

Siblings

by Jowell Tan

We have been walking for approximately two hours and eighteen minutes. The fruit stall vendor that was chasing us when we stole his apples gave up about ten minutes into the chase, leaving us to slowly enjoy our apples while we walked. It is now 12:03 A.M. All the people in their homes are asleep, save for a few who are savoring television's late night programming, their living room lights falling upon our faces as we walk past them.

We reach a house, and instantly I know it is perfect for us tonight — The newspaper thrown neatly into a pile at the gate indicates that its owners have been away for quite a long time, as do the stuffed mailbox and rundown exterior. She hides behind me, as if the house was a monster, chasing to devour us. "It's okay," I reassure her, "We've done this before, remember?" She nods, but I can still see her fingers tremble as she climbs over the gate.

Inside the home, the state of abandonment is made obvious. The wooden chairs have rotted from lack of care, fallen prey to the termites. The paint on the walls falls off in chips, decorating the floor in patches of white. The portraits on the wall are obscured, completely hidden under a thick layer of dust.

"Is it safe?," she asks, shakily lighting her cigarette. "There isn't a "Condemned" sign on this one."

"Don't worry," I say, "It'll be alright — We'll be gone by the morning anyway." I take her by the hand into the back room, where probably the maid stayed, but now is only occupied by an empty bed. She sits on the bed while I get to work. The rotted chairs make excellent firewood, as do the frames of the portraits. I break the chairs into pieces. Breaking things is one those things that I've always enjoyed

— The inherent violence involved always seems to help me forget where I am.

She continues to smoke her cigarettes, one after the other, watching me prepare the wood for the fire. The broken chairs are laid aside each other, as are the photo frames. It seems the people of this house were a happy family — The smiling faces, the children's enthusiasm tells me as much. I wonder what happened to them.

The firewood done, I motion for her lighter. Tearing out a photo from one of the frames, I put the light to it. The seated row of elders disappear first, before the younger ones standing behind are engulfed as well. I throw the photo onto the pile. The flames spread fast, and soon the fire is burning steadily. We warm up by the fire, relieved to be able to run from the cold, at least for tonight. We both lay on the bed, and she hugs me tightly, head to my chest. I take her cigarette and take a long puff. Silence echoes throughout the throughout the room, the only sound the crackling of the wood as it burns.

“Do you think they miss us?” She asks.

“Who?”

“You know, Mom and Dad.”

“I'm sure they do. I know they do.”

She begins to snuffle. The pressure on my chest increases slightly, and I can feel water on my shirt.

“Do you miss them?”

She says nothing, but nods. She sniffs a little louder, hugs me a little tighter. I finish up the cigarette. “Me too.”

Awhile later she has fallen asleep. It is exactly 2:30 A.M. I close my eyes and fall asleep as well.

When I open them again, it is morning. The fire has burned itself out, and the happy family that was once in this home is no more. I shake her by the shoulders. "Wake up," I speak into her ear, "We have to go." She sits up, rubbing her eyes. She smiles at me before standing up, kicking the charred remains of the firewood, the charcoal dust coating the walls. "Let's go!" She says loudly, grabbing me by the hand. We leave the room, the house. Today is a new day.

