

It was after school on a Thursday. I walked in through the doors of my small apartment and took a step in the kitchen. The kitchen stove clock read 4:48 p.m. in large green letters. I glanced at the opening of my old room, not at all surprised at what I saw. My dad was slouching on his big white bed, watching T.V as usual. The bed sheets with green-leaf patterns were stained with all sorts of late-night leftovers.

I yelled out, "I'm home!" but I heard no response. I sighed, knowing that there was no one that was going to bother to acknowledge me.

My mom was supposed to be home from work in an hour. I knew she'd be pissed when she saw my dad slacking, as usual. I stood on the white tiles in my kitchen, finding myself imagining what it would be like to live only with my mom. I walked over to the wooden stool next to the counter and rested my head on the glazed marble. Then I heard a deep, booming voice calling my name.

"Erin! I'm going out to get some cigarettes! I'll be back in a bit." The words trampled like ashy footsteps over my head.

"Ok. Bye."

"That's it?"

"Yup!"

The door slammed, a noise I had grown too used to.

As I was getting up to take a shower, the melody to a Justin Bieber song blared from my cellphone. The words on my screen were clear. "Dad's Office." That's the only phone he uses. I eventually pressed the green button with a twinge of hesitation. The call was pathetic, just as pathetic as his effort to be more of a father to me. It started with my exasperated sigh, and led into yet another strained conversation.

"Hey Dad," I said.

"Hi. I was thinking about why you haven't even tried to talk to me."

"I tried."

"Well, I figured you'd call me after I left."

"Sorry, I've kind of been off electronics."

"Oh." He detected my lie. "I'm gonna get a cup of Cuban coffee and I'll be home, alright?"

"Okay."

There was the silence, and he broke it. "Where's your mom? Shouldn't she be home by

"Why don't you call *her* and ask her?"

"Why can't you tell me?"

"Why can't you care about me for once? Forget about mom."

"I'll be home soon."

"Bye."

I felt like I was being irrational at first. Then, I remembered his pointless outbursts, lies and unnecessary cursing.

He was the open flame that always burned me. My legs, scorched. My hands, singed. My soul, blackened. I'd try to convince myself to be immune to the fires.

It was a bad idea in the first place, to play along with his words. They reflected in my tears. It was true when they said that when you fought fire with fire, you were bound to get burned.

My mom got home around five. Her hair was up in a ponytail that day. She wore a mother's fragrance.

"Hi, sweetie pie," she said, a ring in her voice.

"Hi Mom! How was work?" I asked, genuinely interested to hear how her day went.

"I'll tell you after you shower, missy!"

I giggled until she noticed my dad's obvious absence.

"Where's your dad?"

"He went to get coffee. He's coming back 'soon'."

"Hm. Okay."

The sadness in her voice killed me.

Three hours later, at eight p.m. or so, my dad came in slurring his words. His legs wobbled a bit and his smiles weren't correctly timed. This upset my mom more than anything. She yelled at him and he laughed. Soon enough, however, his smile turned into a frown. With gritted teeth, a pointed index finger, and a pair of wild eyes, he brought out the voice of the monster that hid behind his crow's feet.

"I'm not moving away!" he yelled at her.

"I'm not telling you to move away!"

"Then what the hell are you saying, Carmen?"

"We'll talk about it tomorrow," my mom said, in an attempt to regain her cool.

"Forget it! It's always the same with you!" He raised his hand. The motion looked as if he

were about to hit her. I watched with an urge to scream.

My mom calmly stopped him and lowered his arm with her soft hands. Like a hero, she stood bravely in front of him with a straight face. Like a villain, he angrily kicked her out of his room.

My mom turned to me with one tear in her eye and walked past me to lock herself in our room. I sat outside on the carpet and thought for a while. Eventually, inspired by my mom, I got the courage to knock on his door. He wouldn't open it. I called his phone, hoping he'd hear it. He wouldn't pick up. Suddenly the fumes of cigarette reached my ten year old nostrils.

"Dad?" I yelled through the bottom of the door.

Finally I saw the shadow of his footsteps and I hurriedly stood up.

"What?" The monster speaks.

"Daddy, what were you doing?"

"Watching the cars pass by. Why?"

"You smell like cigarettes. You promised you wouldn't smoke."

His face turned pink, like my bare nails and my small heart began to pump violently. I felt my asthma slowly kicking in. I stared at him with a desire to cry. He opened his mouth, getting ready to yell at me- but he surprised me with a whisper.

"I'm so sorry, Erin. I'm so sorry." His voice was breaking.

"To me? You're sorry to me, dad?"

"Yeah, I'm so sorry."

"Not to me. You didn't hurt me. You hurt my mom." My words startled him and he began to cry. But soon enough, he added fuel to my fire.

"Your mom's a bitch!"

I slightly jumped backwards with constant tears. I knew my mom had heard that.

"What the hell is your problem? Why do you love to make us feel pain? You always apologized but you do it again! You're a monster!"

With pure reason, he got the chance to slap me. It burned more than his lighter. I ran to my room sobbing, hoping this nightmare would end. My mom quickly opened the door to let me in. After I ran in, she locked the door and hugged me tight.

"Honey, don't fight my battles, please. Don't do it again."

"I'm so sorry mom. I love you so much." I could barely get my words out.

"I know. I love you, too."

I felt her warm tears on my sweater, which made me cry more. She hugged me tighter at

every sob and cradled me like a baby on her stomach.

“He’ll be gone soon, sweetie.” She said to me. I looked up at her, wondering how soon that was. Most of all, I wondered if I wasn’t supposed to feel happy at the news.

“Where will he go?”

“Far from us, that’s for sure.” That night was the night of a dead end in two long relationships. My dad was a stranger in a dark alley to me, and a murder to my mom. Once he left, I got my old room back. Sometimes, I still have to talk to him and so does she.

There is no immunity to third-degree burns. However, we can always try and heal our wounds. That’s why I became my mother’s shadow as she taught me to be strong. I overcame all the scars and burns. My dad’s fire might have outdone my flame, but my mom and I became the water that drenched him.