Cigarettes in a Kitchen

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We gather around the fumes as if they were God, filling all of our lungs, even those of us who don’t like cigarettes. Five women inhaling it like swirling clouds of conversation, gossip and slang in a kitchen turning yellow and gray. Gray as my grandmother’s coarse hair growing thick just above her lip that disappears when she kisses the end of her Ultra Light Blue. She forces smoke, like understanding, away as she speaks. Swift, Swede eyes follow it up, and mine, slow and brown, follow it down again and into my nose where it’s held by tiny hairs against my will, captured somewhere behind my eyes, between my temples, making my head pulse with every judging word. And I think maybe the smoke, the hard, suffocating smell, the haze it creates, is why I can’t understand my mother’s Midwest expressions, Gamey, taters, roastin’ ears, my aunt and grandmother’s anger at the stupidity of that damned Clinton, men, and the hell bent woman next door. This cloudy kitchen is why I don’t recognize the names, Johnson, Swedelund, Larson, my younger cousin repeats in whispers. And maybe it is this confusion that makes my eyes burn with the brightness of their creamy hair, their crystal eyes, haloed in the smog that dulls me, makes me want to shut my eyes, cover my ears.