

Fumes by Kristine Kathryn Rusch

He made them turn on the siren.

He'd never heard it from inside the car before. He was disappointed that it sounded so faint, not louder like he expected. The radio buzzed and burred, but he couldn't catch the words. The car smelled faintly of gasoline.

The officers made him sit in the back. They bundled him in quick like they were hiding him, then drove off faster than they had to, given that the emergency was over.

Ernie stared at the fine web of lines on the passenger window, making it even harder to break. No door handles, no locks, and a scratched plastic screen behind a metal grill, protecting them from him.

They hadn't cuffed him. They hadn't read him his rights like the detectives did on TV. But they were more efficient than those guys, wearing real uniforms and talking to everyone in the neighborhood.

He didn't look at the house, its back corner still burning. Certainly not at the garbage cans in the back, charred and burnt, their lids long gone. The curtains in the window above had become ash.

Funny the smoke had no smell. Except that little whiff of gasoline, like he used to get when he went to the gas station with his dad. He'd wait beside the car, hoping his dad would spill some like he did that one time. The entire car reeked of gas all the way home.

The neighbors milled around like they'd caused the fire. Mrs. Capuzio found his mom's shoe, teetering on its heel at the edge of the alley. Mrs. Nunez dialed 911, even though Mr. Okasan shook his head. Then everyone looked quick at Ernie, and then looked away, like they didn't want him to see.

Like he didn't know, even though he did.

The officers' voices were muffled under the burr of the siren. He almost asked them to shut it off, but they'd been doing him a favor. They'd given him that same look, that how-much-does-he-know? look, and mixed with it was another, the please-don't-make-me-tell-him, which he'd seen before, back when his dad died.

His mom had the look then. She kept rubbing her hands together until they were red and chapped. She didn't say nothing to him until after the funeral, letting events explain most everything.

He'd been younger then. Stuff bugged him then.

But not now.

The officers, they said they were going to look for his aunt. Ernie hadn't seen his aunt since forever. She caught him sniffing model airplane glue once, and she took the bottle away from him, telling his mom that he'd be trouble.

He leaned back on the hard plastic seat and closed his eyes. They were dry and scratchy, like his throat. He ached in places he didn't even know he could ache. He'd fallen hard, hit his head, but didn't black out. He had known that: if he'd blacked out, he would've died.

He wished the police car would slow down. He wished he hadn't asked for the siren. He didn't like it. He wanted it to blast the thoughts from his head. To drive the scene from his head—the collapsed corner of the house, the smoke rising, the flame inside the walls like it was busting in from outside.

Which he supposed it had been.

Did she think he hadn't seen her? Hadn't she known he'd been watching her every single day since his dad's funeral, every single day since they moved halfway across the state to a town where no one whispered about them?

She said it was because he'd been blamed for the towel on the space heater, the candle beside the bedspread, even though he'd been the one who'd put out the flames. He'd even tossed the matches each and every time they found their way into the house.

What he didn't get was how come no one else saw her eyes get that crazy gleam when she saw a spark. How she walked to a flame, any flame, even the ones on TV, her fingers touching them like they were made of real gold.

He'd said something to his aunt at his dad's funeral, but she'd wiped her eyes and muttered something about model airplane glue. His mom hadn't heard, and even if she had, what would she have done? Tossed him out? He was the only one who kept saving her.

The only one.

The car finally stopped. He opened his eyes, saw the weird lights of the emergency room—all neon white and hospital blue, with that weird snaky symbol going up the side.

The blond officer got out of the car, opened Ernie's door, and helped him out. Ernie shook his head.

"I'm all right," he said.

The officer said something Ernie couldn't hear because of that buzzing siren—how come they didn't shut it off?—and took Ernie's arm. The hold was gentle. He could barely feel the man's fingers against his flesh.

The other officer stayed in the car. He had hardly even looked at Ernie, scared to make eye contact maybe, or maybe he knew.

Or thought he did.

Ernie stumbled forward, trying to keep up with the blond officer. He was getting tired. Maybe because he hadn't had enough sleep.

The smell of gas had woke him up. It had been stronger than it had been that day in the car with his dad. The last good day of his short life.

Ernie had known he was in a dream-memory and hadn't even wanted to open his eyes, but he had, and he saw her pouring an entire gallon into the closest garbage can just outside the open window.

He'd complained about having the room near the garbage cans, but she hadn't listened. He hated the smell of rotting food, the way it clung to the curtains even when the window was closed.

Which it wasn't. It was open, and the curtains hung too close, and he could see through them to his mom, standing in the middle of all the cans, biting her lower lip.

That crazy look in her eyes had gotten worse since Dad died, and the way she stared at that match, the flame shimmering in the gasoline fumes, Ernie knew she hadn't thought it through; she was just lost in the pretty flame, all red and gold and white, with a little trail of smoke rising....

He got out of his room. Somehow, he'd gotten out.

Even the emergency room smelled of gasoline. One of the nurses looked right at him and looked away again, just like the neighbors, like the other police officer.

Only the blond one stayed beside him, hand lightly touching, voice filled with compassion. Even now, Ernie couldn't make out the words. Everything buzzed. Had they shut off the siren?

He couldn't tell.

The nurse took him to one of those examination rooms. The officer stayed behind. The nurse made Ernie sit on a bed. She gave him clothes—one with an open back—but he didn't take them. She talked, but he couldn't hear her either.

She shined a light in his eyes, nodded, held up a finger, then two. He knew what she wanted. He'd been through this before. They thought he had a concussion. Maybe he did.

He didn't say anything though. He was so tired. He just wished there was someplace on the planet that didn't smell of gasoline. Someplace without the awful buzzing.

Someplace where he no longer saw his mother's eyes widening as the flame caught the fumes, and the fire turned a funky blue—the only look of joy he'd ever seen his mother have—

Right before that last awful kaboom.