the floor engulfs me, tuning soft as I sink into the quicksand.

What's happening? In some distant, functioning part of my mind, I know that this high feels different, but the intensity of that thought is muted by my lack of self-preservation. I struggle with the quicksand, but my attempts at freedom are futile; each movement sucks me in further. I become inundated by thick mucus.

It's all in your head, man, just some weird shit you got, ride it out and enjoy the freedom, the irrepressible, yet distant shred of sanity tells me. I sink deeper. The pressure is crippling. I can't breathe. *It's all in your head.* I'm drowning.

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I'm on my way to see him now actually. It's a bit of a drive, about an hour. It makes me so sad that he ended up the way he did. He was always so successful—top grades in school, graduated from uni and had a stable job. He had a lovely sports car that he took me out in a

couple of times. I used to joke that he'd had his mid-life crisis about twenty years premature. But he was on good money, and boys will be boys.

I never really knew what ended up happening to it. I suppose he sold it, like the rest of his belongings. That was about the time when I began to notice his depression. It was hard for me to accept, I mean, he had a great job, was living in a nice place, earning a decent income, he even had a girlfriend—so why was he so unhappy? I tried to intervene, tried to help him and do what a mother's supposed to do. But he was adamant in his refusal to accept my support.

It hurt me so much to see him spiral down, everything becoming too much for him. I stayed as strong as I could. But he just continued to shut me out. My life changed then. I felt like my son had died. It's a curious thing how whatever happens in your child's life, impacts exactly the same on your own.

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My feet hit solid ground. It takes a second for me to locate the rasping, sucking sound I can hear, until I realise it's me, gasping for air. I scramble to my feet, instinct driving me to run. Alive, out of breath, but free I run. It doesn't matter where, as long as it's away. I rip open my door—the sound of the rusty hinges sets my teeth on edge—and burst out into the hallway. I can feel my heart pounding, a forceful *du-dum, du-dum, du-dum* that sounds so fast, throbbing in my ears. I should keep running... I feel a rising sense of paranoia.

Someone set me up with the quicksand.

But before momentum can carry me far, colours close in on me. Patterns of reds, greens, yellows and blues lift me off the ground. I don't know how, I don't question, I only accept. I drift towards a door down the hall. A face is imprinted in the wood; it makes me

laugh and tells me to climb through it. My inhibitions left me long ago, so I obey without second thought, reaching for the enticing handle. It's unlocked. The colours follow me in, letting me drift like a half-deflated helium balloon. I see a lounge. Three small people are sitting on it, watching TV. Children. I join them. Whatever they are watching is amazing. My jaw drops as I sink onto the lounge, boneless, beside them, absorbed in this television experience. Their wails don't worry me. I'm not going to hurt them.

The colour of the room fills with a blinding red and a reverberating *crash* dulls all of my senses. In slow motion, I crumble. Piece by piece I fall to the floor. I see a woman standing above me, holding a frying pan. I laugh. She hit me, but it doesn't hurt. I'm granted a fleeting rationalisation, and realise that I deserved it. Another rational thought: *Thank god I didn't get angry*. Because when I'm angry, I'm unstoppable. And bad things happen.

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I forgot to mention that his dad walked out on us about three years ago. It was abrupt, and they were very close. He was already depressed at this point, but his dad's upheaval caused an exponential increase in his unhappiness. My ex-husband was having an affair—of course, isn't that always the way? He sat my son and I down, gave me the divorce papers, all signed, and explained that he didn't love me anymore and there was no reason to stay now that our child had grown up. I was too shocked to say anything. I just sat and stared, confused, unbelieving, undeserving.

He'd already packed a suitcase. I remember hearing the fight between my son and him. I remember the screaming, the throwing, the accusatory tones and the punches that sent him out the door. But I can't remember a word said between them.

Ever since my ex-husband left, he's made no attempt to contact either of us. I declined my son's offer to move back in with me—he'd only moved out six months earlier and had just renewed his lease. I was devastated, but didn't want my sadness to hold him back. Retrospectively, I wish I'd said yes. Hindsight really is a bitch. My house was too full of memories, so he didn't visit often. Instead, I went to him, but he'd already begun shutting everyone out. Our melancholy seemed to be in constant equilibrium; our lack of passion, infectious. I hate myself for not being stronger. I emancipated from that mind-set, sadly, my son did not. He had already turned to something else to escape his depression.

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I leave her apartment, walking back out to the hallway and toward the staircase. I begin descending, one by one, two by two, three by three. Do I dare four by four?

Yes.

Of course I'm overconfident. My ankle rolls and I collapse, crashing down the staircase in a cartwheel of flailing limbs. The noise of the fall is loud but I don't feel any pain, nothing can hurt me today. The bubbles cushioned my fall, too. *Bubbles?*

I stand on shaking legs, blinking, as hundreds of tiny bubbles glitter and twinkle as they pop, their opacity playing tricks on my eyes. I turn around, looking at the stairway that could not break me. I can hear music, it sounds like it's coming from close by. I begin to dance. I jump to the beat of the drum and feel the bass vibrations echo inside my chest. *Du-dum, du-dum, du-dum.*

The lyrics don't make sense but it doesn't matter. I'm not concentrating on their meaning. I feel a warm liquid running down my cheek. Blood. It doesn't faze me. Today I am strong. I am the king of the world! Nothing can defeat me. Not today.

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I didn't like the crowd he hung around. They weren't good people. They got him drinking, and their lazy, negligent attitudes surrounded him. Like osmosis, their carelessness seeped into him, permeating his character. He was fired after failing a random drug and alcohol test his company conducted. Unsurprising to me, but coming as an obvious shock to him, his girlfriend left him. Her leaving pricked a hole in the cocoon of blissful ignorance he enveloped himself within, causing him to lash out and become violent. He got in trouble from the police more and more often, his morals crossing dangerous territory into nihilistic waters.

‘Just stealing, or something,’ he'd mumbled in reproach whenever I'd asked after what he'd done wrong.

Those horrible people, messing up his life more than it already was. I'm not naive; I'm a mother. I know he wasn't well, I know he was responsible for his actions, and I accept that, but I know that those people were no help. I used to drive to his apartment with food. I knew he couldn't cook or afford much. It was an excuse to get out of my own house too; I was usually lonely and too proud to call my friends over for support.

More often than not I would find him passed out. His ‘friends’ were there on many occasions, passed out as well. An unbroken tide of desolate souls, always dismissing help, too stubborn to admit that they needed love. One day I'd forcibly roused them, begging for their help to take him to the hospital. I couldn't lift him and he wouldn't wake up. They just laughed at me and said he'd be fine. I called an ambulance. His blood alcohol level was seven times over the legal limit. He was in intensive care for three days.

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People come out of their rooms, yelling at me, telling me I'm a loser and to leave. I get angry. All I want to do is fucking dance. Some guy gets up in my face and I hit him, throwing my elbow around to collide with his cheek. The crack of bone on bone makes my cracked lips curve into a grin of sadistic satisfaction. He falls to the floor and I jump on him, lifting his head and smashing it back onto the floor.

He must have been the one that set me up with the bloody quicksand.

People are ripping me off of him, screaming at me. There are so many noises. So many sounds filling my head. It hurts. I feel sick. I turn to the wall, pressing my hands against it for support as I vomit on the wooden floor, my stomach contracting in dry retching spasms, heaving up bile because there's nothing else in it.

What am I doing? It's my fault they're angry. I *am* a loser, dancing by myself. I look at the mess I've left the guy in. My anger dissipates. I suck in a quick breath and stagger away.

It's my fault my dad left. My fault my mum's so upset. My fault my girlfriend walked out. My fault my life's so screwed up.

With fists clenched, I hit myself in the head, over and over. I want the bad thoughts to go away.

A crushing blackness fills my peripheral vision. I feel like I've been blind for the past three hours.

The darkness closes in. I am blind. I stumble forward, blinking continuously, crashing into things that I cannot see.

I feel a cool gust of air blow past me as I push through a door. It's refreshing, blowing against the sweat on my forehead, stilling the rolling nausea in my stomach a little. I must be outside. My legs wobble as jolts of pain shoot through my whole body. My head is throbbing so badly, I can't concentrate.

I knew that high felt off. It must have been cut something bad, piece of shit dealer.

My nose burns. I feel like I'm choking. The sting of unshed tears hits me and I scrunch my eyes closed, trying to dispel them. It doesn't work. Salty droplets pool at the corners of my mouth, mingling with the taste of blood. My sight is coming back but everything is out of focus and shadowed.

I stumble on, still trying to convince myself that I am invincible. There isn't anything else to do.

I am the king of the world.

My high has almost worn off.

Nothing can break me.

The ground becomes clearer. It's not light grey, like I was expecting, but a dark charcoal, with white lines.

Not today.

Bright lights shine in my eyes, blinding me yet again. I bring my arm up as a shield from the oncoming yellow light, but it throws me off balance. My ankle rolls. I yell out in pain, reaching down in an automatic movement to brace myself against the fall. I hear a screech. My palms slap the ground. I smell burning rubber. I taste copper and salt.

I feel nothing.

Nothing can break me. Not today.

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Here we are. He's over in the far section of the grounds. It's a beautiful area, I thought this place suited him, opposite the ocean. Water's supposed to be cleansing, rejuvenating and forgiving.

My son died a year ago today. He was hit by a car. He stumbled and fell into an oncoming vehicle. I don't blame the driver, from what the police tell me there was no way to have avoided the collision, high and unpredictable as my son had been that night.

He'd been on drugs for years. I'd known, deep down, but I'd been in denial. How could so much go wrong? How could I lose a husband to another woman and a son to addiction? It seemed like too much, so I chose the easy option. I tried to help him where I could, but it was never enough. For a long time I blamed myself, and my ex-husband, and the crowd of people who introduced him to that lifestyle. But in reality, it was a combination of all of us, and in the end, ultimately his choice.

I wish I'd pushed harder. I wish I'd forced him into rehab, done something, anything. But there isn't much out there. Sure, police are cracking down on drug use, manufacturing and trafficking, but I don't know the first place to turn to for genuine help or to keep people from relapsing...

God I miss him. I call his phone every now and then—I kept it—just to hear his voice on the other end, telling me he's busy and to leave a message. It all happened so quickly. One minute he was my son, breathing, talking, living. The next, he was gone. Just like that.

But sometimes, like on this crisp winter morning, when the glare from the sun is so thick as to be corporeal, and the heavy golden rays wash over me as they break through the trees, I can feel him with me still.