Cigs

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She squashed the cig. The smolders hissed on the dewed, chipped paint of the picnic table. The box beside her waited, open for her to reach for another. She pulled one out and lit it with a red BIC lighter. The backyard remained silent except for the exhale of her breath. Smoke drifted off to the right in a hazy grey against the bright summer sky. She squinted against the glare of the sun and hung her head to make her hair fall in a shade around her face. The Camel Blue hung limp in her hand.

Her head pounded like a mother. She grabbed the Solo cup beside her and downed the second glass of water.

The wind picked up and whisked her hair about her face. The fringes of the dark flapper costume mocked her limp hair and danced with grace on the wind’s fingers. The wind revealed a green bruise already forming on her thigh from last night. She smoothed them down and pulled the dress lower.

A third cig finished. Her head felt filled with a mixture of sand and sharp shards of shells. The grass retained a little life to it. The Indian summer held on still in the end of October.

A brown nose wedged itself between her bare feet planted on the bench. The happy grin of a dirty Golden Retriever greeted her. Mud speckled her face and burrs clumped her fur in masses. Her nipples hung low to the ground, heavy from the lack of puppies to relieve her. A leash trailed on the ground behind her.

She held her hand to the dog to smell. She sniffed, sneezed, and returned to smiling.

“Ey,” a voice said to her right.

She spun around on the table top. The fringes settled and she beheld a short old man. He wore an assortment of clothes. A black garbage bag tinned when he set it next to his feet. The ash colored stocking set above grey hair frilled around the edges. His eyes were shrunken brown spots with a bulbous nose in between. It was the kind of nose the toy trolls with the jewels for belly buttons sport. He stood on the other side of the chain link fence. They stared at one another. The dog grinned.

The old man made a move and she tensed. He pointed a finger at his dog.

“This, uh, she belong to you?” she said.
He nodded.
She pulled a chunk of fence back and revealed a hole for him to
squish through. She kept him in her sight while he shuffled around the yard poking at cups and cans. He pulled two out of the fire pit and came to stand a few feet away from her. The muscles in her body tightened. She perched on the edge of the table.

“You live here?” His thick accent made it difficult for her to understand him.

“No, I go to a different school. I’m just visiting.” She tried to sound casual. Her cigarette pointed in the direction of home when she gestured.

“Ah, yes. You live here?” She gave him a look and took a deep draw of her cig.

He tried another route. “I take these?” He indicated the cans.

She nodded.

“You go to school?” Another nod from her. The dog left her post by her feet and began sniffing around the yard.

“Where you from?” He struggled around the English. She shrugged. “I go to school at Iowa State. I study English.”

“Ah!” He slapped a knee. “My home Bulgaria.” He stood silent for a moment, still like a garden gnome with his hands flat on his sides. “Daughter a professor in Missouri.”

“That’s cool. I want to be a professor,” she put out the fifth cig. She turned her attention away from him to light another. He began to mosey around the yard again. She watched him through the haze of cigarette smoke. He disappeared around the front of the house. She sighed, relieved.

The Bulgarian can man left her mind. She drifted to images from last night with the wind. The night looked promising. Jerry, her boyfriend, was well on his way to a good time by a fourth of a bottle of Diablo tequila by the time she drove into town. They decided to host the Halloween party at his place this year after Jerry fell off the balcony and broke the railing of their friend’s place. She spent the morning vacuuming, dusting, doing the dishes, and hanging streamers while he took pulls and tugged his fingers through his hair. The tiny kitchen gleamed as best it could with the chipped tiles and peeling countertops. The fridge overflowed with alcohol and finger-foods.

Guests arrived in clumps after nine o’clock. She welcomed them at the door, sparkling in her flapper costume. She held an extended cig holder that was blinged out in faux diamonds which matched the twinkle of her headband. Jerry, dressed as Jerry, stoked a bonfire in the backyard and drank tequila from the bottle.
Music blared from the speakers. Partiers screamed in ears to be heard. Drinks spilled. More alcohol flowed to replace empty cups. During the hubbub, a zombie slipped in the side door. He swayed in combination of music and intoxication. His eyes caught a sparkle amongst the crowd in the living room and drew closer to it.

She felt his arms wrap around her and turned expecting Jerry. A man dressed in a torn shirt and jeans grinned at her. His face had been whited out. Blood and gore dripped from his mouth and covered his shirt. Clumps of goop sat in his greasy hair. He bent to kiss her, his arms pinned hers to her sides. She squirmed and turned away. His beer saturated breath raked across her neck.

The crowd slammed into silence around her.

She opened her eyes.

Jerry stood in front of them clenching a beer. She could see the veins standing out on both of his arms, his short, broad body poised to charge. His eyes slitted with anger and he chucked the can to the ground. “What is going on?” Each word slammed into her chest like a can of beer.

She whimpered. The zombie chose this moment to let go of her. Jerry charged. All two hundred pounds of him went into tearing the undead apart. He shoved her to the side. She screamed. The music screamed. The guests screamed. Their cries edged Jerry further.

“Jerry,” her voice stopped him for a second. He looked at her, and she knew his cause was lost. His eyes had sunk into a glazed fury where her touch could not be felt.

He continued punching the zombie. The man no longer moved. Jerry found the secret way to stop a zombie, but stopping didn’t saturate Jerry’s anger. She jumped into the beating. Jerry shoved her out of the way. She slammed into the wall and sat down hard.

The slam shook Jerry. He stopped. Looked at the zombie. Looked at his hands. Looked at her. She curled in a ball and avoided his eyes. He snorted. Spat. And he grabbed her around the wrist to drag her to the bedroom.

She shuddered at the memory and hugged herself. The Bulgarian cam man returned.

“Ey,” he said and grinned. “You live here?”

She shivered in the sun. Her slinky costume made her feel naked.

“Um, no. I am just visiting.” She lit one of her last cigs with a shaky
He pointed to a bag of cans sitting by the house she’d picked up earlier. “I take these?”

She nodded. The dog was not in sight.


“Ah, yeah, that’s nice.” Her cigarette was almost done.

“The hell?” Both stiffened at the sound of Jerry’s voice from the house.

He stomped into sight with the dog. His hand clenched her leash.

“What is this mutt doing in my house?”

She rushed forward. “Jerry, I’m sorry, baby. I left the door to the house open to air it out. It just reeks of beer, reeks of so much beer.” The last repeated in a whisper.

He shoved the leash into her stomach. A soft gasp escaped her mouth. He shook his head in disgust and turned to stalk back into the house.

The door slammed.

The can man waited for her by the picnic table. She handed him the leash and the bag of cans. And she resumed her perch on top the picnic table. Her fingers reached for the cigarette box and found the last cig. The can man watched while she tried to light it three times before succeeding.

He pointed to the fingerprint bruises around her wrist. Jerry could match each one of them with his own.

She shrugged. “It was the zombie’s fault, not his.”

The Bulgarian shook his head.

He bent to pick up the can of bags and pulled his dog behind him. Her tail wagged. He tossed the garbage bag over the fence next to his other bag.

He stood for awhile longer like a gnome once more. His face concentrated like he was trying to find the words to say something. But his tongue failed him. He settled for a simple, “thank you,” and continued on his way.

She sat on the table, a still figure in the sun. The cig remained unsmoked. It burned until nothing was left but ash to blow away in the wind.