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Smokin'

By Al Kaufman

The irony of meeting her because I had just decided to get in shape is not lost on me. I should have taken it as a sign that this was not meant to be, but instead I took it to mean that now was not the time to start a health kick.

It was January. My New Year's resolution, for the fifth year in a row, was to get in shape. I was quite sure that this resolution would suffer the same fate as the previous four, but I knew I'd feel guilty if I didn't at least make an effort of fooling myself that this was going to be the year. I took half of my lunch hour for a brisk walk. It was best to start slowly. I didn't want to shock my system with anything drastic like weights or running.

I was just returning to the office when I saw her. I had noticed her once or twice in the building. She wasn't attractive as much as she was striking. Her eyes were a little too small, her nose a bit too long, and her cheeks slightly too cherubic. Her clothes were not the latest fashion, but neither were they dated. She carried herself in a way that emanated a sexy self-confidence without arrogance. When I saw her she was sitting on a bench outside the front entrance.

At the end of her right hand was a cigarette.

I was used to seeing smokers on that bench; all bunched up for warmth in cold weather, or huddled under umbrellas in the rain. They looked and acted like the outcasts that they were. They were the smokers. They were the ones with the filthy, ugly habit that was not yet illegal, just righteously shameful. They were bad people.

She did not seem aware of this. She was defiant. She was proud. She was exquisite.

Usually during these moments I think to myself, "Wow, it would be great to date her," and then do nothing to bring it to fruition, but I was feeling good. I had just walked two miles and had a touch of runner's (okay, walker's) euphoria. The prospect of handling complaints and questions from people about their taxes did not seem as dreadful as it had on other days when I spent my lunch hour eating processed food in the break room. I was a new me. I was ready to take a risk.

I was also woefully out of practice. It had been over a year since my last date, mostly because the idea of asking a woman out made my palms sweat. I could talk to people once I knew them, but by then I was the brother, the one they came to when they needed advice about their Neanderthal boyfriends. It was a role I didn't mind playing, excepting for Rachel, Melanie, and Corinne. But they felt so comfortable with me that they would even walk in front of me in their underwear. So at least I could go home soon after and masturbate.

I was determined not to let that happen with this woman. It was time to make my move.

"Can I bum a cigarette off you?"

It was the only opening line I could think of. It seemed brilliant at the time. We'd sit on the bench, our thighs almost grazing, and bond over our mutual affection of inhaling carcinogens into our bodies. It all seemed so romantic.

“Sure, menthols okay?”

“Sure, just a long as it has nicotine.” I gave a little laugh. I was playing like a smooth addict.

She laughed and pulled one out of her pack. She handed it to me and reached for her lighter. I put the cigarette to my lips and hoped she would attribute the extra beads of sweat on my forehead to my recent workout. I was terrified. I tried to imagine the cigarette as a paper straw in my mouth. Her hand looked soft, with long, elegant fingers as she brought the flame up to my face. I wanted to reach out and touch her hand with mine, as if I was trying to steady the flame, but decided that would look too obvious.

Besides, I had other things on my mind, like how the hell do you get a cigarette lit anyway? I had no idea to what degree I needed to inhale. Too much and I would have a coughing fit, too little and the cigarette would not light. Either way, this should be hand model would know I was a fraud. I sucked it. It lit.

I felt my chest tighten and my pulse quicken. Saliva began pooling at the back of my mouth. There was a burning in my chest, and I could picture the cilia in my lungs begin to glow orange and burn down to nothing, causing my entire chest cavity to contract. But that was nothing compared to the taste. It tasted like a bad cough drop, and it felt like I had taken 30 of such drops on an empty stomach. The need to retch was difficult to quell, but watching her hand as it took her lighter back to its home calmed me, although I obviously could not fully hide the grimace on my face.

“Not used to menthols, huh?”

“No,” I said. “I usually just smoke the regulars, but, like I said, any port in a storm. I’m Hal, I’m on the seventh floor.”

“Sandra, I’m on nine.” She held out her hand and offered me the chance to shake it. I was briefly at a loss as to what to do with my extra appendage, but then realized I could switch it to my left hand. I quickly wiped my damp hand on my pant leg and grasped hers. It was soft but firm and comfortably warm, surprisingly so due to the chilly temperature. I wanted to bring it to my lips and taste its saltiness. I wanted to rub it on my face. I wanted to place it on my crotch. I released her hand after about three seconds, which I remember reading is the proper time for a first handshake.

“I know menthols are considered sort of the white trash cigarette, but I’ve been smoking them since I was fifteen and I’ve grown used to them. Are you new?”

This caught me unaware. New to what? Could she tell I hadn’t smoked before? I thought I was doing pretty well. Not holding it between my first and second fingers like the socialites in the movies, but pinching it between my thumb and first finger, like I was hard core. I looked like I knew what I was doing, dammit.

“Excuse me?”

“I haven’t seen you out here before. You get to know the smokers pretty quick around here. We all end up needing our fix around the same time. You just start working here?”

I am in awe as to how the mind works, how it associates one moment with another. I, like everyone else on the planet, have always been a big fan of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. It was never Christmas until Boris Karloff told the tale on my TV. Even now, I rent it before I go to visit my brother and his sons on Christmas Eve. We pop popcorn and I watch it with my two nephews. It’s become a sort of tradition. At that moment on the bench, my mind went straight to the scene where Mary Lou Who asks the

Grinch, dressed as Santa, why he is taking their tree. Mr. Karloff reads, "He thought up a lie, and he thought it up quick."

"No, I've been here two years now." That part was the truth. "I just usually walk while I smoke. I guess I like to feel like I'm exercising while I'm killing myself, kind of hope the two will balance each other out." I gave a little chuckle, and she, thankfully, did as well. "But today as I went out on my walk I realized I was out of my Marlboros. I figured I'd just get some at the CVS along my route. But when I got there I realized I had no money. So I was really Jonesing by the time I got back here. I can't tell you how thrilled I was to see you sitting here."

And there you have the lie sandwich. Put small truths at both ends and hope they don't notice the whopper in the middle. She gave a little laugh that exposed her neck over the top of her scarf, so it must have worked.

"I've had something like that happen to me before. Sort of helps you to understand why crack heads sell their bodies and their kids, huh?"

She had a nice smile. It was an I'm-being-amusing-for-your-benefit-because-I-like-you smile. Don't ask me how I knew. Someone skywriting "I LOVE YOU HAL" is usually not an obvious enough signal for me. But in this case I just knew.

"Exactly," I said.

We chatted for a few moments about cigarettes. I apparently started smoking in college and gave it up for a year or so after I graduated, only to take it up again after I broke up with a girlfriend. We both wholeheartedly agreed that anti-smoking laws were forcing people like us to act like criminals, and soon the only thing we would be able to do is smoke in our own houses -- provided we had no kids -- with the lights off, while attempting to hide the little orange glow.

We smoked in silence for awhile. I was desperately trying to think of something to say for two reasons. One, I wanted her to like me. Two, if I talked I could just hold the cigarette and not have to inhale it. Then, it just came into my head. It was as if the god of dating had finally looked down on me and taken pity. He decided he could at least spare one good line on me. I used it before he could decide to take it back.

"Anyway, you saved my life just now. I'd like to make it up to you with at least dinner or something."

Okay, maybe the god didn't have the "or something" part in his line, but I was out of practice and, between the cigarette and getting up the nerve to ask her out, my stomach was quivering like a frightened Chihuahua.

She smiled. She must bleach her teeth. They were white. "I'd like that," she said. "The last guy I dated didn't smoke and, you know, it really caused problems. I couldn't smoke in his house. I mean, what good is sex if you can't have a cigarette after?"

I laughed. I needed to remind myself to laugh. I was too busy picturing us naked in bed with our arms around each other as we enjoyed a satisfying post-coital cancer stick. But I even managed to nod my head and say, "Exactly," agreeing that sex without a cigarette is about as satisfying as kissing your own sister. But I knew I was in. I knew she liked me, otherwise she wouldn't have mentioned sex at all. Even I was smart enough to pick up that cue.

"How's Friday night sound?" I asked, hoping I wasn't being too presumptuous by assuming that she would be free on a weekend night.

"Sounds good," she said.

“Do you like Thai?”

“Love it.”

“Great.”

She reached into her purse and gave me her business card. She scribbled her home number on the back. “Here’s my extension. Call me next time you go on one of your walking cigarette breaks. I’d love to go with you.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow around 11:30.”

“I’m looking forward to it.”

It was my first ever cigarette date. We walked back to the elevators and I got off at seven. I felt like I should give her a kiss goodbye or something, but I just said goodbye and walked off as she smiled and waved. Once the sickness in my stomach subsided, the rest of the day was easy.

I stopped at the QT on the way home and bought a pack of Marlboros. You know, the Marlboro Man and all. I was a confounded when the cashier asked me “Soft or hard?” I wanted to tell him I was getting cigarettes, not Viagra. I couldn’t understand. I just stared back and said, “Huh?”

“Soft pack or hard pack?”

I had no idea what the difference was, but I wasn’t going to let this kid explain it to me. I just assumed, as a guy, there was only one way to go. “Hard pack,” I said.

I couldn’t believe how much they’d cost. I’ve eaten meals for less than I paid for that pack. Sandra was turning into an expensive date. I was back in the parking lot of my complex when I realized I had forgotten to get a lighter.

I didn’t smoke again until our cigarette date the next day. I picked up a lighter on my way into work, opened the pack, and pulled a few cigarettes out so that she would think I had smoked some since our last encounter. I had worked on topics to discuss. I figured we could talk work for awhile and make sure she didn’t know anyone I knew. All I needed was someone telling her I was a nice guy who didn’t inhale.

I had worked out topics to discuss. I thought I would start with things she liked to do in the city, then move onto current events. A homeless man had just been arrested for allegedly killing three people. Many folks thought he was framed because the cops had no idea who the real killer was. I wanted her take on it. If she wanted the homeless guy to fry then I’d know that it wouldn’t work and I’d only be out a pack of cigarettes and a few clean breaths.

But it ended up that she thought the case was just another instance of the poor and disenfranchised getting screwed. It also ended up that she liked films by the Coen brothers and books by Christopher Moore. I was clearly in love. I also realized that regular Marlboros went down much more smoothly than menthols. My lungs still felt like they were smoldering, but I didn’t feel like I needed to puke. Things were definitely looking up.

Ooh, and she kept touching me while we walked. She gestured a lot when she talked and always seemed to brush my shoulder with her index finger. Every time she made contact my heart palpitated more than it did when I sucked poisonous smoke into my body. So what if I was slowly killing myself for her. Isn’t that what love is all about – making sacrifices?

I decided on Son of Siam. Yes, the name is in horrible taste, but I really don't think the owner realized that when he named the place. Besides, in a town like this, where going ethnic usually means eating at Taco Bell, you take what you can get. I adore the curry dishes there, but I knew that would be a bad first date food. The mild but flavorful pad thai would be my choice that evening.

Clothing selection was difficult. I had nothing. Practically all my shirts were at least five years old and looked about ten. My pants were all fraying at the fly and hem. I flew over to Target and picked out their best cheap clothes. I wish they made Garanimals for adults, because I wasted a good twenty minutes trying to find a shirt and pants set that matched. I felt so, well, female. Here I was rushing out buying new clothes for a first date. I finally settled on a khaki print shirt with black pants. It looked elegant yet casual. Plus I'd be able to wear the ensemble to work.

I got home, showered and shaved, and only nicked myself once on my neck. Then it was off to Sandra's house.

She came out as soon as I rang her bell, so I only caught a glimpse inside. It looked neater than I had imagined. That was good. I'm actually a fairly tidy person. My friend Corinne, whom I've been lusting after for years, commented on my neat house and asked me if I was gay. I wanted to tell her, "I'll show you gay," and grab her for a toe curling kiss, but instead I just whined, "No."

"Sorry if I'm late. Were you waiting for me?" She looked great in all black.

"No, you're right on time."

"I've just never been on a date where I didn't have to wait for her."

"Yeah, it's a curse. My dad was always into being on time. It got me in trouble in college. I'd be invited to a party and show up when they said it started. Then I'd wait an hour for everyone else to get there. I've gotten a little better, but I see no point in making you wait. And besides, I'm hungry."

She didn't light up in the car. I don't know what I would have done if she did. It was too cold to open the windows and dangle the cigarette outside. I've heard lots of stories about never being able to get the smell out. I was thinking of telling her that I never smoked in my car, but I don't know if I would have been able to when it came right down to it.

We talked easily in the car and held hands as we entered the restaurant. I was really feeling something. Everything was so natural with her. I was downright giddy with anticipation, but simultaneously relaxed and comfortable. I don't expect you to understand.

We hit our first lull after we ordered our spring rolls and pad thais. While I frantically tried to organize my topics in my head, she took a sip of water then asked me, "Do you still smoke pot?"

"Huh?" She had a devilish grin on her face. She knew she had me.

"You heard me."

"That's a little like when Groucho Marx used to ask his guests, 'When did you stop beating your wife?'"

"I've watched you smoke. You pinch it between your thumb and forefinger, like a joint. Only pot smokers hold a cigarette that way."

This pleased me on two counts. One, she noticed little things about me. Two, this was obviously a pre-planned question. Like me, she put some thought into the evening and wanted it to go well.

“Yeah, I guess I did start smoking in college, around the same time I took up weed, but I really only stuck with the cigarettes.”

“Yeah, me too. Pot just makes me hungry and paranoid. Usually, people are put on drugs to not feel hungry and paranoid.”

“I’m glad you noticed though.”

“What?”

“How I smoke. I’m glad you noticed.”

She smiled that cute smile that scrunched up her eyes and took hold of my hand.

“I like looking at you, Hal. To be quite honest, it’s my new favorite hobby.”

“Well, I certainly appreciate your honesty, and may I add that you have exquisite tastes in hobbies. Yet another thing that I find attractive about you.”

We flirted that way for the rest of the night. I’ll spare you the nauseating cuteness of it all. That kind of stuff really only works on the person you’re saying it to, and even then only if they really like you to begin with.

We stopped for a beer and cigarette at Joe’s Place. It was so smoky in there that I didn’t even notice my own Marlboro. When I took her home and she asked me if I wanted to come in. I knew enough to suppress my hearty, “hell, yeah!” for a casual “sure.”

She had some funky folk art on her walls that she showed to me. Her house was very neat except for the ashtray with the three butts in it on her dining room table. It was like a splotch of black paint on a Monet, and I couldn’t take my eyes off it.

She took me into the living room and went into the kitchen. I took off my coat and laid it gently on the arm of her sofa. She returned with two beers and the ashtray. She sat next to me and lit up. I followed. I mostly drank my beer and tried to keep from burning any of her furniture. Once we extinguished the cigarettes I put my arm around her and kissed her.

It was horrible.

She was all stale smoke and beer. Even her hair smelled like she used day old nicotine shampoo. “You can do this,” I told myself as I ran my hands along her back. “Except for this little smoking thing she is your soul mate.” Funny, I always hated when other people used that term to define their significant others.

I felt clammy. Saliva began to puddle in my mouth. I knew that throwing up on her would put a damper on our relationship, so I pulled away and coughed. My chest heaved. I asked for water and she ran into the kitchen and brought some back. I could feel it cleansing as it went down.

“You okay?”

I loved this woman. I had to do it. Sure, she broke up with her last boyfriend because he didn’t smoke, but he wasn’t her soul mate. “Sandy, I have a confession to make. I don’t smoke.”

Never had I seen a woman go from beautiful to ugly so quickly. “You lying sack of shit.”

I was confused. I really thought she’d understand. I thought she’d tell me it was all right. “No, really, I don’t smoke.”

“I heard you the first time, asshole. Get out.”

“No, but wait. I did this for you. I really think I love you. I think we have something. I’m willing to take up smoking for you. Just give me awhile. I’ll get better.”

“Now you’re just a pathetic lying sack of shit. Get. Out. Now.” She sounded like Moses when he came down from the mountain and saw the golden calf. She pointed to the door, and I expected it to part open.

I couldn’t give in this easily. She wanted me to fight for her, to demonstrate my devotion. I know she did. Now was the time to make the grand romantic gesture, like pull the lit cigarette from her mouth, eat it, and kiss her until the smoke came out of my ears.

But instead I whimpered, “Please, I’ll change.”

“Go!”

The word rattled in my brain. I was listening to it bounce around in there until I felt her hands on my chest. I had a moment of hope, like all this yelling had stirred up some hidden passion in her, and she was going to grab me and swallow me with desire. But then those hands, those beautiful, charming hands, pushed me back into the door with such force that I turned around quickly to see if my body left an imprint.

Dammit, I could feel myself beginning to cry. And the thing that really pissed me off was I didn’t even know if it was from the excruciating pain of hitting the door or from losing out on the love of my life.

She will not see me cry.

I will leave with dignity.

“Bitch!” I screamed before slamming the door behind me. I don’t think my voice cracked.

I wish I could tell you I walked out to her place and into the arms of vegetarian triathlete. But the truth of the matter is I went home and finished my pack of Marlboros. The next day I bought another pack. Now I buy them by the carton. It’s cheaper. I have a nice guttural hack that comes out when I’m eating or in bed. I don’t go out to the smokers’ bench during my breaks, I just light up while I walk. I occasionally see Sandra though. She just scowls at me and looks away, even if I have a cigarette in my hand.