

The ash scatters down like snowflakes.

Timothy Oham slowly exhales the smoke into the cool October morning air, and watches as the smoke fade into sunlight. He feels a rush of dopamine to his head, and euphoria sinks into his trembling hands, and he steadily grabs onto the window frame, the smooth fringe of the curtain stroking his left cheek. He smokes because he likes the smell, the taste, and the feeling. He likes to smoke with his so-called friends, leaning against their BMX bikes, swearing at little kids going for their mother's errand.

It has been two weeks. When his friend offered him a packet, he took it without giving much of a thought. Everyone else was doing it, so why not him? Ever since forever, Timothy was labelled as the 'outsider'. It was very subtle. Crumpled memos found in his locker, distasteful looks, laughing eyes. Damn it, everyone else seemed so, unfairly and bewilderingly content. Everyone, except him.

In his world, you do things to get things in reward. Timothy inhaled into the cigarette and comforted into the idea that at least, smoking had made him 'acceptable'. Smoking was like participating in a group activity, and it created a thin bond between him and the others. The smokers. Likewise, the relationship struck when someone asked him, "Tim, got a light?", giving Timothy a feeling of belonging and camaraderie. He enjoyed watching young boys regard him in awe when he would tap the ends of his cigarette butt, letting the grey, lifeless flakes fall onto the concrete ground. But he also secretly felt revolt afterwards late at night, a side-affect from too much tobacco.

Was it worth the risk? Well, yes, there is a thrill that comes from breaking rules. He is sixteen, and his dad, a doctor, thinks his son is resurrected Jesus. And like most other dads with teenage boys, he's dead-set wrong. Knowing that smoking was a sly form of betrayal, Timothy felt satisfied. After all, his dad was the first to betray when he re-married with Jasmine.

How bad can it possibly get? Timothy looked at the packet, with one last cigarette inside. It gazed back at him, daring him, pushing his limit, tempting him. Absently his hand reached out for the round cylinder figure, put it between his rasp lips, and another fracture of his soul dissolved into the air as he lighted the cancer-stick.

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The cigarette, still flaring red at the end, drops to the carpet from her shuddering hand. Scowling, Liz's stomach churns again, and she could feel the figure twisting inside her, protesting. Was it resisting the smoke? Liz pondered down at her swollen belly. She decided she was too tired to clean up the mess, so instead she tip-toed her way through the empty Domino boxes and stockings to the toilet. Gently, she lifted her hoodie, and gazed at her reflection. Her body seemed rougher in texture, more...yellow. Perhaps it's a summer tan? Or maybe this is the whole pregnancy thing, the "glowing" process. She snorted. Who am I kidding? Liz wasn't stupid enough; she knew cigarettes would harm the baby. Then why on earth did she decide to have it anyway? She could have chosen the alternative, on that day when she decided to take the courage and bought herself a 'pregnancy stick'. She could have easily called up the number she found on her weekly magazine. Few minutes, exchange of names and dates, and the booking would have been set. Yet when she saw the little, holy, red plus sign, she knew she just wouldn't be able to do it.

For several weeks she was sicker than a dog, avoiding any calls from anyone, and she decided to stay inside her depressing flat. Her roommate who never came home after breakfast, and the influenza Liz was going through; it was all too much. When she continued her smoking, people accused her of being selfish and ignorant. *Screw them*, she would tell herself. *Screw them all*.

She didn't smoke because she didn't care for the baby, she smoked because she could no longer take her lithium for anxiety and depression, and as sad as it was she was too weak to quit, she just couldn't give up. She lost too much already. Her family, her friends, her future hopes, her trust, her part-time job. She didn't have the confidence to be able to give up neither her smoking habits nor her baby. Smoking became her only coping mechanism that actually worked. Along with the grey wisps of smoke she would momentarily forget the horror of her one-night-stand mistake. She would forget that everything was her fault, her responsibility. It was something out of cowardice.

She never felt entirely justified in her actions, but it wasn't like she ever sat down to justify what she was doing. She genuinely smoked out of habit. She didn't know what to do about it. She could have seen someone. But she was

too hurt, scarred and scared to reach for help.

Meanwhile, through all of that, somewhere inside her body, a baby, no bigger than a dodgeball, is struggling to breathe.
It is struggling to live.

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'Do you think I can fly off this bridge?'

His voice.

'Am I dying?'

Mrs. Oham's eyes snap open, and she finds herself leaning forward on the edge of the bridge. The dark, greedy sea-water gurgles below, and she is somewhat enchanted by its tidying waves. It is 9pm. The cars driving past throws up warm breeze against her ankles, and she meekly looks at the vase in her arms. Its lid is open, and half of the ash has been tipped into the water already. Now how did that happen?

Witnesses watched in horror as seventeen-year-old Timothy Oham threw himself over the Sea Cliff Bridge located in the northern Illawarra region of New South Whales...despite efforts from rescuers and doctors young Tim drew his last breath in the Wollongong Hospital at 2.17am...

Stop. Stop. Too much, too much. She tilt the vase, her eyes blurred with thick tears, and the ash falls down and some flies into her hair by the wind.

Cancer. She didn't know, until Dr. Prescott revealed the X-Rays. He pointed at the darker spots, and started explaining the growth of the colony and how it would have killed him anyhow. Even if Timothy didn't jump off that darn bridge, he still would have died. Mrs. Oham recalled back to Tim's brittle fingernails. His tongue. How his hair seemed to thin out. She should have known. It was bloody obvious, wasn't it? Yet she was selfish enough to neglect the evident problems, believing into her own lie that everything was going to be okay.

Did he know?

Prescot looks at her, and they both know the answer to her question.

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It's a dream.

Blindly, you're running downstairs, and the flame cackles in your ears. The carpet's on fire, the couch is on fire, everything's on fire. Panicked, you pick up the phone, but the line's dead. The scent of burning leather amplifies the frightening idea of death, and you're helplessly trapped. Yet the smell is so familiar, and you can't tell why. Now you're turning all the taps, looking for buckets, containers; any source or material that can keep you alive.

Then you realise with pounding heart, the other existent inside of you, also gripped with fear, kicking your stomach. It doesn't know what's happening. It's kicking, as though it's trying to get out. It doesn't want to stay, you realise. It no longer feels safe inside your womb. Tears of agony start streaming down your cheeks, and you slide down onto the floor. The crackling sound of the flame eventually dissolves with the sound of the faintly beating heart. *Thump, thump, thump*. You vaguely wonder whose heartbeat it is, and silently pray that the death would be painless. Whose death, you don't know.

'It was a dream', Liz sobbed, 'A dream.'

Mrs. Oham stood there, not knowing what to say.

'Tim's baby,' Liz looked around, suddenly conscious of the hollow emptiness inside her stomach. 'Where's the baby?' she looked at Mrs. Oham, not wishing, but wishing to hear the answer.

'Sleeping.' she replied, with an air of absent-mindedness, 'Just sleeping.'