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## Smoke Circles

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## Smoke Circles

They met in secret. He liked to think it was because she was ashamed of what they were doing, that she was afraid God would find out, or even worse, one of the nuns. He liked to think of her whispering her prayers at night, her hands clenched together so tightly the dimpled flesh around her knuckles stretched whiter than bone.

But when they came to the cave behind the woodshed and one long sweep of her flashlight revealed stubby vanilla scented candles tucked into rocky crevices and a soft wool blanket nestled invitingly across the floor, he began to wonder if she planned it all.

Even their first meeting seemed contrived. Everyone knew the Catholic girls hung out at the library after school. They stood out front in scattered groups like flocks of tropical birds pondering migration, each plaid, pleated skirt a fan of plumage, watching the boys from the public school parade past in their shiny cars.

His friends picked her out at the beginning of the school year, long skinny legs, hot chocolate colored hair curling shyly into the round, white curve of her elbow. Her books pressed against her chest like hungry children clamoring for attention.

The boys called out to her from car windows, their angular arms beckoning, their sugary voices singing that sweet song: *hey baby let me take you for a ride let me show you what you're made for does that cross around your neck make you a saint cause angel I'm in need of saving*. She kept on walking, turning her head till her hair fell across her face and hid the smile that played with her lips like an eager adolescent.

This drove them mad.

They followed her home, strolling a few feet behind her, watching her book bag bounce against her back in time with their heartbeats. They called her house at three a.m. and exhaled repeatedly. They sat in trees in her front yard, swinging blue jean legs and hollering through cupped hands *come out and play, baby* till her father threatened to call the police — all tried and true methods of obtaining a girl's respect and affection. Still, the blinds at her window stayed closed.

His friends sought comfort in other girls: drugstore blondes, leggy redheads. They all looked the same in those uniforms, anyway.

"Steve," they told him, their voices holding the awed conviction of one who has become a true believer. "There are girls out there that will screw you for a stick of gum."

So he took to chewing Wrigley's, stocking Chiclets in the glove compartment of his truck. Yet in the end, it was the cigarettes that she noticed, his cigarettes in the poetry section of the public library.

She passed by him twice, the second time brushing lightly against his shoulder, sending a shock wave up and down his arm. Steve had a sudden realization of how electrocution must feel — and he liked it. He caught a whiff of summer as she passed, of sun and air, and grass stems crushed by the weight of warm bodies lying together all afternoon.

He followed her into the next aisle, the poetry aisle. She strained to reach a book on the top shelf. Her hand stopped a few inches too short, her fingers clenching and unclenching uselessly like a child grasping for the cookie jar on top of the refrigerator.

She turned to him.

"Could you? I can't quite reach."

"Which one?"

She pointed to a slim volume with a faded green cover. He reached over her head and plucked it down easily. *Dorothy Parker, Collected Verse*. He held it out of her reach, teasingly, cruelly.

"You like poetry?"

"Pick a page."

He leafed through the worn, gray pages, soft and greasy against his skin.

"Forty-nine," he said.

"The title?"

"Solace."

"Solace," she whispered, her pale voice feathery.

The hair on his arms stood at attention.

She closed her eyes, and inhaled slowly. The tiny gold cross on a chain around her neck rose and fell like a buoy between her breasts.

"There was a rose that withered young. I saw its shattered beauty hung upon a silver stem. They said, what reason there to care with blossoms budding everywhere? I did not answer them." Her eyes flew open, pulses of dark light, settling their sights on him. "Are you impressed?"

"Keep going."

She laughed, the sound of water falling.

"Don't tempt me. I know most of the book by heart."

"You're a poet."

"An actress."

She tossed her head, and her hair flew over her back and re-arranged itself across her shoulders like a thick dark cloud.

"I played the lead in the school play, Saint Joan. At the end people actually cried. I made them cry."

Her eyes grew luminous, focusing on him. She did not blink as she said, "I'm Lisa."

The cave, of course, was Lisa's idea. It was Lisa's cave, discovered some time ago in a childhood she did not speak of. He liked to think of a long legged ten-year-old, barefoot and brown skinned, seeking shelter from a sudden storm. He did not ask if she brought other boys here. He had seen the names scrawled on the walls with charcoal, the cigarette butts that were not his.

Their agreement— Lisa's agreement— was simple. He gave her a cigarette for every poem she recited. Though his poetic knowledge previously consisted only of eighth-grade English class, the words spoken in the dark cave, spoken in her clear half-whisper, suddenly made sense. Suddenly, they became something private, exclusive between his ears and her lips. They became secrets.

She squared her shoulders, sat back on her heels —the cave was not tall enough for standing— and closed her eyes. Lisa always closed her eyes, as if it helped her to remember, as if the flickering candlelight and the soft yellow beam of the flashlight were too distracting.

Her face came alive with movement, eyebrows arched, forehead crossed with tiny emotion lines: worry lines, passion lines, sorrow lines. He knew when she was finished because the lines melted back into the smooth plain of her skin like breakers settling after a squall.

Afterward, Lisa smoked cigarettes lying on her back, one hand propped under her head as if gazing up at the sky, as if she could see right through the roof of the cave, right through the trees to the stars beyond. She blew rings and watched them hang in the air between them, dissolving into nothingness, only air.

She blew smoke circles at the ceiling. He imagined tracing those circles underneath her shirt, across her stomach. But they disappeared too quickly, hitting the ceiling and scattering, drops of water into a pan. He imagined the smoke seeping down the cold, wet walls, rolling back to him over the ground all misty and hot and he inhaled the sweet, suffocating fumes until his lungs burned.

He never touched her.

"Do you want to kiss me?" she asked him once, grinding the stub of her cigarette into a pile of ash the color of stone.

"Yes," he said.

She closed her eyes, her lashes flickering, tiny gray butterflies beating their wings.

"I'm ready," she whispered.

She parted her mouth slightly, just wide enough for a breath, a slit of smoke.

He listened to her breathe. A heartbeat passed before he leaned forward and softly touched the tip of his index finger to her lips.

Though they met at the cave for two months, she did not invite him to kiss her again, and he would never ask.

Drinking beer behind the high school one night, one of his friends told him of the Catholic girl he had taken home, the curly-haired actress who, in the thrones of passion, quoted lines of Shakespeare. With her eyes closed.

"Did she read you poetry?" Steve asked.

"Did she what?"

"Read you poetry."

His friend threw a crushed can in the darkened direction of the football field.

"We made poetry," he said. "We didn't need to read it."

Early into November, it snowed for the first time. Steve waited at the wood shed for two hours before giving up on her and walking back himself. The woods were dark. Without Lisa or her flashlight, he tripped over small things; varicose roots, branches displaced by a long ago storm.

Inside the cave, orphaned leaves laid a brittle, colorless carpet that crackled and came alive under his boots. Two of the candles had burned to extinction, feeble wicks drowning in their own yellow wax. The snow drifted, sending up a white smoke screen, sprinkling the outer lip of the cave with sugar circles. He crouched by the ground and wrote their names in the snow. Steve and Lisa.

On the way back to his truck, his breath crystallized. It hung in the air before him like something unspoken. He walked through it, the wind stinging his face with bitterness.

He thought of Lisa, lying on her back, blowing circles at the stars while words fell from her lips like kisses.

*—Alison Stine '00*