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By Freida Theant

SMOKE SIGNALS MAGAZINE - May - June 2011

“Oh yes, considerably,” she replied, her anger growing, so that when she took a violent pull on her cigarette, her eyes blazed nearly as fiercely as the blazing tip. “There are lands and financial benefits, to say nothing of the political alliances and connections to the Tories that would fall into his grasp. This would greatly ease the way for his gaining a seat in the House of Lords.”

“But you don’t know what he has over your grandfather? The threat of some kind of scandal?”

“It almost certainly is something like that,” she guessed bitterly. “But without knowing any of the particulars, there’s nothing I can do.”

Before she could finish, the waiter reappeared, and they shoved the dilemma aside in favor of the dinner menu. Both ordered seafood specialties of the island, and steered the intervening talk into anecdotes concerning their childhood. When it arrived, the elegant meal and Sauterne wine exceeded their expectations, and had the badly needed effect of rejuvenating and relaxing them.

After the waiter cleared the desert plates, and they partitioned the remains of the Sauterne into their glasses, Allen asked, “What do ya think? Wanna get back to Hamilton before it gets any later?”

She upended the pack and saw there were only three Pall Malls left; she reduced that by one. Pushing the case over to him, she said, “I really don’t want to leave this cozy little ... womb,” the

pull of her mouth compelled the candle flame to ignite her smaller candle, "as soon as we finish these fags, I suppose we'd best get on. I'll have the waiter call us up a taxi."

With a look of resignation Allen removed the penultimate Pall Mall and resolved to savor this last mutual smoke in the closing moments of their encounter, for a lifetime would probably pass without seeing its like. The sustained pressure of his draw called the flame onto his cigarette deliberately, without hurrying, discarding the light-up puff to take the delicious post-dinner draft deep inside. The face of his cigarette blazed several heartbeats like a small sunrise in the cavernous dark from that sustained pull, and Nimbsy burned that image onto her soul for a lifelong keepsake. Filling his lungs plentifully, Allen held the fumes captive until they yielded the last of their magic, then casually rolled the spent smoke outwards from his mouth, jaw lowered carelessly. Progressive cumulus clusters hid his face before ambling toward the candle, where, caught up in the updraft, they rose violently as a column to the ceiling.

"Yes, I'll signal the waiter," Allen broke from his reverie, "Do you know how much it's gonna cost to get back to Hamilton by taxi?" He gestured to the server who waited half hidden in the recesses of the chamber.

"Don't concern yourself over the fare; I have more than enough."

The waiter took their request, and advised them that, after he placed the call, they could remain seated at their table until he announced that the driver had arrived. They accepted the arrangement gratefully, as reflected in her generous tip.

By the time their server announced the cab's arrival, she had already deposited her crushed out butt with the lipstick band and he his in the ceramic recipient. Entering the rear door of the Bermuda Cab Co. no. 325, Allen responded to the driver's request for their destination, "The main dockyard in Hamilton where the U S sailing ship is moored. It's downtown, do you know the location?"

The cabbie knew very well, "Of course, the one that docked this morning. I've already taken a few fares from your mates, but of all the ones I've picked up you're the farthest away."

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Nimbsy and Allen couched themselves comfortably in the plush rear seat, nestled together and bravely commented on the passing sights, now mostly in silhouette. The cabby qualified some of scenes with interesting background details and like the scenery, the minutes flowed past them effortlessly. </p>

“Everything on this island looks lovely,” she summarized. “I can’t believe things are so orderly, so secure, so clean here. It just not realistic.”

“Well, perhaps they are illusory,” the cabby laughed. “We have our own problems here, just like anywhere else. But, the appearances are so very important and everybody knows that. Maybe we pay more attention to how things look than most places do.”

“I know something about that,” Allen chimed in. “The military is always makin’ things look great regardless of how old or threadbare it really is. For instance, that ship of ours? It’s over thirty years old, but thanks to thirty layers of paint, and thousands of hours polishing the brightwork, it looks fine. You know, ship shape.”

“Back home, the whole social system revolves around a smart appearance. Never mind how rotten the person; the cut of his suit and his manner of speaking can paper over just oodles of disgrace,” Nimbsy added. “And contrariwise, you can be a saint on earth, but should you arrive at opening night with the wrong sort, or last year’s outfit, well ... you might as well have confessed to the dailies to being a street whore!”

All three shared the laughter in response. “Yes it’s true,” the cabby affirmed, “Everywhere you go you can always find someone who takes appearances to be the most important thing of all. Sounds like both of you are more than familiar with that way of life.”

Nimbsy made a “V” with her first two fingers and laid them over her lips, a signal that Allen understood and passed her the pack of Pall Malls. She tipped the case upside down and the last one fell into her palm, along with some shreds of tobacco. Tapping the final fag on the armrest, she asked the driver, “Where is the ashtray back here? It’s too dark for me to see it.”

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Allen brought his lighter flame up and her hand guided his to the final cigarette. As she oscillated the flame across the face of the Pall Mall, her grip on his hand was stronger, but still tender.

The driver responded, "The ashtray folds in from the back of my seat – you should see it just in front of you."

"Ah yes, there it is," she thanked the cabby, and then turned to Allen. The brilliance from her cigarette's coal during her first drag actually illuminated the nearby surfaces for an instant. "This is the last fag, you know. We'll have to share it," she lowered her voice and bent toward him invitingly.

"Good thing we're getting back to town." Allen said. "I'm gonna have to buy another pack when we get there."

And he inclined toward her as well, expecting her to pass him the floating ember, which is how it appeared in the extreme darkness of their back seat. Instead, she brought the glowing dot to her lips, made it flare brightly and then held it above her left shoulder, away from Allen. Instead of exhaling, she cupped her right hand around his jawline and drew his face into hers. As their lips pressed into union, her tongue forced his mouth open and she poured her captive treasure into his mouth. Instinctively, he took the draft down into his chest, absorbed its gift, and released the kiss to expel the sensual fog from his nostrils.

"I told you we would share it," she whispered. "I just didn't say how."

"I've never had a smoke I've enjoyed like that. Let me do that for you," he said.

Instead of an answer, she extended the floating ember toward his nearest hand. He placed his first two fingers around the white shaft and lifted it gently from her grasp. The orange dot once again made a brilliant sunrise as his deep pull highlighted their faces, then the lips sealed in concert, giving her that drink of smoke mixed with his breath that she so craved.

“Mmm,” the deep sound mixed with her outpouring of ghostly clouds in a diffuse cone, barely visible in this darkness. Other than the occasional deep-chested purr, the two passengers shared their clouded breath in amorous silence. Predictably the rich sensations permeating their chests triggered other burning desires a few points lower down, and the cigarette was not the only smoldering ember flaring into heated brilliance in the backseat. The fog from the burning cigarette and its exhailes softened their shadowy figures as their facial outlines melted into each repeatedly. But the circumstances of the taxi environment restricted how far their desires could take them and it fell to her to finally shove the unusable finale into the ashtray, to the unspoken regret of them both.

Breaking the quiet, she emerged from deep emotional turmoil and breathed the message into Allen’s ear, “He’s right. The cabby, I mean. Appearances are everything. That’s how you can help me.”

“Help you with what?”

“Break this wretched engagement with that absolute monster,” she whispered between clenched teeth. “Give me back my life!”

“Sure, but what can I do?”

“Just follow my lead,” she breathed softly, “and go along with my scheme. Please don’t ask any questions, just yet.” Then she commanded the driver cordially, “We’ve had a change of plans. Just take us back to the Bermuda Princess Hotel.”

He replied in the affirmative. And in the breathless stillness they recognized the increasing outdoor lighting that said that they were approaching the capital. The cab pulled up into the grand entrance, and the travelers wished their driver a warm farewell with an appreciative tip. Grasping his hand, Nimbsy virtually hauled Allen through the revolving glass door and briskly through the lobby on the way to the desk clerk. Retrieving her keys and messages, she propelled Allen to the elevator; destination the fifth floor.

There were only a few minutes left before the one am deadline as Allen's somewhat scuffed black leather shoes creaked over the springy gangplank. He saluted the foredeck and then the attending officer, signing back in from his fast expiring liberty in the waist of the sailing ship. Frank was one of several sailors on deck looking out over the harbor at the far rail, and Allen joined him for an exchange of their day's adventures.

"So, how did your day go?" Allen asked Frank cheerfully.

"Pretty nice, thanks," he replied, and proceeded to recap his wanderings around Hamilton, giving his account of seeing the shops, trying the restaurants, sampling the beer and liquors and chatting with friendly Bermudians of every stripe, always tinged with his own humorous outlook. After a couple of anecdotes, Frank returned the question, "So how about you? What did ya do all day?"

"Headed east. I made it into St George and spent most of my time there. Saw a lot of historical stuff, from the old British Colony times," he said, his matter-of-fact voice not altogether hiding his underlying sense of profound satisfaction.

Frank felt that there was an hidden gem here that Allen wasn't sharing. "Uh Huh," he grunted, accenting the last syllable heavily. "So you didn't go out there and get some?"

Allen tried to suppress the involuntary grin that crossed his face, but it shone through anyway. "I didn't say that."

"OK, now we're getting somewhere." Frank would be relentless. He would have the truth before they slung their hammocks for the night or he would keep grilling Allen until he broke. "Let's hear it."

"Maybe you could say, I ruined a woman's reputation tonight."

Frank had to pause; so astonished was he over this unexpected response. "She let you do this?"

"She insisted on it. Didn't give me any choice; she dragged me up into her hotel room," he continued.

"Well I hope you used some kinda protection," was about all Frank could manage in his shock.

"Couldn't. She wouldn't get pregnant if I'd done that," Allen making the mystery so much more acute.

"She wanted you to get her pregnant?" Frank's unbelief reached new heights.

"Yeah, it sorta guarantees that her reputation is shot," Allen repeated.

"Why the hell would a woman want you to do that?"

Before answering, Allen reached into his pocket to retrieve his plastic cigarette box, flipped the lid open and pulled out that slightly ovoid cylinder that makes Navy Players such a distinctive cigarette. His Zippo illuminated the nearby rigging and both sailors in the time it took him to incinerate that oval tip. A stream of white smeared into the wind from his mouth and then he replied, "She needed me to help keep her free. If I hadn't've helped her, she'd 've been trapped into a lifetime of really bad shit. Lotsa pain. She couldn't stand that, and this was the only thing that'd guarantee she wouldn't hafta go through with it."

"Okay, Captain Stud," Frank retorted, "If getting' pregnant is her escape from the bad shit, you guys had better remember something ... ya don't get pregnant from just one time. Know what I mean?"

“Yeah, sure do. That’s why we’re getting’ together again as soon as I go on liberty this afternoon, “ Allen said with a philosophical grin. “I’m gonna rack out as soon as I finish this,” and he held up the lit Navy Player like a candle. “After all, I’m gonna be pretty busy tomorrow. She ‘n I are both gonna get a real work out.”

Less than a mile away, on the fifth floor of the luxury hotel Bermuda Princess, Nimbsy opened her sleep fogged eyes and rolled over the rumpled sheets of her double bed that still showed signs of her now absent partner. Glancing at the red-glowing clock radio numerals, she commented, “One A. M. Good, he’s back on time.”

With Hamilton’s twinkling harbor lights looking in from her picture window, she reached for her silver cigarette case with the Waldshire crest engraved on top, freshly stocked with Navy Players, lit one while her head remained on the pillow, her exhausted and sensually odorous body horizontal and sent the creamy opaque vapors streaming up in orgasmic spurts just as Allen had spouted his life creating essence from the slit mouth of his fleshy wand. He was the ideal choice; terribly clean, a cordial and compassionate stranger and virtually everything Hanley was not. Then the product of her much deeper drag, profoundly inhaled, virtually floated out of her mouth from within her diaphragm, making her trademark nimbus clouds while she pondered her studding sailor and the good luck she had in finding him. Tomorrow, and maybe the day after, Allen would give her a few more thrilling and golden moments of tension and release, and the means for gaining a release of more permanent sort.