

In the Time it Takes the Smoke to Clear

By Katherine Owen

A package of Gauloises Blondes cigarettes rests on the table. The blue paper box is crumpled slightly and the cellophane wrapper has been discarded to the side. Several of the slender French smokes have fallen out of the pack, some completely, some only halfway, and they seem to be swimming in the scattered slivers of tobacco that have loosened themselves from the delicate white paper that hugs the rest of the tobacco and now lie on the table next to a lighter and an ashtray.

Maureen sits on one side of the table. She stares over Andrew's left shoulder at the clock hanging on the wall. It is one thirty-three in the morning. On the other side of the table, Andrew taps his fingers on the dark wood. He is attempting to remember a lesson or two of the piano instruction he received in his youth. All he can remember is *The Flight of the Bumblebee*. Maureen switches her glance from the second hand of the clock to Andrew's hands, specifically his cuticles. She regards them contemptuously; they are thick and overgrown. Andrew mistakes her glance as a rebuke to his tapping and blushes a bit, pressing his hands flat against the table in order to halt their sudden impulse to rehearse great classical compositions.

There is a moment of silence and Maureen picks up her pack of cigarettes. She fiddles with the flip-top lid for a while before sliding one of the slim cylindrical sticks out. She holds it in her fingers for a while, passing it from hand to hand before she places it between her lips. They close gently over the spotted filter, tightly, but not tightly enough that the filter smashes and wrinkles. This happened the first time she attempted to smoke. She smoked her first cigarette out of a desperate desire to be considered one of the cool kids. Sitting in the back of a Plymouth Reliant, her green and red plaid Catholic school uniform wrinkled and sliding up her legs, revealing a stray thread unraveling from her black panties, she took one of the crumpled Marlboro Reds that was offered to her, passed back over the front seat. Even in her ignorance, she knew that the cigarette was old, stale; it tasted wrong, though she didn't know what the right taste would have been. The boys in the car had laughed at her, swapping forty-ounce bottles of St. Ides malt liquor and Miller Genuine Draft. They were amused at the shuddering cough she issued and how she gripped the cigarette so tightly that it snapped and tobacco and ash tumbled down the front of her white oxford blouse. She hadn't asked for another one.

Andrew offers to light Maureen's cigarette for her and leans across the table, but she takes the lighter from his hand and holds it for a while. The heavy metal case feels cool in her hand. Andrew's eyes shift to gaze to the right, his mouth opens and then closes; he is trying to establish the best opening sentence to the conversation. Just as he is about to speak, Maureen flicks the lighter's case open, and presses on the wheel mechanism, igniting the flint. She gazes into the blue and white and black of the flame as Andrew starts to talk.

"Maureen, hon, I know that something is bothering you and I wish that you would tell me what it is."

Maureen raises her eyes from the flame and catches Andrew's eyes. Her gaze still fixed on him, she tilts her head forward and touches the tip of the cigarette to the flame. Sucking deeply she lights the cigarette and inhales the sweet smoke. The first curls thread through the room. Her finger releases the lighter and places it back on the table. Tipping her head back a bit, she exhales, pushing the smoke from her lungs and closes her eyes. In her head she feels the slight rush that comes with the first drag of any cigarette. No matter how often she smokes, it is the same. Her eyes water slightly and her head spins. The hair on her arms raises and her fingers tingle. She takes a large breath to calm herself. This feeling is almost like being touched, the wrong way; she shivers silently.

Several years ago, she had been sitting in a coffee shop on a date with a man she barely knew. The mirrors that covered all of the walls in the room were unnerving, and gave Maureen the feeling that the place was much larger than it actually was. Glancing at her own reflection and the reflection of her date sitting next to her was unavoidable and she looked critically at the way she held her coffee cup and the stilted way she smiled. The thick turtleneck sweater that she wore offered a padding between her arm resting on the counter and his arm placed carefully next to it. The door to the coffee shop opened with a rush of cool air and in the mirror she watched an elderly couple enter and place their order. Nodding and grinning at the appropriate places in her date's story, she felt a slight pressure on her leg and realized, as the pressure traveled from her leg, to the top of her thigh, to the round flesh of her ass, that the pressure came from the hand of the elderly man who had just entered and was now carrying his order to the table across the room where his wife waited.

Her date had wanted Maureen to confront the man and even offered to say, insisted on saying, something to him, but she dragged him outside after fumbling to grab her purse and spilling her coffee down the front of her sweater. Later that evening, after her date kissed her goodnight and his hand trailed from her leg, to the top of her thigh, she vomited in her apartment, unable to make it to the bathroom.

A cloud of smoke escapes from the end of her cigarette, circles her mouth and her lips, curls into her nose as she inhales another drag, swallows the aromatic fumes and pushes them, almost spitting them, back out. A little sausage of ash has collected on the cigarette and Maureen leans over to pull the ashtray closer to her. She taps the accumulation of ash into a glass bowl with the image of a Hawaiian beach painted on it and clears her throat. The smoke is hanging in the air above her head and the room is stifling. Across the table, Andrew is hidden in the gray feathers of smoke that swallow the room and Maureen can not see him as she opens her mouth to talk. She is dizzy and disgusted as she tries to speak. The hand holding the cigarette is quivering visibly and the slender fingers of her other hand press against her temple. She is disheveled; her hair is rumpled and knotted, her clothes are unwashed, wrinkled and look thrown on, which they were. Despite all this and the bruising hickey just below her collarbone, she feels dignified and reserved.

"Andrew," she starts and then stops.

"What is it, Maureen? I thought that you told me you were ready. It was wonderful, wasn't it? Did you enjoy yourself?"

Again, she inhales from her cigarette. She ashes once more and stares at the ashtray. The glass flashes under the light hanging from the ceiling and Maureen imagines what the glass would sound like hitting the floor. The muscles in her thighs ache and she wonders if Andrew is sore anywhere on his body. She had behaved like a savage in the bedroom, pressing herself onto him, pulling at his hair and his skin, like she needed to touch him like she needed to eat, like it was a necessity. She had let his hands and his mouth travel everywhere and now that it is over she tries to remember what it felt like, she tries to remember if she enjoyed herself.

She presses her cigarette to her mouth again and notices that the white paper is burning close to the brown, flecked filter. Her arms fold close to her body and she feels an ache in her foot. It is an ache like the one that she felt the first time she went to bed with another person. She sank into the mattress, burying herself under the soaked sheets; her head smacked against the bed frame and she moaned. She felt her lungs and her stomach crush under the weight of her father's body and she kicked her legs and, with her foot, knocked over a lamp that stood on the table near her bed, shattering it on the floor. It wasn't until she went to the bathroom later that she discovered that her foot felt wet because it was dripping with blood and she had to use her shirt to tie the wound closed.

Maureen closes her eyes and leans her elbows on the table. She attempts to inhale the last of her cigarette, but tastes the bitter burn of the filter. She slowly pushes the butt into the bottom of the ashtray, pressing it down harder and harder until the last bit of orange dims and is extinguished with a soft hiss. She glances at the clock. It is one thirty-nine in the morning.

"Maureen..." Andrew begins.

"Andrew, I can't see you anymore. Would you leave now?"

She closes her eyes and so does not see the last trails of smoke rise to the ceiling, coil and twist, illuminated by the single light in the room. The billows of smoke curl and spread until they begin to thin and then they float away and vanish.