

Snuff

My father hated the smell of candles; when a whiff of one drifted by he would cover his nose and gasp for air like a skunk had just shot one off in his face. As a child I was told that Jesus' presence could be seen in the flickering of a candle. During mass I watched the lively dance of yellow and orange flames, hypnotized as the priest's voice droned on. Sitting there on the pews, surrounded by a mystical glow, how could Dad not appreciate the delicate aroma of melting wax and charred wick?

On Sunday, hours after church was over, I crept into my parent's bedroom and, standing on tiptoes, I swiped one of the scented candles that stood on parade on my mother's dresser. Slipping silently from room to room, I locked myself in the bathroom and sat on the floor by the toilet, flipping the lid down.

With shaking hands and a sense of ceremony I placed the candle on the lid and lit it, panicking when the flame remained still. I watched and bit at the dry skin on my lip, fearing that Jesus no longer existed without that rhythmic blinking of fire, that the world was missing its savior and I, as a good Catholic girl, had a duty to restore Him. I had no hesitation in cheating - I blew on the candle, my cheeks ballooning as I forced the flame to move. Flicker, flicker. I had resurrected Jesus once more.

"What is that bloody smell?" Dad shouted at the bottom of the stairs. "Has someone lit candles?"

I would have lied if it meant I could get away with it, but I couldn't hide that sweet scent.

"Sorry, Dad."

I wasn't.

"Just blow them out, now. And open a window. I can't stand the smell."

"Yes, Dad."

My favorite part of a candle was snuffing it out. Like the best things in life, the most precious moments are when the thing we are obsessed with is about to perish. Puff, a single blow from my parted lips and the flame was gone, only a shadow of smoke remaining. The scent was stronger, sickly sweet with tendrils of gray delicately flouncing into the air - a candle's last breath.

As it hung midair, I inhaled through my mouth, tasting the dry heat of the moment, a Eucharist of ash. Then I'd jump to my feet and prop open the window with my sister's toothbrush, letting fresh air gush in and the ghost of my candle seep out. The ceremony concluded with me tipping the wax onto my palm, letting the warmth of drippings scald me then fade as it cooled and became hard in my cupped hand. I threw the chunk of wax into the trash can, my palm red and tingling.

I discovered the best place to snuff out candles was in church. Every Sunday after mass I collected hymn books for the priest, Father Ted. As I stacked the books, I watched parishioners wander over to semi-altars erected in the corners of the church. They were secretive little alcoves where sins were muttered to statues rather than to God's man, their faces illuminated by the soft glow of candle trays.

I was interested in people's actions, slow and deliberate as they fumbled in their trousers or handbags, grabbing coins to pay for their candle-lit confessions. I could hear the clink of metal as the coins were deposited; the sound was louder if the box was empty. And then they selected a candle, choosing just the right one that, when lit, would grant them instant access to God. On

knees with clasped hands the guilty mumbled fervent prayers, cloaking the church in a blanket of unbearable humanity. And there I stood with the statues, breathing it all in, the smell of wax, wick, smoke and sin.

When the sinners left, I lingered, wanting to reenact their rituals. I knew my sins were in contemplation of acts yet to be committed, not in the revelation of transgressions past. I pretended to search my empty pockets for change and I placed a ghost coin in the deposit box. With a sense of importance I knelt at the altar, selecting my candle. I always chose the one with the longest wick, lit it and placed it on the top right-hand side of the tray. I knew which side of the Lord to sit on.

I didn't pray, but I would *think* about praying. I knew I should pray for the lost souls and those who had died and needed the living to speak their names in hushed, reverent tones. But I didn't because I didn't have time for them. Instead, I watched the candles dance and listened to the tune of thoughts that tangled in my mind like a shredded net.

I lifted my hand to a different candle, my fingers hovering over the flame. I let the heat get close enough to warm my skin, but not burn. And then, like a magpie, I swooped in with my thumb and forefinger, pinching the wick and stealing the flame. I enjoyed the scent of the candle's charred remains as it floated in the air like an unsaid homily and I stared at what was left; a puddle of wax with no value.

My fingers were smeared black.

I wondered what the person who lit that doused candle had prayed for, but only for a moment, before I reached over and snuffed out every single flame - excluding my own.