

## Liars Taste Sour

“The earth is in your skin”

That’s what she’d say to you, in between meals and prayers and sometimes even sins. Soft  
whispers of silver voice,  
in one ear and

out the other

-- never wrapping themselves quite as tightly around your brain as she hoped they were.

Her words were always gray, but not in the morose way -- definitely not. They were gray in a  
way that shimmered in the light and reminded you of dusk  
(not dawn),

almost as though slowly brightening stars were meant to be scattered among the curves of her  
letters and dips of their tails. Her voice was the type of dull that made the word *calm* siphon  
through your mind’s eye in all its squiggly, blue glory, and even softened the  
pinpricks of

raised

hair

that swept over your forearm when things got scary.

Gray like the last drop of paint from a tube of periwinkle,  
slightly paler, slightly more watery --

the sort of liquid presence that coats everything and anything. She soothed your mind and calmed  
the louder colors -- her voice was the dullest of them all.

There are some words that are louder than others, most of which she used to try to keep as far  
away from you as she possibly could. She and Mom would talk in hushed voices, each word  
quieter than the last, until they heard you coming down the hallway or up the stairs. Sisters are  
supposed to share secrets, but sometimes it felt like Asha was the only big sister in the world that  
whispered with her mom instead. She brandished her secrets like weapons against the words she  
didn’t want you to hear, twirled them away with iridescent vocal chords and cloudy tunes,  
but hospital walls are thin and  
your curiosity is thicker.

*Synesthesia* is the loudest. It’s the color orange of a tractor with rusted tires, the kind that screech  
and jerk when they’re rotated, even though that’s literally their job (she doesn’t like it when you  
use that word -- “It sounds daft, Margot.”).

*Misophonia* is the shortest, squat and fat and hairy with a sickly green sheene that reminds you of sick.

*Cerebral Palsy* is quite the opposite: it's a brighter yellow than the sun and makes you squeeze your eyes shut so hard they hurt (but if it keeps that god awful yellow out of the air then you'll squeeze them even harder).

They're louder in delivery than they are in your mind, and even worse depending on who's delivering them. Dr. Bishops' voice sounds in your ear like a fork in the garbage disposal, so when his metallic speech is coupled with an offhand remark about your neurology, there's almost always an explosion of red-tinged haze; like clouds leftover after a fireworks display -- ghostly remnants of a snap crackle pop.

Pair that with an examination room that tastes like acrid magenta and Asha's voice is the only thing that can calm you down.

“If the earth is in your skin, it's easy to stay grounded.”

There are other awful words obviously, there are *always* other words, but until this morning, those three took the cake.

Phones have always been interesting as well. A cool slab of metal in your palm tastes nothing like the sour sting of a choppy voice over the line; it can be hard to reconcile. The roughness of your puppy Hanson's fur doesn't line up with his absolutely green presence -- another thing that's hard to piece together. Mom's voice sounds sweet when she's lying, but usually liars taste sour. Things don't make sense sometimes, but Asha always did. Gray like space and bright like the stars, she walked around in a cloud of ash that made it seem like she floated, maybe even flew.

Superhero.

Superheros don't burn out, they burn on. But when you picked up your cell phone this morning (it's dripping teal and oozing azure) there's a chrome voice on the other end saying something that sounds louder than those top three combined.

*Death* sounds brown and *Asha* sounds gray.

But *Asha's death* sounds like a firework that imploded instead of exploding.

An inverse firework,

or smoke without a spark.

Med school.

That had always been the dream. A mother whose hands had never done more than scrub and rinse raised a woman whose hands would hold scalpels and stethoscopes; it was practically decided before she was born. Spencer's hands would model latex gloves where her mother's had hidden behind oven mitts, and medical school was the first step towards that dream -- the rest would inevitably follow.

When she found out she was pregnant with Asha, it still seemed possible. Unexpected pregnancy aside, leaving the dean's office that day had felt completely natural. With a guaranteed spot in the following year's graduating class and an already glowing letter of recommendation from the head of the kinesiology department, Spencer had left feeling excited -- both for the baby and for her degree.

As soon as Asha had turned one, Spencer was back at the university. Three classes, straight As, and one semester later, she was on top of the world. Asha had taken brilliantly to the sitter, Edward was just on the verge of a promotion, and she had merely eight credits left to finish her degree.

Four more classes and half a semester later, she was pregnant with Margot.

Things seemed less possible after that. Margot's cerebral palsy leached her of the hours she could spend in the library, and pretty soon it felt naive to keep trying. She felt her dream leave her as suddenly as a gust of wind, and after a misguided (and colossally unsuccessful) attempt to wane Margot off her constant presence and perhaps onto the same sitter Asha had gotten along so well with, Spencer finally gave up her seat at the university and settled into the very lifestyle she had told herself she'd never succumb to.

Motherhood felt like inhaling a star and exhaling carbon dioxide. Margot's tantrums drove her insane, and Edward's inability to cope left her feeling like a single mother of three. Each plate smashed against a wall (red spaghetti was sometimes too loud) had her wanting to put her fist right there next to it, and each trace of women's perfume she could smell behind Edward's ear had a knot growing in her stomach that, at this point, felt too tight to ever untangle. These were the exhales, the murky, contaminated air she couldn't get out of her lungs fast enough.

And then the inhales. With each breath in she cherished Margot's eyelashes, long enough that they touched her cheek while she slept, and Asha's silent observation, astute enough that by the age of four, she had developed a relationship with Margot that was exponentially, if not entirely, better than the one she shared with Margot herself. With each gasp of air she watched Edward

toss Margot in the air while she screamed with glee, her face as red as her hair. She watched Margot carefully braid Asha's hair every morning, the older one still pretending she couldn't do it on her own, satisfying the small part of her younger sister's subconscious that screamed "useless." With each inhale she felt the small bubble of her family grow larger than their entire neighborhood, their entire state, the country and even the world. She felt a powerhouse of dependence, not only on her but on each other, and she knew this powerhouse, this electricity they generated as a unit, was the closest thing to truth she had ever witnessed. They could light up the sky, *they were a fireworks display*.

Snap, crackle

-- a bubble that large was bound to --

pop.

March 2nd, 2014. An untended stove top and a linen drape just an inch too long (she had been telling Edward to take it to the tailor since his mother had sent them over nine years ago).

Fire's only pretty when it's too far to touch.