

**Story title:** Addiction

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By the time I was twelve, I was addicted to sniffing petrol. My parents had bought a new car—a blue Wagon R—and with that came a gallon of fuel that was always on the garage shelf. When I was at home by myself, I would climb through the guest room window and into the garage, stand on my tippy toes to retrieve the jar, unscrew the cap, and inhale. After the first few minutes, I would be tottering, ears ringing, eyes losing focus. The way that oily-metallic sweetness floated up the nose and around the back of my tongue, greasing up my teeth. The way it made me take bigger and bigger breaths, the fumes sweeping through my lungs. Only when I started feeling light-headed would I stop. There really is no equivalent to what petrol smells like—like paint fumes but lighter, nail polish remover but fuller-bodied, kerosene but without the earthy, salty tang. If I close my eyes and really concentrate, I can still conjure up its plasticky rush. But this too is an echo of an echo.

At some point, I was so hooked that I would even get up in the middle of the night, creeping to my parents' snores for a quick whiff. One night, I was woken by the sounds of my mother gasping in bed. *Take me to the hospital*, she cried. Her voice was panicked and choked, as if she were suffocating. *I can't breathe, I can't breathe!*

There was a pause, and then my father's hushed voice. *You're fine. You're imagining it.*

*Huntu, please, please take me*, she begged. *I swear, I swear...*

A grunt, and then the thud of Deuta's feet on the floor. I pretended to be asleep while they

shuffled around in their room. I wasn't afraid for my mother. She often insisted that she couldn't breathe, or that there was something caught in her windpipe, or a pain building in her chest. My father always resisted at first, and then took her to the Emergency Room. They always came back in a few hours, with the doctors unable to detect anything amiss. After my parents left, I went to the garage, and put my nose to the petrol can. This was the first time I sniffed petrol at night.

I was alone at home a lot. My dog, Pempem, was always there, padding behind me wherever I went. I never petted her or paid her much heed. My mother loved the dog though. She kissed and cuddled her, and when my father wasn't around, even let her sleep in their bed.

My parents had a chest full of books under their bed that they didn't want me to see. Some afternoons, I would wriggle in and pull out the trunk and take my pick, flipping a practiced finger to the adult parts. Sometimes I would get a hard pillow and squeeze it between my legs as I read. After I was done, I would put everything back in its place. But one day, I found a CD in the trunk. I hid it in the front of my kurta and brought it to my room.

The video began with a buxom North Indian woman with glittering, kohl-lined eyes staring so intensely from the screen that I imagined she was looking directly at me. She was sitting on a low cot, licking her lips suggestively at the grainy, shaky camera. She was wearing a red saree and a purple blouse with its top unhooked. Then a tall, fair man walked into the frame. He placed his foot on her stomach, and she leaned back, smiling up at him. He was wearing a black string that went over one shoulder and met the other side of his body at the waist. The man

ceremoniously took the string off himself and hung it off the corner of the bed. Then he yanked at the woman's saree to pull her towards him, tearing the blouse right off her chest. Soon they were writhing around on the cot. I didn't know what I was seeing, yet a sick, clammy feeling was building up within me. I jumped up, taking the CD and throwing it out to the overgrown plot behind our house. Later, as I held the petrol can to my nose, scenes from the film played and replayed in my head.

My mother was prone to bouts of anger that could quickly turn violent. I never cried. I think that's what really got to her. I shouted, sometimes, but rarely. I knew what not to give her—a reaction—and that made her determined to get one. One morning, I began a hurried breakfast while Deuta warmed the scooter. My mother sat across from me, reading the paper. She looked me up and down.

*Are you wearing a chemise under the shirt?* she asked.

*No*, I replied, stiffening immediately.

*Go put one on.*

*I'll do it when I'm done eating*, I said.

*No, change first. You look obscene.*

*I said I'll do it after eating. Can you leave me alone?*

The next thing I knew, something warm and wet had hit my face. Ma had thrown her tea at me.

*Shameless, speaking back at your mother like that*, she spat, glaring hatefully.

To this day, when I recall it, I can still feel my jaw hard, my face dripping onto my school shirt. I wasn't hurt, of course, for my mother was terrified of burns and only drank her tea cold. But I felt humiliated.

I often daydreamed about running away. I would make a list of things I'd take—two shirts, pyjamas, my diary, my mug. I would steal Deuta's wallet from the top of the dresser and take the right from our gate, then another right at the first lane, and then I would run and run until I reached Chenijan tea estate. Maybe I would live in one of the large, dry pipes by the gates of Chenijan. Maybe the gentleman who owned the plantation would find me and adopt me. I liked to imagine that if I ran away, my mother would learn her lesson. She would regret the times she had hit me, called me stupid or ungrateful. I imagined nothing of my father. He had never done me either harm or good, so he never quite became real in my eyes. I never actually ran because I knew that they would find me and bring me back, and then my mother would learn nothing from it.

I also thought a lot about killing myself. If I died, my mother would surely regret her ways. Maybe I would leave a note about how she had humiliated me, about how mean a woman she had been. I would recount every time she had hit me so that everyone would know, and so she could never forget. I wanted to go the most painless way possible. I didn't want to suffer, and so I figured it would have to be an overdose of pills. These fantasies were strongest in the afternoons—I would lie spread eagle on the garage floor, smiling up at the ceiling, while Pempem padded about outside, her nose occasionally appearing through the curtains to check on me.

One afternoon, I sniffed petrol for so long that my ears began to roar, and I passed out. When my parents returned from work that day, they kept ringing the doorbell while I lay unconscious of

the sounds. I later found out that my father had to break a window to let himself in.

I woke in a hospital bed. Upon finding me, my parents had rushed to the ER, where the doctor pronounced me completely fine. He told them he suspected that I had inhaled some kind of chemical fumes, and that this sort of thing was quite common among teenagers these days. My parents put two and two together, and realised what the spilled petrol was about. As we drove back, I could see my mother reflected in the rearview mirror, her face distorted in anger. My father was driving impassively, looking straight on as Ma's accusations rained down upon him and me. Soon we were home. Still shouting, she slammed the car door shut, but when Pempem leapt up at her, her face turned soft, her eyes brimming with tears as she hugged and kissed her.

Once inside, Ma slapped me hard. *We had been banging for hours! And you have been doing this shit, have you?* Another slap, her eyes full of hate. I broke myself out of her grasp, and made for a bottle of pills on the medicine tray.

*I'll kill myself!* I cried, brandishing the bottle at her. *I'll take all these pills and commit suicide!*

*That's what you want, you want me to die!*

*Those are multivitamins.* My mother spat back, her teeth bared. *They won't kill you. But yes, take them. Die,* she said.

Suddenly, my father appeared, in a fit of rage. I'd never seen him angry before. He rounded on my mother, the first blow landing on her shoulder. Her eyes widened and she backed away. Then, in a motion that was almost comical, she slipped. She fell to the floor with a shriek, crawling backwards as my father advanced on her. Her eyes locked with mine for the briefest second

before I turned away. Another slap echoed through the house, the crack of palm in contact with flesh.

Later, I was sitting on the verandah when I felt my mother behind me.

*Ki koriso?* she asked.

*Nothing. Homework,* I responded.

My mother knelt, her fingers curled tight around my wrist, forcing me to look at her.

*I thought I saw you smile when your father hit me,* she said, her eyes boring into mine. *Did you smile, did you, did you.*