A Habitual Smoker

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I have just bought cigarettes. It's not an amazing occurrence in itself. People buy cigarettes all the time. This is different. I don't smoke.

"Lookin' for a good deal on cigarettes?" the cashier had asked as I set instant coffee on the counter.

My initial reaction was to explain to him that I'm not because I don't. Smoke, that is. But before I could inform him of this I thought of how I must have looked just then, strolling up and down the dwarfed aisles, becoming transfixed first on various food items, and then, in a perverse way I had never known, on the cigarettes.

Staring at food became an obsession when I still lived in Indiana. The never ending shelves of sugar and chocolate milk powder at the supermarket put me in a childish ecstasy. As a little girl I would beg my mom to push down the pop aisle again so I could run my hand across the cool sides of the cans. Pop was the only thing she'd let me touch. And now as a college student the excitement of walking through food stacked over my head still cannot be matched. But my boyfriend, Tom, lets me touch everything, and I do. I dream of strawberry sugar wafers melting on my tongue as I stroke the plastic package, fantasize about my back teeth grinding those stiff rye crackers as I shake the box. I feel the steak filling my stomach as I make indents in the meat. Tom used to be patient with my regression. He even enjoyed it. He'd put his arms around my waist and say, "Hey, little girl, hurry up," and pull me along. If I go to the store now, I try to be alone.

In this particular convenience store I knew I had time. I stopped when I noticed an entire aisle was devoted to cigarettes. I stood before the numerous neatly stacked white and tan boxes, the packed cartons. Each corner was sharp under the harsh lights. Instantly my imagination snatched them up and held on firmly. My desire for them swelled. I wondered about the feeling of gently squeezing the soft filter between my fingers. I considered the patterns the thick, white swirls would draw against my lone desk lamp. I thought of my tongue stroking the rough tip, my lips set around the cool paper.

I am not certain how long I remained there, taking small steps to the right and left, eyeing the many brands. Even though I often break down and buy some kind of food, I finally went to the counter without cigarettes. That is when the cashier addressed me.

"The ones on the display here," he went on, pointing, "are on sale—two for the price of one. Cheapest cigarettes in the store."
It is a cold night. A fresh set of shivers fingers my spine. I begin the walk back to my dorm room carrying a brown paper bag containing instant coffee and two packs of cigarettes.

I don't smoke, but I've subconsciously been tempted to do it—just once—for several days. I think of all the cliches about smoking. "She's doing it because everybody else does it." That's right. I've been envious of those who pull lighters from their backpacks as they wait for their next classes. It appears to be an action as important as eating. "She just wants to look older." This is correct, too. I am experiencing an "adult-like" sensation, nearly a glow, knowing that a year ago I could not have bought the cigarettes. This time it was suggested to me—adult to adult. Freudians would say that I have an oral fixation. They have a valid point. The anticipation of sucking smoke into my mouth accelerates my pace.

Then it hits me. I don't have matches. I look over my shoulder at the long stretch of sidewalk and conclude, once again, that it is a cold night. I continue but slower now.

In my room I sit at my desk, turn on my lamp, and take the cigarettes from the sack. After tearing off half of the top, exposing the ends of the filters, I bring the pack to my nose and fill my lungs with a scent that seems to spill over on my tongue. As the stimulus sweeps across my brain my stomach and thigh muscles contract pleasurably. I close my eyes. I imagine the smell of smoke extending from one wall to the other and my air draped with a hazy, white cloud. I see myself enveloped and caressed by the cigarettes' breath.

My dreams dissolve; I don't have matches. As always when I look for something, I start looking in the middle drawer, then the top left, the top right, and alternating on the way down. There is not much hope of finding any. I don't. My frustration is disturbed by several sharp knocks on my door. I recognize them and am not certain whether I am comforted or annoyed. Regardless, the door swings open and Tom walks in.

"Done studyin'," he says slower than is intended. He holds my chin for a moment with his still-cold hand. The veins of his eyes have deepened. Dark lines extend outward from the bridge of his nose as if trying to hide his faint freckles. I pull his head down to my level by his red hair. We kiss. I remember musing on our first night together that I'd never had a redhead before. Something warm struggles inside me. "Go d' bed?" Tom asks.

He locks the door. I do not have to watch him retrace his steps and do this. Again, I don't know if I feel secure or irritated. When I hear the lock click I wish it were possible to feel a balance between the two, but I know it isn't.

"God damn, physics is a bitch. Me and Manes went for hours on the lab," he mumbles, putting his coat and backpack away. He turns and smiles fully towards me. "Babe..."
I turn my concentration to the cigarettes on my lighted desk. I wonder if I should hide them. Cigarettes always seem to be something hidden or not talked about except with other smokers.

"I bought cigarettes tonight, Tom. See?" In one motion I take the pack into my hand and show it to him. After all, I have grown up and can do what I want. The cashier, probably a smoker himself, wouldn't have offered me the cigarettes if he thought I hadn't and couldn't.

"But we don't smoke," Tom says.

"I know. I just wanted to, that's all," I say.

He slides his sweatshirt over his head. "Well, I can't stand the smell of them. Don't make it a habit. God, I'm exhausted." His jeans come off and he climbs into my bed.

It's my room, I think defiantly. But my control of it has slipped so greatly it might as well be his, too. I feel I hardly know the girl who, months ago, suggested that Tom spend his nights here. I try to recall what it feels like to sleep alone, to be able to stretch my limbs over each end of the bed.

"Don't worry. I don't have matches." I drop my clothes into a pile where I stand and slide in next to him. "When I was ten my mom had this boyfriend who smoked. He bought them by the carton. I took a pack from him. This was summer. I would stay up very late, lie in my bed with the lights out, smoke, listen to the radio, and think. I never do that anymore."

Tom looks at the ceiling. "You really feel you have to?"

"Yes. Thinking, yes." I fold my arms across my chest. "Smoking, probably not, but it might help."

"God, hon, it gets to me somehow. Not the thinking thing, I guess, though your mind seems fine to me. Smoking...it's so...imperfect." He throws his hand to his forehead and sits up. "No, no, I don't mean imperfect. Did you ever make your mother cry?"

"Sure."

"Well, you know that feeling you got along with the guilt? The anger that your mom would let you do something so terrible to her?"

"I think so. A kind of disappointment, right?"

"Almost." He is silent for a moment and slips deep in the covers. "It's the change in the regular pattern, really."

I understand this, and I don't respond. Tom opens his arms to me, and I automatically fall close and absorb the absolute comfort his body gives. Dropping the whole cigarette conversation from my mind, I think only of his soothing skin quieting any irritations I might have. Months ago the conversation wouldn't have ended. We would have exhausted every philosophical implication of the subject. I press myself against him and breathe smoothly. My lips lightly brush his neck. To this we respond. Too much. I'd never had a redhead. He'd never had anyone.
at all, though I didn’t know it at the time. But even then it was more than that. I resent him and myself for twisting affection. Afterwards, I can feel his heart thumping on my chest. I think about the cigarettes.

“That was incredible,” Tom says. “It’s amazing that...”

I imagine the tingling burn of my lips around the filter. I think of the smoke filling my mouth, my eyes. Tomorrow, I’ll buy matches and I’ll smoke. This room will be coated with it. I’ll listen to music. I’ll smoke all night.

I have an early class the next day. Tom doesn’t, so I must be quiet as I get dressed in the insufficient morning light. I dry my hair and apply my make-up in the bathroom down the hall. Back in my room I sit on my bed, put my arms on either side of his shoulders, and kiss his loose, sleeping lips. The familiar smell of his skin, moist from slumber, trips my senses. This is a self-made ritual.

“Sweetheart,” I say, rousing him, “I have to go. Are...maybe you could go back to your room now.”

His words are muddled and fall within one another. But because I have heard them before I comprehend. “I’ll stay. Put your key on the desk. I’ll leave it in the usual place.”

I gather my books. I hate not being able to lock my own door. It is my room.

All day I spot smokers. I am impressed by their mastery of cigarettes. One lights up while walking, not slowing his pace. I note another inhale and exhale in regular breathing patterns. All of them I see know exactly where their lighters are—always. At noon I see them sitting in the Union cafeteria and am astounded. Before them on their tables are ashtrays, sometimes coffee. No food. In a place where food is so available they satisfy themselves with simply the passing of smoke through their parted lips. I sit alone and have coffee for lunch.

With each smoker I feel a sense of comradery increasing within me. I want to smile knowingly at them, nod, or say in an exasperated manner, “In the whole library—no smoking!” And I feel akin to an oppressed minority when I see the sign with the red slash. How dare they? They just don’t understand. What gives them the right?

On my way back to the dorms I stop at the same convenience store as the previous night. But instead of going there only to ogle sweet rolls and nacho-flavored Cornuts, I have a definite purpose. I pick up a book of matches, place it on the counter, and stare steadily at the cashier. I expect her to ring it up, but she doesn’t.

“They’re free,” she says at last.
I don’t take my eyes off hers. “Of course,” I say, hiding my mistake. “I just haven’t carried cash in a while, so I’m used to picking up matches. But I have the money now.” I am relieved that I happen to turn directly to where the lighter display is. “A lighter is what I meant really.” I pick one up and set it in front of me.

“Uh-huh,” she punches the keys of the register. “Sometimes habits get confused.”

In my room I am saturated with anticipation. Nevertheless, I do not plunge frantically for the cigarettes and lighter as I would have with potato chips and French onion dip. No. With a deliberate restraint I hang up my coat and methodically put my books on the shelf. Inside, my nerves flutter like excited humming birds; yet, on the outside I am calm.

The first sight of the flame startles me, and I flinch. The second time I study it. It’s strange how solid the fire seems. I place the end of a cigarette in what appears to be a ball of yellow satin and inhale. The tip becomes bright red. The smoke eases around my tongue, then reaches out into the air, and spreads itself thin.

A woman looks good with a cigarette, I conclude from my reflection in the mirror. I practice handling it, trying to make the movement of my hand to my mouth look effortless. Perhaps I’m awkward, but with the second pack I want to be an expert. Besides, just the mere presence of the white stream twisting upward from my fingers is sultry in itself.

I’m so fascinated with the burning cigarette I do not hear Tom’s three sharp knocks and am only aware of him when he speaks.

“What is this?” He waves his arms and forces himself to cough.

This, I want to say, is my damn room. But I don’t. There is a woman in the mirror smiling at me, and I continue to smile back.

—Carmen Largaespada