

For Smoking, Harmony

by Freida Theant

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Holly doesn't get behind the wheel and turn the ignition key of her rusted-bed Dodge pick up without first insuring her Newport is flamed up and casting off white ribbons from its ever-burning cherry. Like today, with her sandy hair scraggly, her jeans wrinkled, no makeup, she cracked the driver's side window wide enough to extend her arm, while she motors through her town of winter-weary villagers, heading toward the Agway farm supply Co-op and then the Grand Union for groceries. Her lips pluck the cigarette from the wedge in her fingers and anchor it securely in her smile, freeing both hands to make the hard turn off of Main St., south onto one of the lesser streets.

Her cheek muscles and lips coordinate skillfully to coax smoke through the discoloring filter of the dangling Newport, pooling the menthol-toast flavor in her mouth before she invites the fumes to penetrate her. When the minty burn no longer charms her lungs, Holly channels the fumes away through nostrils and mouth. The chalky flow expands, then collides onto the streaked windshield, and mushrooms radially to fog the three-person cab. This bluish aura diminishes; vacuumed out by the slip-stream from the side-window. That makes it easier to see the partially-restored stagecoach inn she's passing; the one that hasn't been used for vacationers since the 50's. The gingerbread architecture says 19th century hotel but the hand-lettered billboard out front contradicts that; reading "*Temple of the Mother Goddess.*"

Breakfast and lunch diners gossip about the *Temple's* heathens as though they were witches at The Village Café over black coffee or fountain glasses of Cola. Nobody cares that only three of the dozen devotees are actually self-proclaimed

Wiccans

and each of them have wildly differing ideas of what a witch's life consists. In fact, they are a diverse lot, and their greatest unifying force is the menacing opposition from the village church-goers, and not their worship of a three-thousand-year-old Sumerian Goddess.

Usually the yellow painted three-story *Temple* with the chocolate trim fades into the background from over familiarity, except today: Holly's attention is riveted on a thirties-something woman on the veranda losing her struggle with a milk can-turned-flower-urn. She isn't one of the locals, and since *everyone knows everybody* here in the

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Village of Bear Mountain, Holly takes her for a recent arrival. Her make-up, slender body, straight raven hair, denim clothing and running shoes are just a little too fashionable to be from this impoverished 'burg'. Then the heavy urn rolls backwards toward the woman, spills out clay and potting soil and she falls to the porch floor. Holly mashes the brake pedal, and skids to a halt at the alley, flings her door open, flicks her cigarette to the gravel and dog-trots up to the victim.

"Are you hurt?" Holly extends her hand to the crouching figure as she leaps up the steps.

"No, I'll be alright in a minute. But I bruised my knee." The outsider rises painfully from the gritty floorboards, using her arms to elevate until she can kneel. With Holly's help, she lifts herself, at first wobbly, but instantly feeling the spasms of painful ligaments.

"Want me to take ya to Doctor Patel's office?" Holly offers.

"Not yet. Let me pack my knee in ice and take some Tylenol before I worry about doctors." The woman suddenly remembers, "Oh, and thanks. My name is Rebecca. I'm staying here at the *Temple* for a week; up from the City."

"I'm Holly an' I live outside of town. You wanna sit down on your bench; maybe I can get ya some ice?"

Rebecca gingerly angled her way onto the settee, "The ice is in the freezer, top shelf of the fridge, and a dishtowel should be sitting on the counter. Oh, and could you bring Tylenol and my cigarettes, too?"

"Sure," Holly said "which cigarettes am I looking for?"

"I left a pack of Parliaments on the table. The Tylenol's in the cabinet."

Holly pokes her head inside the mysteriously dark salon and calls out, "Anybody here?" and treads intrigued but light-footed toward the back of the inn, noting the array of smartly restored antiques displayed in the public rooms, offset by the velvet drapery and rich flowery Victorian wallpaper. She feels suspicious of the homey décor; not what she expected from witches or pagan priestesses. Tiptoeing into the kitchen, she peers transfixed at the large black iron wood-burning stove that dominates the space, but forces herself to concentrate on her search. From behind her, she hears far-off female voices in the sun-drenched backyard but the rooms are empty. Holly just gathers her objects and brings them to the porch.

"Let's wrap these in your towel," Holly said, popping the ice cubes onto the towel-draped end table. She slides the pain-killers, an Evian water and Parliaments over to Rebecca, "Need a light?"

Rebecca cuddles her swollen knee in the terrycloth icepack, and repositions herself to relax, "Yes, I would appreciate it."

Rebecca centers a cigarette in her mouth, and inclines her head forward while pursing her lips expectantly. Holly clicks the lighter and edges the flame just below the Parliament's face. *Involuntarily Holly briefly visualizes herself as the Wicked Witch of the West, shoving her flaming broom towards Dorothy's fellow Oz traveler and shrieking, "Here Scarecrow, wanna play with fire?" as she ignites his straw*

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Unused to having someone light her up, Rebecca's cigarette wavers, but she focuses on the flaming tip. The dull tobacco grains at the surface flash into red, orange and gold jewels of light; then the smoke streamers shoot up. She squirts out the light-up draft and now draws purposefully on the cigarette to earn her awaited relief from the pain. The burning wafer flares and broadens, swallowing the black ring that leads the forward edge of the coal, and visibly inches toward her lips. Swallowing the incoming rich sensation, she pulls the draft deep inside, and holds the mildly abrasive treasure for a few pain-damping heartbeats, before expelling the spent fumes out through her nose and mouth. Her waves of pain are already subsiding. She finally washes a pair of caplets down with glugs of the expensive water.

"So what are you? Some kind of religion or...?"

“Witches? Are we Wiccans?” Rebecca finished the unspoken question for her.

“Yeah, are you what they say...that you cast spells, and that kinda stuff?” Holly continued.

Rebecca reseats the fresh cigarette into her smile, crinkles her eyes slightly and draws hard for another round of numbing comfort. “Some of us are Wiccans as well, but all of us worship the Mother Goddess. This *Temple* is the only one dedicated to her.”

“So you’re witches and pagans, both?” Then Holly realized, “My Newports got left in the cab,” and looked anxiously toward her pick up. “I’m gonna go get ‘em.”

“No, don’t bother. Take one of mine,” Rebecca said, handing her Parliaments to Holly. “And, Yes. Whatever pathways the spirits beckon us, we are free to follow, even if they include multiple devotions. After all, the *Wiccan Rede*, our Rule makes clear, ‘*An it harm none, Do as Ye will*’.”

Holly withdrew and examined the virgin wand. Puzzled by the complicated filter she wondered what effect that might have, but after lighting and inhaling her first Parliament, she decided it tasted “okay for a non-menthol”. Pulses of smoke accented her syllables in white puffs while she exhaled and spoke simultaneously, “Do you guys worship the Devil and cast spells?”

“No. Satan is for Christians, Moslems and demonic cults; not us. He isn’t part of our beliefs,” Rebecca said, then took a deliberate, thoughtful drag on her cigarette. She let it fill her before she strained the white ribbon back through her tensed lips. After that dramatic pause, she resumed, “When I cast spells, they are only for my benefit, just like prayers in a synagogue or church; not to curse anybody. You see, based on our the threefold rule: ‘*what ever you do comes back to you three times*’, a witch who casts an evil spell would bring back onto herself three times the misery.”

Holly lifts the smoldering cigarette and examines it closely. “In order to get the flavor from this

Parliament, I have to take deeper pulls and hold them in my lungs longer,” she observed, completely off the subject. “Otherwise, it doesn’t do for me what I’m used to in Newports.” She sucked a more vigorous toke from her magical wand before cycling the exhale through her nostrils, the better to maximize her satisfaction. “Okay, how does a spell work?” returning to the issue at hand.

“You use spirituality and nature to transform things to better advantage,” Rebecca replied. “By asking the help of deities or spirits in rituals and by using the proper herbs or symbols, they partner with you to reverse negative energies. Many of these rituals are written in our Book of Shadows
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“But that doesn’t really tell me how it works,” Holly protested.

“It’s all about transforms. Most are invisible to the eye, but their effects are plain enough.” Holly’s silent smoking told Rebecca that she needed to explain, “A spell might be compared to your cigarette.”

“How?”

“When the smoking urge touches you, one cigarette in its pack is just a promise that by itself is meaningless,” the witch said. “You have to summon the necessary spirit, which in this case is your flame. It is the essential ingredient for you to gain fulfillment. The flame’s enters the cigarette, grows at the edge and its heat transforms the tobacco to smoke. But you have to have to draw on the cigarette while the flame is applied to the tip. That’s the ritual; it brings the spirit and essential ingredients together for realization. Now you have the transformation that yields your desired result. When you breathe in the smoke you experience the satisfaction flooding through out your essence deep within. All anyone else sees is the smoke you take intake and expel, but what **you** feel, as the smoker, is the satisfaction from the white river calming, energizing and soothing you. That’s a lot like how a spell works.”

“The smoke is what’s seen, but it’s the ember that makes the magic,” her eyes and smile widened as Holly grasped the metaphor. “Cigarette changed by fire to white fumes that I inhale: that’s what you call the transformation, isn’t it?”

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“Yes, and with the ritual of partaking the white fumes, they combine with you,” the witch confirmed. “The rest you return to the air, to rise and forever disperse, breathing out your disharmony.” Rebecca returns her Parliament to her lips, hollows her cheeks for a deep draft and abruptly withdraws it. She is starving for the toast flavored aroma, so she cups her lower lip to offer the compact cloud an escape, yet her nose will capture the fleeing smoke in a sheet of airy milk racing up and over the rim of her upper lip. The snowy fluid, like a cataract in reverse, squeezes into the dark commas that define her nostrils. The streaming smoke blanks out her upper lip as the flood obscures her features. Inhaling this directly into her chest, she savors the tingling relief from her craving, and lets the soothing dose intoxicate her core. Making the sign of a spout with her mouth she releases her smoky breath mingled with any unease.

Rebecca continues, “We believe there are five basic elements, symbolized as the points of a star: Spirit, Air, Fire, Earth and Water. If the smoke is the spirit, then your smoking spell uses three of the elements. Drink water from a ceramic cup and your spell’s pentacle is now complete.”

“So what kinda spell would you call that?”

“Such a spell, seeking peace, renewal, and adjustment to the universe” Rebecca says, “should be labeled ‘*For Smoking, Harmony*’.”