

‘Candles’ by Svetlana Sterlin
Second runner-up
2023 Young Writers Award

Candles

Earlier

We have many candles in our house. I know this, but I never can find anything else that my mother would like at these Mothers Day stalls. I pocket a lavender-scented one, pretend to keep browsing, then leave the hall with a smile at the supervisors.

On my way out, I almost run into a teacher aide.

‘Hi,’ she says. ‘Um ...’

‘Nastya,’ I offer.

‘Is that short for Anastasia?’

‘Nope. Just Nastya. Soft y.’

She moves away from the hall’s crimson glow and the smell of rose-scented hand creams. My mother has always hated roses.

‘You’ve got your ESL test now,’ the teacher says. ‘Remember?’

‘Oh, I’m not actually ESL. My dad put that on my enrolment form because technically, English isn’t the first language I learned to speak.’

The teacher smiles. I’ve seen that sort of smile before.

‘Well, since you’re already enrolled as an ESL student, you’ll have to sit this test. Just like last term. It should only take an hour.’

I smile, too. ‘I’m in English Extension.’

‘We just need to see where you’re at.’

I follow her and finish the test within twenty minutes. She marks it, then tells me that maybe I don’t need to be part of the ESL program after all. That’s what I tried to tell them in Term 1.

Earlier Still

I don't like yoghurt. In Grade 1, someone pours a tub of it into my hair. Another time, someone tips it onto my chair and I sit in it.

Sometimes we play on the jungle gym, though once, my head gets stuck in there and the principal himself has to pull me out. We only stop playing when a kid falls from the slide and cracks his head. That's the first time I see an ambulance up close. Teachers tell us to scat.

Later, I don't remember whether the kid died or not.

I move schools the following year, in Grade 2, when Dad has to work at a different pool. And then again the next year, and the next, and the next. I don't understand. Yet.

At my second school, the boys play games with us. They hide in the bushes at big lunch. Being picked to join them equals bragging rights.

In Grade 3, we move beyond the bushes. Our new spot is a secret alley between the trees and the main building. Nobody can see us there. Nobody can see how two boys pin me to the wall and lift my skirt up to look at my nickers.

I remember writing a love letter to one of them and waiting for him to find it after class, watching him scrunch it up and shove it in the bin. Stumbling over to salvage the glittery paper, the smudged felt pen, the crumpled hand-drawn hearts that landed beside thawing poppers and sandwich crusts. Running through the school with wet cheeks and messy hair and listening to nobody when they tried to stop me, not even the teachers. Getting my first detention. Something about swearing. I didn't understand. Why are some words banned? What's the point of a language if you're not allowed to use all of it?

Nowhere, Always

Ever since the first yoghurt incident, my parents got a lot of unwanted calls from my schools. Like the time a girl slapped me across the face at the top of the monkey bars. Something about my black bread and my not knowing any pop songs. My parents told me I should've hit her back. I told them that's not how it works now. Maybe I meant *here*.

Here, Now

I remember a time when nobody questioned my place here. Not even me. But these days when I walk into the pool, my friends are already laughing at something they never tell me about.

Jamal and Dae and the others crowd around Flynn like always. I don't understand. He wouldn't survive a day in my life, even though Dad treats him like he's older than he is.

The boys are in the stands when I get back from the change rooms.

'Have you ever high-fived a boy?'

They look like they're about to jeer, so I say, 'Yeah, obviously.'

'Hugged a boy?'

I squint at Flynn. 'I've hugged you.'

I think they're going to ask me if I've ever kissed a boy.

'Held hands?'

'Why d'you wanna know?'

They shrug and skip down the steps to get their kitbags. The girls watch me.

I don't understand.

Earlier, Again

In Grade 6 we share the class with seventh graders. They're graduating soon, and some of us are still ten.

A boy in this class always picks on me. The teacher says I must be encouraging him. She says I should stop flirting with him, but I don't even know what 'flirting' means.

The boy and I walk home together because he lives across the road from me. We already know all the places to be quiet so we don't disturb the dogs behind tall fences. This is where I come to dislike fences, because one time he throws my bag over one, but that hasn't happened yet.

He asks me if I've ever watched porn.

'What's porn?'

He laughs. 'It's naked people. You ever seen a naked person?'

'Yeah. Hasn't everyone?'

'Well, then you've seen porn.'

The next day he tells the other seventh graders that Nastya watches porn. That's the first time someone is clever enough to nickname me Nasty.

At our club's Christmas break-up party, I attempt to dive over my friends as they do a backstroke start. A loud crack and closed eyes and tears mingling with pool water, then me realising my chin feels unusually soft. I see diluted blood trickling from Lily Hong's head. I say something meaningless, like *sorry*, then plod in a trance to the bathroom to look at my chin, which has been cleaved open from end to end.

The older girls try to coax smiles out of me, but that makes blood spurt from my chin. They offer me candy canes, but I can't open my mouth to eat them.

At least I have a blood sister now. I always wanted a sister.

Seven stitches are weaved into my skin, and Lily has her head glued. Her scar is invisible in her hair, while mine gives me a perpetual double chin. I never hear the end of it from Dad.

Over the holidays we spend a few weeks in Malaysia. Rain pours for days. On Christmas Eve, we dash into the car park to see that our rental has a flat tyre.

‘Отлично,’ my mother says. ‘How are we going to get to the doctor now?’

We sprint back inside, our shoes squeaking all the way up to our dingy hotel room, which smells of damp cloth. I lay on the bed while my mother tugs the twine out of my flesh and complains that this is the unluckiest holiday we've ever had. When she's done, she covers my wound with a bandage the size of a flip-phone, which will forever timestamp the photos from this strip.

It's the last holiday we'll ever have.

Another storm hits when we're on our way to the airport, leaving us moored in crawling traffic. We miss our flight back to Australia; even though we've lived in the country for seven years, I can't bring myself to call it home. This isn't an attitude I acquired from my parents; it's actually from Lily that I first heard the sentiment.

Reflection

Nobody blames me for jumping at that Christmas party, not even Lily. She says it was an accident, but I know it wasn't.

I remember doubting the leap before I made it. Still, I jumped.

Then

Next year, in high school, everyone starts wearing bras and making sex jokes and swearing. Now that I'm old enough to make my own choices, the teachers ask me what I'd like them to call me.

'Just my name's fine. Nastya.'

'Don't you have a nickname?'

'Not really.'

I hope that nobody will say it, but of course someone does, some boy from my last primary school.

'Yeah, it's Nasty!'

A few boys laugh, but the girls roll their eyes.

'Call her Annie,' one girl offers.

I try to say that I don't like that name, that it's not me, that it's too common, and nobody's called Annie where I'm from, but the teacher says it's a great idea.

Despite everything, this is the first time I hate my name. It's the first time I feel resentment towards my mother for insisting upon it. My mother, who knew I'd be born and would grow up in an English-speaking country.

Present, Later

Dad's boss calls me when I'm listening to a lecture from home.

'Hey, Nastya, it's Leanne.'

'Hi?'

'Listen, I need you to come in early tomorrow. You and Dad, come and see me and Greg in my office.'

'Oh. Okay. What's it about?'

'It's just a meeting.'

'I understand that, but what's it about? Do I need to bring anything?'

‘No, no, just yourself. Your dad already knows. I just want you there as a support person.’

Dad and I don’t speak as we walk up from the pool to Leanne Parker’s office.

Greg is already there when we enter.

Leanne gestures for us to take a seat. I can’t find a comfortable position. The fabric scratches.

Over the next half hour they tell my dad he’s going to lose his job. They tell us our swimming club will be shut down.

Dad asks futile questions, his accent crowding his overlapping words.

‘We’re running at a loss,’ Leanne explains in a tone of voice I’ve heard before.

But it’s a not-for-profit, I should say.

‘We’re outsourcing,’ Greg says. He turns to Dad. ‘You’re welcome to apply as a sole trader.’

You know full well that I can’t afford it, Dad could say.

Afterwards, we walk back to the pool in silence. I guess we knew this was coming. I guess Dad’s been expecting it the last nine years. It’s what always happens—since he emigrated, anyway.

After teaching my learn to swim classes, I join Lily and Flynn and the others and become a teenager again. At the end of the session, we climb out and joke around and watch the sunset, then we bring out a cake for Dad’s birthday.

At home we celebrate Dad’s birthday in awkward silence.

Everywhere

Dad expects me to be a better swimmer than I am. My mother always defends me even though she hates swimming. She doesn’t know that it’s the one place I’m still called Nastya by people who speak English.

I don’t even realise when I start telling people to call me Annie.

Now

This time when Dad loses his job, nobody who calls me Nastya supports us. Only Lily's family offers their loyalty. They even offer to pay for the cost of lane hire at a public pool, so Dad can keep coaching.

They understand.

After it's done and we've all been scattered, Flynn deletes me on social media. I unfollow Jamal and Dae, but I can't untether myself from Flynn. His posts pop up in my feed, and though I don't interact with them, I inspect every detail of his photos: him with his new swim squad, his first girlfriend, photos with Jamal and Dae still as his sides.

A year later, I begin to accept that I believed we'd be together one day. Another year and I convince myself I'm in love. I convince myself that distance makes the heart grow fonder. That he liked me all along, and that's why he can't bear to see me on his Instagram feed. That's why boys like him have teased me all my life.

These thoughts distract me from the fact that Dad is still unemployed. He begins to feel the way he did when he first immigrated, thinking nobody trusts him because of his accent and his being otherness. But they don't know that he spent his whole life trying to escape the USSR. They don't understand.

Later

The only available pool space is thirty minutes away. We drive past our old pool every day, but we can't afford to move. My mother says that if we do, she won't join us, that she never wanted to live here anyway.

I concoct fantasies about Flynn so I don't have to think about how Dad's measly superannuation is dwindling along with the promise of his lifelong ambitions.

I dream of Flynn almost every night, innocent dreams of warm hugs and conversation, and I stop refreshing the 'swimming coach' search results on Seek. I try to believe that the Hongs can help us build our own club from the ground up, that only then will I be able to leave all this behind. Only then will I let go of the hope that Flynn and the others will come back. I will stop believing that he and I still have a chance.

Now, Again

A year passes before I think of the new pool as home, before I accept that Flynn isn't coming back. None of them are.

I'm never going back to school, nor to swimming with Flynn and Jamal and Dae, nor to teach lessons while Dad coaches on the other side of the pool.

But at least we have the Hong's support.

We stop repeating conversations about the school, and Greg, and about how Dad can't get a proper job. I help him at the pool and accept his apologies about not being able to pay me.

We don't talk about how, if we keep on like this, we won't be able to pay the bills. How we've come into the habit of dining by candlelight to save electricity.

Now, Flynn is a boy who doesn't matter as much as I thought he would. But if he and the boys asked me the same questions they did back then, my answers would be the same.

My mother works more hours to make up for the money Dad doesn't earn anymore. One time, when she's working, we invite Lily's family over to dinner.

We sit at the table just before the sun sets.

They look around our living room, at all the shelves lined with all the candles we've accumulated over the years. Just in case.

'You have a lot of candles,' Lily observes.

'You should light one,' I say, passing the lighter.

Before the flames flicker to light, there's an uncertain sputtering, a wavering that reminds me of pool water. The way it hesitates before spilling into the drains. Like it wants to remain on the surface, face up to the light, but some inevitable, inexorable force pulls it down into the darkness of the drains, and it acquiesces to its fate.

But just as inevitably, the spark finds the wick, and I see the Hong's warm faces glowing through the shadows.