

## **A Smoking Room**

The room is in the furthest corner of the airport food court. You've been watching people enter for 30 minutes and no-one has come out yet.

"Our gate is open. Go find your father," she says.

You keep playing with your French fries, hoping that if you look hungry enough, Mum will reconsider, but she's angry today. Anger makes her uncompromising.

The airport is an expanse of legs and bags on wheels, everything at eyeline, everybody animated by urgency and torpor, like they have somewhere to be but no way to get there. Mum made you wait while she sniffed at perfumes, and there was a movie on the monitor in the shop, a lady falling backwards into water.

Then they bought you a happy meal at 9AM, and the toy inside was warped, a melted plastic duck left in the sun too long. Dad said something about stretching his legs, and Mum tutted, and you got scared that they were going to shout again like last night among the suitcases, but instead she drank her coffee, looked away.

You slide off your seat, wanting to imagine parachutes and adventure, but the plunging lady keeps playing in your head.

“Hurry up Frankie. You’ll make us miss the flight,” Mum says.

You keep your head down into the corner, ignore the funny magnets, the books on marine and bird life. There’s a man ahead, impossibly thin, and he wipes his hands on his trousers before opening the smoking-room door. You hear a sound that’s half-way between a vacuum and a howl, like one of the cartoon ghosts on Saturday morning TV. There’s another noise inside you, a drumbeat hammering in your chest and ears.

‘Ten capacity max.,’ says the sign, and you wonder who Max is and what capacity means.

There’s another sign with writing you can’t read, an image of a match on its side, but the tip of the match is a flame, and the flame looks like a noose.

Mum is way behind you now, lost in the currents of people. You can only go forward, find Dad and all his safety, the security of the pavement after a busy road. You push at the door but it’s heavy and needs both hands before it opens.

The scent washes across your skin, a smell of bonfires and sore eyes. People look up and the smoke is coating them, embracing them, like a cocoon or the chrysalis Ms. Garnet showed you in class. The cigarettes are the only things that pierce these coverings, and you wonder if they are what enable people to breathe, and you panic that you might die without your breathing apparatus, like those astronauts who suffocated in a hostile environment.

Where's Dad though? You look from face-to-face, trying to find something you recognise in all this unfamiliarity, but all you can see are hollow stares and sallow skin. The real expressions, the real life is all in the fumes, and you realise that there are things in the smoking-room, wraiths that feed on holidaymakers. You're screaming now, shouting for Dad, your eyes closed, a horrible weight in your bladder that transitions into something warm and wet down your leg.

"Jesus, Frankie, I'm right here," says a voice you hope you recognise, and even though you're scared it is one of the wraiths playing a last terrible trick, you reach out and grab, sobbing, shaking.

Afterwards is all consternation, improvised ablutions in the tight restroom, a pair of swimming shorts fished from a carry-on bag. Your parents blame each other, but all you can think of is how glad you are that you pulled Dad out of that place and how you never, ever want to go back in there again.

They don't mention the incident on the flight home or in the weeks that follow. Instead, they overtalk about how much fun you had, how sad you must be going back to school.

It's only at night, when you can't fight sleep any longer, that the smoking-room comes back for you. Your feet drag across the food court floor, and the door swings wide open.

As inevitable as adulthood.