

Cha

by Ajay Vishwanathan

Cha likes boredom. Because it is all she has? I don't know.

Distractions frighten her. Embarrass her. Make her curl up like a snipped twine.

Mom says she is fine but I know she isn't. Mom has no money to hire someone else. She asks Cha to come home and be with me. So, I think Mom knows too.

The windows aren't open because they are closed for winter, but Cha doesn't care. She stares through them while I stare at her. Because there is nothing to see from the windows, which are opaque like Grandpa's cataract, smeared with ghosts of prints from her hands, my hands, Mom's hands.

She scrubs hard but the prints remain, stubborn like her grip when she's angry. She fingers little pools of clear in the middle of her impressions. And smiles. "No oils there," she says, and points to the trough of her palm. I don't smile back because I don't understand her.

She smells the oil in my hair and tells me she loves me. She loves the smell of oils and creams. Sits in a corner sniffing Mom's sports creams, dryness creams, anything that she can rub onto her hands and then, onto any surface.

"Come down to the basement," she says but we don't have one. Just crawl space. I remember Mom mention once that Cha used to own a big house with a basement where she stashed all kinds of things.

I think Mom has known Cha for a long time. I don't know. Wonder what makes Mom think that Cha can protect me. Probably her size. Cha is a big woman. But I'm happy I'm able to spend time alone, playing by myself. Mom smiles proudly when she hears my neighbors say how confident and assured I am. I don't know what assured means.

Cha dies in her sleep one day, her hair let loose, the color from the dye still wet, daubing the pillow with black. Mom's sobs wake me up.

I am in daycare now and happy. Not sure if I feel bad for Cha but I do think of her. Especially when I see my friends blow at glass windows and see hands bloom.

I begin to wonder whether Mom kept Cha with me to protect *her*. I don't know.

