

UNFILTERED

by Linda Simoni-Wastila

Winter I hated the most. Winter, and days when rain pelted the ground in sheets too thick for space. Smoke curled, a yellow tsunami steam-rolling from the front seat towards the back where I sat with my sister. I made myself tiny as I could, imagining I was Houdini shackled underwater, holding my nose and practicing my escape. An hour into the drive I'd crack my window and sit on my knees to suck the moist air trickling in like a thief. Mother would turn around, the Pall Mall a fiery sixth finger. "Shut the goddamn window, Missy. It's cold outside." The smoke never bothered my sister; she wallowed in the fumes, a gill-breathing dragon. When we arrived at our destination, I'd tumble from the car, refilling myself with pure oxygen for the return trip.

Later, my sister and Mother shared a special intimacy, talking on the patio and tapping ashes into coffee cans. I'd sit inside the cool kitchen and watch from the window. When Mother died last year, felled by a stroke induced by her pack-a-day habit, my sister kept smoking and started running charity 5ks. In her last race, the contestants lined up, waiting for the gun, and I watched from the sidelines. The air smelled electric, reminding me of riding with rolled-down windows, the shimmering wind pummeling us in a furnace blast. I remembered those summer months and wondered if they saved me from worse -- though what could be crappier than life tethered to an oxygen concentrator?

