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American Cigarettes
by Graham Taylor

Was it the fourth or fifth time he'd seen the woman sitting on the bench? Roger Lambert, a thirty-nine-year-old systems analyst, wasn't sure. He pawed at the knot in his tie, which in the 9am heat already felt like a balled fist against his throat. He stared down the steps outside Tower Hill Tube station.

Every morning, the same scene. The woman, perhaps in her late-thirties, always sat with an expensive-looking handbag propped against her left thigh. The bag, like her clothes, was black and the lining, like her lips, was scarlet. He knew this because she'd reach inside for a cigarette and a bullet-shaped silver lighter.

Roger decided she was the most glamorous person he'd ever seen. He was mesmerised by the smoke billowing around her body. In the haze, the people outside the station seemed to disappear as though they were part of an elaborate film set. He felt he was spying on a fading but still-beautiful actress, enjoying a break between takes on a deserted soundstage.

He longed for a cigarette, a sudden and strong pang that snapped him out of his reverie. He had given up a year ago, largely at his wife's request. Yet he missed the ritual of smoking – peeling off the cellophane, nosing that sweet tang of dried tobacco, sliding out a white stick, slipping it between expectant lips...

His mind wandered to the nicotine patches he kept in his desk, and thoughts of work finally led him to his office off St Katharine Docks.

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Roger stuck a brown square on his arm while his PC booted up. He felt guilty – not because he couldn't stop thinking about his starlet on the bench, but because his wife didn't know he was on two packets of patches a week. Giving up smoking was a big deal, and the fact he was still putting nicotine into his body 12 months on felt like a betrayal.

But then the emails and phonecalls and coffee runs began. There were systems to be analysed, and Roger was highly regarded by his peers for the depth and breadth of his analysis.

Imperceptibly, however, his own system was crashing. One morning, he was late for work because he'd been obsessing about the polished curves of her lighter. He'd never been late for work in his life.

Then one day, she gazed back at him from her bench through a fog of smoke. Her face wasn't saying get lost. Caught somewhere between fear and desire, Roger walked down the steps and sat beside her.

"Lexi. Lexi Stryke," she said.

"Sorry? Lucky Strike?"

"Lexi Stryke. With a 'y'. In Stryke." She paused. "And Lexi with an 'i'."

"Oh. I'm Roger Lambert. Spelled exactly as you'd imagine."

Lexi laughed and inadvertently waved her cigarette under his nose. It was good; he savoured each rococo curl of smoke. She must have sensed something pass between them because, still smiling, she offered him one.

He politely declined.

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This continued for a week. Then, the inevitable: Lexi suggested going for a drink, and Roger was surprised how easy it was to say yes. He was glad it was summer. Outside in the warm air, he could watch her light up, inhale, exhale. During the next fortnight, as they explored London's beer gardens and roof terraces, he embraced life as a passive smoker.

At the end of their fifth date, they kissed – properly – for the first time and agreed to meet the following night. Roger could still taste her when he got home and she must have left a trace, for his wife jokingly asked if he'd been smoking. He gripped the unopened packet of twenty hidden in his pocket and told her not to be silly.

That night his heart thudded and his jaw clenched in anticipation of seeing Lexi. He couldn't deny he longed to see and explore her body, but stronger still was his craving to share a cigarette with her.

He knew he was in the grip of addiction, yet couldn't say exactly what he was addicted to.

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Lexi took him to a small, faintly musty flat near the river. Light from bankside bars pooled in ominous slicks on the water. Roger had no idea where he was, but then they were inside, laughing and fumbling with drinks and each other. With a flourish he produced the packet from his pocket.

"What are those? Sorry, I only smoke American cigarettes."

"Fine," said Roger, mildly hurt. He sparked up.

"You're a bad influence, Lexi. You should come with a health warning. I'm back to my bad old ways."

"Whichever way you turn, fate sticks a foot out to trip you."

"Pardon?" As Roger tried to work out what she meant, he wondered if fate was simply a system that could be analysed like any other.

"Sure you want this, Roger? I mean, I've never asked if you're married or anything..."

"Yes."

"You're married?"

"No, I mean yes, you've never asked if I'm married or anything. More whisky?"

She went to the bathroom while he made drinks. Posters for old movies adorned the walls – Detour, Touch Of Evil, Kiss Me Deadly. He wasn't familiar with them but the titles, shimmering in and out of focus through the smog, spoke to him. Deadly. Touch. Evil. Kiss. He felt he could rearrange the words to create infinite hidden narratives. And Detour: that's what his life had taken.

Lexi returned and downed her drink. A car's headlights, refracted through the half-drawn blinds, created strange patterns on the walls. The already-garish images on the posters seemed edgier, more dangerous.

"I read some Chandler once," said Roger. "Made me feel like a criminal."

"Do tell," murmured Lexi, snaking an arm around him.

"Oh, dirty. Dirty and paranoid."

"And guilty?" asked Lexi. She pulled him to the bedroom.

Roger couldn't answer that. An image of his wife flickered briefly in his mind, but she belonged to a different world. Lexi pushed him onto the bed and when he reopened his eyes, her face loomed over his.

He unwrapped her as though he were opening a packet of cigarettes. Ever-shifting plumes of blue-grey smoke folded in on each other, like ghost limbs entwining. He could detect her perfume and his sweat in the pungent air. As they writhed, the stagnant fog eddied, clinging to the sheets and draping their slick bodies. Lexi reached out and knocked over a glass ashtray, and the clatter spurred Roger towards orgasm.

But already he was thinking about the post-coital cigarette.

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He awoke with difficulty. His head throbbed and his tongue bristled in his parched mouth. Lexi was gone. He knew he would never see her again. She'd left her lighter on his pillow; underneath this was a small handwritten card. Her scrawl was childlike, not joined up.

The card read: "He was born when she kissed him. He died when she left him. He lived a few weeks while she loved him."

Roger didn't understand, but he knew he was in a lonely place. She'd used a cigarette to burn a hole through the card; the lipstick-stained butt looked obscene against the white sheet. He had to get out – but first, a smoke.

As he raised the lighter he saw himself, distorted and absurd, reflected in its chrome surface. He didn't recognise the face staring back at him.