

The Smells of All the Ports of Nostalgia

by Carla Hagen

I woke up at 2:00 this morning and smelled cigarette smoke. I sat up in bed. No one has smoked in this house for at least three years, and the grass outside was too wet for a butt to last more than a few seconds. But I smelled it and knew someone was there. I went downstairs and checked the doors, the windows, the burglar alarm. Everything tight, locked down. So I came back to bed. But just before I went to sleep I smelled it again, and then I knew it was you. Were you sitting on the back steps having a smoke, looking at the rain and thinking?

Because you're still here, somewhere, in spite of all the evidence that you're not.

Yesterday your brother and I went to your place. It was a small one-bedroom in a high-rise on the West Bank in Minneapolis. I knew what that could mean: crack pipes in the halls, gang members fighting for the one pay phone to cut deals. I remembered when you were living that life, when you were so thin your face was almost translucent.

But the apartment building was beautifully designed and immaculate. There were huge windows and a communal dining room and an office with green arching skylights. And people from all over the world: Brazilians, Indians and Pakistanis, Mexicans, American Indians, Hmong, long skirted Somali women, Cubans, African Americans, Vietnamese.

We went up in the elevator. In the hall was a railing for the old people. And from behind the doors, the smells of the ports of the world drifting through the halls: curries, *arroz con pollo*, lemon grass, *feijoada*, peanuts, fennel.

Your brother opened the door with a key you'd given him. The first thing I saw was the pair of plastic gloves thrown in the trash by the coroner who came to examine you, to tell us what we already knew. The makeshift bed on the floor was still there, the better to catch the breezes from the Mississippi just below.

I began to clean your dresser drawers. Joints and roaches, carefully hidden. A few porn magazines, also hidden. Weren't they enough, the women who wanted to lie beside you, slow your manic pace? Scattered throughout the drawers were papers, including check stubs, tax returns and court documents from Child Protection.

Everywhere were pictures of children, mementos of children, though no children were there: baby shoes, baby moccasins, pictures scrawled, "I love you, Daddy, love, Annie." The pictures were tacked to the wall, separated in individual frames, gathered in family collections, set into miniature baskets: boys and girls, six in all, most of them combining your dark-skinned beauty with Anna's Native American straight hair and height. The two youngest are up at Red Lake now, on the reservation with their grandmother, who teaches them the shape of moose tracks and the smell of white fish being smoked slowly for the winter. What did they learn from you?

On the walls among the pictures were African basketry and a poster of Queen Latifah. By the bed on the living room floor was a tall votive candle in cobalt blue glass, but there was no Virgen del Cobre on it to protect you.

The light in the bedroom was burned out. We found a fluorescent lamp and kept working. I found more papers, letters from your brother that I returned to him without comment, and photographs. Many of them were Christmas Polaroid shots with your buddies, who inscribed the pictures, getting your name wrong every time. There was a pair of binoculars on the TV. Were you going to take them when you visited your children, who live in the woods now? They would show you birds: look, Daddy, this is a cardinal; that's a hummingbird.

I sat on the floor, avoiding the couch where they laid you, and drank water from one of the few glasses. Below the window was the Mississippi, above it a gray overcast sky. The threat of rain without the release.

On the shelves in the kitchen were macaroni, a little rice, two cans of soup, some spices. But there was no odor of rancid oil, no smell of poverty. Not here, not in the hall, not anywhere in the apartment building. Only the smell of rice and cinnamon and milk and curry and clean kitchens with ovens heating dinner.

We took bags of your clothes down in the elevator and went outside. It was starting to rain, and the wind was blowing. The streets would be wet soon. The men who'd been digging up the street were getting ready to leave. Your brother called to one of them. "Hey, what size shoe you wear?"

I laughed. We were carrying your size fifteen Sorrels boots. Your brother always said about you and your feet, "He came into this world with boats." And he left the same way, I thought. The man was as tall as you, but stockier. He looked at your brother curiously and replied, "Fourteen."

“Close enough,” said your brother and went over to him with the boots. I couldn’t hear what they were saying above the wind and rain. He slapped the man’s shoulder and the man grinned, showing a little gap in his front teeth.

“Hey, thanks,” he said.

We got in the car and drove away. By that time sheets of rain were falling and I had the wipers on full speed. We got back to your brother’s place and in a few minutes unloaded everything that had taken us hours to pack. The phone started to ring: the newspaper about your obituary; your public defender; your work companions; the mother of one of your children.

I came home and went to sleep. But I woke up at 2:00 in the morning with cigarette smoke in my nostrils. I knew it was you. I knew you didn’t dare bother your brother. He’d bailed you out so many times. But you must have been wondering what happened. Why you went to sleep on the floor and everything stopped. Why strangers were touching your body and why they covered you up and took you away. Away from the smells of cinnamon and rice, of strong morning coffee, of fennel and curry; away from the smells of all the ports of nostalgia.