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Ash

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Ash

The Sun News arrived late this morning. My mother barely had time to page through it before leaving for work. I awoke at eight, showered, and joined her at the kitchen table to drink my coffee slowly and to eat my cherry strudel slowly.

"Paul," she said in the swift, sharp way that moms do, "There's a little blurb here about Amanda."

"What's it about?"

"She's won a full scholarship to Fordham."

"She always wanted to go to New York."

"Did she mention this at graduation?"

"She mentioned it." Amanda was ecstatic. Her white robe barely concealed her spastic body. She cried as the principal announced her name. I congratulated her and suggested that we hook-up again sometime. She agreed.

"Amanda's such a talented girl. Remember "Hello Dolly." Her Minnie Fay stole the show."

"I was in that musical too, Mom."

"Very smart too. What was her SAT score? Fourteen-hundred something. Do you remember the time when she came over and played Trivial Pursuit against your dad and . . ."

"I remember, Mom. Aren't you going to be late for work?"

"Shit! You're right. I'll call you from work, sweetie." A sloppy, coffee-rimmed kiss upon my matted hair. She gathered up her purse and portfolios and flew out the side door. Hurried words, "When did you stop dating her?"

"We never dated. We were just friends," I cried; she didn't hear. "Very platonic," I added to affirm the remark. With the paper now in my possession, I steered the folded page of the community section into view. The article was short. Three paragraphs in total. It described the nature of the award, how Amanda won it, and her future plans. Beside the print was a copy of her Senior picture badly cropped. She still looked beautiful. Amanda. We hadn't talked in months. We hadn't been out in ages. I needed a cigarette.

"Paul, we're good friends," Amanda declared with a long draw on her cigarette, "so why don't you trust me?"

"I do. I'm just not sure that this is necessary."

"Sure it is," she returned as smoke curled around her black bangs, "You wish to be believable in your role."

"Yeah."

"Then you must learn. Live the role, Paul."

We were standing in a gazebo on a Thursday night in March. The gazebo's basketball of a lamp flickered; pigeons cooed in the eaves. Rigatoni and red sauce marched through my intestines, while we stood there. After running lines at Agostino's, we had taken the walk which led to the park with the gazebo. Amanda had seen it first, and we

danced under the orange glow and upon the painted white center. Then she said that she needed a smoke. She said that I needed a smoke.

"Are you sure you won't try it?" she continued.

"Yes."

"Your character smokes."

"I use prop cigarettes."

"They look fake. And you don't know how to hold it. You don't know how to breath. The audience will notice."

"And . . ."

"Just try it. Nothing will happen." She smiled behind a veil of gray. "Trust me."

I carefully took the cigarette from her and placed it between my index and middle fingers. It was a Camel. She lit it with a match from the matchbook that she had taken from Agostino's. The ink chef winked at me from his paper kitchen. The ritual began.

Amanda guided me through it all. I drew the smoke in swiftly and allowed it to collect at the back of my throat. I was burned. She asked me how it felt. I attempted to speak, but smoke escaped instead of words. She said, "Draw it in. Into your lungs. Don't trap it." I did. I inhaled. I choked and coughed.

"Did you feel it," she asked.

"Feel what?"

"A buzz."

"No. How do you do it so smoothly? I just choke on the smoke."

"Practice."

Sitting on the white rail of the gazebo, cigarette in hand, she was beautiful. She bent down and kissed me.

"What was that for?"

"Just to see what it was like. We both did something new tonight."

"I thought we were just friends."

"We are," she replied. Another kiss. I returned this one as I pulled her off the rail and onto me. We continued to kiss, and I mumbled something about having dreamt of this once. "Gentle," she whispered as I rammed my teeth into hers. My tongue was lost somewhere by hers. I could taste the tobacco in her. "You taste like cigarettes."

"What?" she asked playfully biting my ear.

I let her down. She said that she needed another smoke. I asked for another. I finished this one. I learned the ritual. I spoke in character matching seductive puffs with key lines. We spoke of the play for the rest of the night. After the final performance she stopped calling.

I finished the article and strudel. Moved on to movie reviews. I also went for the pack of Camels hidden in my coat pocket.

-paul durica '00