

Leah's New Year's Eve

by Freida Theant

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Leah's boots indent the pristine snow with her footfalls trudging to the picnic table blanketed with three inches in this suburban recreational park. Before she sits down to enjoy the view of the vacant skating pond, her woolly mittens whisk off mounded flakes from the bench, while she jets clouds of steam from her mouth in this 20 degree weather. This New Year's Eve afternoon snowfall is at its most intent so of course the grey cloudy ceiling overhead is accentuated by aimless luminous spots dropping over every available surface, even Leah's caramel-colored woolen cap framing the face of what she's been frequently reminded is a Cate Blanchet look.

But today she's relieved that the holiday festivities, except for tonight, are over, for neither Chanukah nor Christmas had meaning for her this year. It's been that way since graduating and leaving family and friends last year. She even feels content that she has no plans for a New Year's Eve celebration, either, since all of her new Chicago contacts are work-related. She feels uncomfortable around them socially, especially after this year's holiday office party.

Four years of University College left Leah with a sinister covenant with cigarettes, especially those flavored minty ones. She strips off her mittens to extract one of those paper skinned relief-columns from her pack of Salems. Had she a Diane Arbus to make one of her stunning black and white photographic portraits, Leah lighting her flat-white cigarette in this foggy snowfall this diffuse afternoon would have been a masterpiece of blurred whites and greys. The flame of her lighter never touches the cylinder's face; she merely nudges it to the proximity and strains the pearly filter with her cheeks' pull. The fire bends into the heart of the circle and smoke jets magically from between Leah's lips 100 mm further back. She breaks the seal of filter and pulls her quickened Salem out and away, revealing an ashen white face partially covering the glowing orange ember just behind. A powdery white dollop starts to roll from her opened mouth, but is snapped back inside with her sharp inhale, mixing air and fumes in a tranquilizing mix. The minty singe within her breast follows her first full-strength deep pull, fulfilling yet again this devoted smoker's expectation. She propels a flowing streamer of smoke which blends with steam from her natural breath. They amplify each other to whiten the space about her and make her face round-edged before fading off into the foggy haze of the day's deadening opacity. She is, indeed, a very model of soft-focus art.

The snowfall dampens the distant noises of this urban setting, allowing her to hear with unexpected clarity only up-close sounds like the rushing made by exhaled smoke fleeing her pursed lips. She concentrates on the concrete bordered pond and icy cover before her, and savors her moment of delicious relief. She isn't aware that steps are approaching her from the

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street.

The voice surprises her when feminine tones ask, "Don't you work downtown, in the 'loop'? You're the Cate Blanchet doppelganger that takes the Commuter train to Union Station each morning?"

Leah startled, twisted around to see a woman about her own age, clearly a twenties-something with that look that said 'professional woman'. "Yes, I catch the commuter to the 'loop'," she replied trying not to sound ruffled. A childhood on the East Coast taught her not to show surprise, so to complete the nonchalance, she brings her Salem to her mouth for a leisurely pull, squints barely to contemplate her new companion, "I think I've seen you at our train station just up the street....don't you usually have some friends that accompany you?"

"Yeah, there's the three of us that live here but commute downtown Chicago." The woman with the long, straight brunet hair shuffles toward the bench to brush off enough snow to keep from wetting her lime tinted ski jacket before sitting. "My name's Deborah," and in a greeting gesture, extended her suede-gloved hand. "I've been meaning to introduce myself to you for months, now, but on workdays we're each so busy getting to work that I never found the time. But then walking past the skating pond this afternoon, I thought I recognized you from the street. So I came over to see if it was really you."

Leah transferred her cigarette to the left and shook the stranger's hand, "Well thank you for coming over, Deborah, and my name is not Cate, it's Leah. Happy New Years'....Eve."

"Yeah. And a Happy New Years' Eve to you Leah. I and my BFF's are Post-Christmas bargain hunting, and they're still at the mall, but I needed some quiet time and a cigarette. I see you've got yours going already."

"Yes, ever since college, I depend on these. But don't get me wrong; I enjoy 'em. It's not just a self-medication thing....."

"OH, I know what you mean," Deborah replied grinning satirically, while her black-suede

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covered fingers popped up an L and M Blue from its pack, and slid it away from its neighbors. By the time Deborah had the filter tightly pursed between her lips, Leah had a flame up to its edge. Deborah cupped her hand around Leah's to steady the light-up, and then bid her cheeks to draw the flame to the ignition intensity. Deborah double pumped the ember before letting Leah's lighter hand free to make sure she had unconditional-commitment from her cigarette in this treacherous wind, and with each pull on the filter, squirted out a dense plume of dull white that sharply flew off dissolving into the blizzard air. "Thanks," Deborah acknowledged, both for the favor and the recognition that they, as kindred spirits, shared a common sin, at least according to today's social climate.

"So what are your big plans for tonight?" Deborah asked taking a hard pull on her L and M, enough to lift the angle to 30 degrees while the ember glowed out from the fierce heat. "You goin' to a party with friends?"

Leah flicked the Salem's filter with her thumb out of nervous tension, "Uhh, no. I'm new to Chicago and I don't really have friends, yet and people at work aren't worth socializing with. Worse, at the Christmas Party this year, the horny married men thought I was the main entre' and swarmed all over me."

Deborah burst out laughing, "The NEW Girl!! Fresh Meat!" She laughed which brought on a spasm of coughing until she could settle down. "Yeah, I get it...."

Leah took her final hit on the diminished Salem and let the butt fall noiselessly thru the snow cover beneath the table. "Tonight I'm just in the mood for a little quiet TV and a few phone calls to my folks back home."

"Aww, no....not on New Year's Eve!!" her companion urged. "Why not let me introduce you to my friends Barb and Nora, and maybe, just maybe, if everyone plays well along together, all of us could do a New Year's Eve supper at some kosher deli? What's it gonna hurt to just meet them?" During this whole presentation, she waved the smoldering cigarette in great sweeping gestures tracing smoke trails throughout the snowflake laden air.

Her invitation was so animated, and heart-felt that Leah caved in. Her instincts from just this brief encounter, her body language and tone of voice all said she and Deborah shared similar

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backgrounds and attitudes. As friends there wouldn't be any nasty reverses later on. "Okay, so we'll go to meet 'em. What's the worst that can happen?"

"Exactly... We'll walk to the Mall walk in less than five minutes, come on!" Deborah answered, also flinging her expiring butt in an end-over-end spiraling curve to disappear under the snow.

Once they entered the post-Christmas sale and bargains emporium, Deborah called her friends on her cell. "Okay you two, come and meet me in the front of the J C Penney's," she insists. "You'll never guess who I found in the park this afternoon....and I want you to meet her."

Nora and Barb found the waiting pair and were delighted to come face-to-face with the Cate Blanchet look-alike at last. Chattering excitedly, they agreed to get better acquainted over dinner at Abe's Deli two blocks away. On the snowy trek down Main Street, Nora begged one of Deborah's cigarettes, exclaiming to their new companion, "I don't usually smoke, but on girls' nights, especially after some wine, I enjoy an occasional cigarette. I bum them for a while, but eventually I buy 'em a replacement pack."

"I just quit last summer so I only smoke other peoples' cigarettes, too," Barb interjects, tartly, and making the sign of a "V" with her fingers at Leah. Leah understands and forwards one of her Salems, and brings the lighter flame to her companion's unlit tip.

"We're gonna hafta finish these outside before we go in, girls," Deborah announced. "So let's window shop and slow down."

"Good. That gives you a chance to tell us a little bit about yourself," Nora suggested. "You're new to Chicagoland?"

"I'm from Massachusetts and went to University College for my business degree," she answered. "My parents hoped I'd start a career in finance and get married, but all I was offered was this job here in logistics and material management. I didn't really have any serious boyfriend before I left Mass; It was too early to get serious about anybody, and I still feel that way. I may get married or not, but I'd rather disappoint my parents than suffer in a failed

marriage.”

Nods of approval from all three smokers.

“Good for you, Leah,” Barb applauded. All four of them were nearly hidden by their combined clouds of steam and cigarette smoke.

“You can’t live your life around other people’s expectations,” Nora added. “Your family and friends have to take you as you are.”

“And that includes cigarettes,” Deborah emphasized, reacting to the smoking ban that prohibits them from lighting up once they sit down in the restaurant. “We make our own decisions regarding our own bodies and lifestyles. We accept the consequences and the responsibility so that gives us the right to choose smoking if that’s what we really want.”

By the time they reached Abe’s Deli, they crush out their butts, dust off the clinging snowflakes, and slide in through the glass doorway; hungry for wine and great kosher eating. The natural connections between all four becomes apparent during the animated conversation; they understand each other; despising manipulative and scheming people, or those who see only the monetary or political value of a situation. They share being single and loving it. Better yet; they have no work-related connections; each is a professional in her own capacity; Nora, a high school English teacher for Cook County; Barb, a medical technician for clinical laboratories, and Deborah a broker specializing in agricultural commodities.

“I think we should celebrate tonight, not as a New Year, which, for us, was Rosh Hashanah, but as a celebration of Leah coming into our circle!” Nora proposes, after they divide up the dinner bill, chuck in the owed money and calculate the tip they decide to leave.

“She’s right, our New Years was really back in September. We can rearrange things for our new circumstances,” Deborah confirms, edging their way back out into the blizzard street. “New times call for new measures.”

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And so all four of them, bravely truck out into the steady snowfall of New Year's Eve darkening night, seeking out neighborhood taverns to try, one after another, like a game of musical chairs. When midnight falls they found themselves at some forgettable but homey local tavern, and at the stroke of the midnight hour, along with the roomful of celebrants, all four cheer and hug and make merry. They have opened their friendship circle this new year to include the newcomer Leah.

It signals new beginnings, with the promise of a happier, better year ahead for all.