

result, people rarely see me light up. It isn't as though I am rationing the cubic millimetres of my lungs, but I cannot afford to support the addiction heavily. Incense is my alternatives. Wrapped in that tinfoil, I didn't see how that smouldering cone could possibly set the house on fire, but, ludicrous or not, Carl was going to have his big Almighty way.

Stomping his dirty workboots over the scrubbed linoleum of my room – what can I say, what can I say? – he picks up the incense. His hands flips the tinfoil over the cone and he crumples it before tossing it out the window. When he's gone from my room, I will lean out the window to make sure he didn't set the grass on fire, but for now, I'm more concerned that he is towering over me, angry, lonesome, a man who probably hasn't had his sexual needs satisfied for months or longer. I was grateful when he grabbed me he did not grab my breasts.

The alternative hit, though. When he wrapped his workhands around my neck, hands lined and sinewy, it hurt. Badly. It will continue to hurt for hours. But protest? That is why he did it, because nothing escaped from my throat.

Words.

Breath.

I felt myself being pulled out of the chair. To save my jaws, I scrambled to my feet the best way I could. I could feel my eyes bulging, heard an odd gurgle that was either my voice or breath trying to come out. Tomorrow was going to be a bad neck day, I thought.

"Whatcha got to say there, Hope? Cat got your tongue?"

I could say nothing. His jaw tightened, followed by his grip.

"Is the great Hopeless Mossman actually unable to speak her friggin' mind?" He leaned closer. "Speak up. Can't hear you."

Gurgle, gurgle. It was all I could mouth.

"You just remember," he said, "that I'm the boss of this house every hour, every day. Whether you're cookin' my supper or scrubbin' my dishes, whether you're downstairs or upstairs, I've got the right ta know what you're doin', got that? You got that, Hopeless? Got that?"

Gurgle, gurgle.

"I ain't gonna ask you a question

unless you're gonna answer it. Do you know who's the boss in this here house? Want me ta go through this all again?"

Moment of release: I stumbled back against the chair. I couldn't speak because I was too busy catching my breath and the air was necessary for work formation. Finally, then, a miracle. I could answer.

"Yes," I said, voice raspy, "I understand. Thank you for making that clear."

Next I'd be saying I love Big Brother.

"Don't get snarky with me there, Hope. I ain't in the mood. You're happy right that there's more where that came from."

Mother of mercy, he left. From the hallway, I could hear, "Jesus Christ, this house'll still smell like shit tomorrow."

Back in my room, it felt like someone was poking the air back into my lungs with a broken stick. Choking is unpleasant, a way of hanging that unfortunately does not involve the severing spinal column to dull sensation.

Carl hadn't let me hang until I passed out, but who knew what he would do the next time? Or what I'd do over incense. We were both bombs ready to detonate tonight. This I knew – something had to change. Chances are, we'd never be able to make over our minds and personalities. This was no Dickens; there were no ghosts urging us to stop this foolishness. It wasn't a family sitcom where everyone hugged after thirty minutes of strife. Rest assured, I was not going to let this happen again. I would not be beat over incense, so I shut my door and began bag packing, quietly. Planning escape. Waiting for Carl to go to bed.

Nine-thirty he went to bed. All the other housewives and braided-hair daughters were tucking into their own beds, and I was the only one preparing for a nighttime journey to my sister's house. I didn't care I was going to a place where weed is grown in the backyard and Nova Scotia Liquor Commission alcohol is sold at double-prices at all hours of the night. What mattered was that I was going to my sister, who would welcome me and give me unconditional lodgings. Yes, that meant an old cot, but now I am here with Bernice – who would better understand

what I am going through? – and no one is berating me about the incense. Besides, it was a safe house. Safe was no longer home.

In the living room, Daniel Carver's marijuana scent lingers. He smokes and sells it. Bernice. I don't know what scruples she has now that she lives here, but she has never gotten stoned in front of her little sister. Perhaps she is like me, afraid drugs would transform us into Carl.

It was a leisurely runaway along the dirt road following the seacoast. There are no major landmarks on byroad 02. The only thing making up the route's scenery is the rocky coast and crashing waves on one side, coniferous trees to the left. If you're lucky, the temperature will be just right and the scent of salt, fir and sand – and possibly sandalwood coming off your clothing – will lend a beautiful perfume to the air. This evening I could smell that particular odour of the seashore, but it abruptly vanished when the marijuana king and bootlegger pulled open the door of the house he shares with my sister.

A glorified shoebox, it is painted seagull grey, and the birds it is hued after leave little white splatters all over the black roof. It is a shoebox that could be cozy and adorable if decorated properly. In its present condition, however, it looks like what it is: a home of two young people starting out without help from their parents. At least Bernice had made cookies not long before I arrived. The smell of freshly-baked spice cookies – at least there was that.

"What are you doing here, Hope?" she asked, looking out over her pan of cookies as I entered the kitchen, dropped my bag on the varnished chip-board floor, then slipped into a metal chair with a plastic red flower cushion and backrest. "It's got to be after ten-thirty."

"Carl. Need I say more?"

Bernice set the cookies onto a rack on the Formica table. "Lord, no. I've been there. Do we need coffee?"

"Sure. I've got the smokes.

Rothman's okay?"

"Yup."

"Coffee, smokes and cookies.

What more do we need?"

"Each other," she said.

While she boiled a pot of water

on the woodstove, which also acted as their source of heat, I dug into my bag for cigarettes, bypassing the clean underwear, black agenda and incense. That poor bag was creamed full, seams straining, crocheted flowers stretched bigger than ever.

Bernice rattled around in the cupboard for a glass bottle of instant coffee-grounds and the sugarbowl. In no time, there was a steaming cup of caffeine comfort of the faux-marble tabletop. With a spatula, she flipped cookies off the rack and onto two plates for each of his.

Eating, drinking, smoking, we talked. I began with the incense and ended with how I didn't deserve to be half-choked to death.

"You're right," my dark-haired sister said. "You don't deserve that. A smart mind like yours doesn't deserve punishment for being smarter than the asshole whose sperm gave you life."

I laid my head into my elbow and stared out through the tangle of blonde hanging before my eyes.

"Please don't mention that man's sperm again. Carl and sperm - two entities that should not be put together."

Bernice laughed and blew out smoke. "No," she said. "They shouldn't."

She gave me more hope, pardon the pun, and hours later, wobbling on the cot, I am grateful I'm here. I think I deserve it.

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