

Three on a Match

by Freida Theant

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Lillian, in her blue jean jacket and tight-fitting denim pants, brunette straight-brushed shoulder length hair and knit scarf sidles thru a maze of Student Union cafeteria chairs projecting variously from their central tables, some supporting students slouched over them, others hunched atop the table at odd angles. Penetrating into the smoky, dense interior, she unhooks her shoulder strap from her canvas book bag, lets them crash to the linoleum and settles her coffee onto the sticky, beverage-stained table. Seated a few rows from the floor-to-ceiling windows, she glances despondently thru the windows at the patches of ice on College Avenue that signal that the wintry climate was overstaying its tenure into the spring months.

Her purple-yellow hands, numbed cold from changing classes outdoors, made it difficult to snatch the three quarters full pack of Marlboro Reds, peers up and around to see if her companion had yet entered the cafeteria, while her hands sightlessly pull up a cork tipped nico-promise. Janice slips it between her expectant lips without shifting her focus, and edges a Bic flame expectantly to its tip.

As the fire chars the first layer, she pouts her cheeks for a lengthy kiss. Keeping the furnace in place a little longer, the fiery surface crackles slightly as it gently but steadily eats its way up the white paper skin. She clicks the lighter shut but her continuous draw sustains the coal's glaring fiercely. It's just the light-up pulse; Lillian gulps briefly to send the first smoke pulled up through her sinuses and out her nostrils to quilt the table below with billowing cones; flowing, expanding and obscuring with, lazy-drifting whiteness. She morphs into her semi-trance with her Marlboro wherein she multiple pumps him for smoky relief while she wraps her mind around today's crisis: looming is the threat of cancelled classes owing to growing campus unrest. Anti-War protestors nationwide are disrupting academic schedules and it appears that now her college has become the next victim. How will the crowds of radical demonstrators just outside the windows affect her if she gets swept up in their violent turmoil? Could she be arrested just for crossing the street and changing classes?

Agitated she props her left elbow on the table while her left hand cups her chin, her first two fingers masking her mouth and securing her cigarette between them, while her slightly ambered digits alternatively insert and withdraw the caramelizing filter from between her lips. This rhythm

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facilitates those cyclic pulses of smoky meditation, patterns that move the cherry hotter and faster as she feels more frustration for lack of resolutions. She dissolves partially in the resulting haze of exhaled smoke.

A companion's voice yanks her from her reverie, "Classes over?" bringing Lillian to glance up at Janice, a classmate.

"Yeah, I was just waiting for Bobbi.... you know, from Phys Ed? She's gonna meet me here, 'n you're welcome to join us," Lillian explaining withdraws her hand from her mouth to crush out the butt. "We were gonna go to get some real lunch, not this cafeteria crap. Wanna come?"

Janice slumps into a chair, splays her books across the table and retrieves her Vantage cigarettes. Since there are only a few more promises left inside this nearly empty Vantage she makes a mental note to ferret out a new pack.

Janice nails are immaculate and trimmed to perfection, and she places her Vantage filter carefully between her immaculate 'almost un-glossed' lips.

She barely brushes the flame across the cigarette's tip, waving the lighter slightly right-to-left and as her lips sustain a deep kiss. The lighter goes dark; she spurts a slender spear of white straight forward to expel the vestigial puff and then she coaxes that satisfyingly heavy draft, pulling more gently and fully. She parts her lips, lifts the cigarette from her pursed smile, and makes her mouth wide open round; the opaque hemisphere captured inside was all that was visible, the rest mysteriously hidden by the cottony diffusion. Just as she inhales air to mix with her captive draft, a fugitive curl twists up over her lip and slides past her nose. Then the cloud vanishes, drawn into her lungs, to be held there until the rhythm of breath calls for its release. And this exhale was as satisfying as the soothing, scratchy but fulfilling sensation that penetrated her lungs whilst it dwelt therein. Streams of smoke simultaneously flow from both her nostrils and slightly parted lips; she closes her mouth and the final fumes flow in diminishing intensity; thinning to invisibility.

"Sure, I'm up for it," her reply squirts the barest of residual smoke.

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A shout from the entrance of the cafeteria draws their attention to a black wool scarf and army-navy-store jacketed student waving her hand overhead.

It's Bobbi, twisting, sidling and scuttling through the obstacle course of students, tables and floor garbage and sliding into the only vacant chair left at their table. She rips her scarf off and plops down, exhausted, into the chrome and sage fiberglass seat, greeting them cheerfully, "Hope I didn't keep ya waiting long?" She lets fall the books with a loud thud in true drama-queen fashion. She plunges her hand deep within. What she withdraws brings a scowl to her pixie-haircut framed face, "Shit! I'm outta cigarettes; I freakin' knew it! I shouldda stopped off at the drugstore on the way this morning and gotten my Winstons."

Janice shoves her Vantages toward Bobbi. "You're welcome to one of these. You ever tried one?"

"Bobbi you remember Janice from PE?" Lillian interjects simultaneously.

"Thanks, Janice. Sure I remember you." Her cold-immobilized fingers move barely, yet manage to pluck one cigarette free, slide its cork-hued filter between her chilled-blue lips as she replies "Thanks, I'll pay you back later."

Bobbi recovers her Zippo lighter from the depths of a pocket in her army jacket, sparks up a flame and seems to actually press it up against the brown face of the Vantage. The instant the lighter clicks shut, she shoots a quick, slender jet of smoke forward, to expel that first unwanted drag. Then she coaxes out a satisfyingly heavy draft, pulling more gently and over greater time. She parts her lips, lifts her cigarette from off of the lipstick, and lets the bulging ball of cottony smoke expand outward from her mouth into the atmosphere beyond. As the opaque hemisphere captured inside projected further out of its chamber, she inhaled some air to sweep up the escaping draft in what appeared to be a snap. The cloud vanishes, vacuumed down into her lungs, there to release the soul-satisfying nicotine as expected. To savor the sensation a bit more, her diaphragm summons the fluffy lungful back up in a generous, open mouth lazy exhale that slowly drifts beyond her wide open lips and rolls into the air beyond.

"There was trouble on campus where lines of National Guard troops were closing in on the protestors! I had to go way around 'em to stay out of it," Bobbi warned, giving her blond tresses

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a shake to emphasize the point. "Getting around today is gonna be difficult." The jerky way she brought her smoldering Vantage straight up to her parted lips telegraphed that the prevailing unrest was already affecting her. She drew hard on the filter with the anxiety of fear; both of what was going on and fear of the possible harm to her and the other students caught in the violence impending between the police and the mobs of radical demonstrators.

Suddenly the student union's main entrance exploded noisily as scruffy student in a disorganized and non-synchronous chorus shouted news blurbs, which was only partially intelligible at their distance this far away. The three women turned to listen.

"What are they saying?" Lillian gasped.

"I can't make it out", Bobbi said, "but it sounded like 'they're coming'"

"Who's coming?" Janice demanded. Before she could reply their attention was riveted by agitated, surplus Army clad, long-haired demonstrators of both sexes pouring into the great hall seeking refuge from the massive arrests just outside.

"National Guard," Lillian shouted above the roar.

"That awful smell?" Janice yelled. "It's choking me!"

"Tear gas from the riot police," Lillian surmised.

As more refugees thrust themselves through the cafeteria doors, clinging tear gas bled out from their outer garments and into the stagnant atmosphere.

"Let's get outta here!" Bobbi warned, "Or we'll all get mobbed or choked to death...."

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"Where are we going?" Janice's voice was starting to shade into frantic.

"I'll tell you where I'm going," Bobbi assured them in a composed voice, "To Walgreen's up the street. I'm not going through this without my Winstons!"

"Yeah," Janice concurred, "I'm just about outta Marlboros, too. It's not far, a couple blocks; we should slip out by the back alley and avoid the demonstrators and the mass arrests."

The three women seized their backpacks and fled to a seldom-used exit onto a side-street. Cracking open the massive metal door slowly at first, Bobbi peered cautiously through the opening. The air was laden w/ the noxious fumes of riot-control gases, and swirls of haze drifted down the streets from the centers of conflict, but the few people present were passive.

"This street isn't hot, yet," Bobbi observed, "Let's go!"

They slipped out, jogging north, but Janice called out, "Hey you two! Quit running! That looks so freakin' guilty. It just draws attention....walk normal or we'll be collared."

"She's right," Lillian said, just as a squad of National Guard soldiers appeared at the corner in riot gear, weapons 'at the ready'. They moved deliberately toward the terrified and helpless trio without knowing if the women are protestors (and subject to seizure) or registered students of the University.

"Gimme a Vantage," Bobbi commanded Janice, "and light one for yourself!" Janice was wide eyed and open-mouthed with shock but followed the order zombie-like without understanding the intent.

"Lillian, get yer ass over here; I'm gonna give you a light for your Marlboro," Bobbi continued

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half whispered. Lillian moved back in to the grouping, and fetched up their cigarettes.

“Now I’m gonna light you up, too” Bobbi ruled, “and we all gotta look like were between classes.”

“So they know that we’re students!” Lillian observed, the new understanding dawning on her.

“And we don’t behave so freaky here in the street,” Janice concurred.

Their heads clustered together and their chilled and numbing hands cupped about the forward edge of their cigarettes as Bobbi’s Zippo lighter applied flame for each. The cold, the stress of the moment and the brief blasts of wind made them bobble the cigarettes while Bobbi tried to get them lit.

“Hold still,” Bobbi demanded under her breath. Finally, the left edge of Lillian’s Marlboro caught a crescent char that grew in orange intensity, flaring brightly as the burn site widened. Then Janice buried the tip of her Vantage right into the blue cone above the wick, and, surrounded by the yellow flame, ignited both the tip and the underside of the leading edge in a beveled burn-zone that gave off ample smoke, growing with the multiple pumps she applied.

Dangling their cigarettes left their hands free to cup 360 degrees around Bobbi’s Vantage, who quickly burned in a full-front light-up.

In the same time the squad of fatigue clad guardsmen were on them, and the forward soldier challenged, “What’re you gals doin’ out here?”

A voice from the rear of the squad commanded, “It’s Okay, Corporal. You can see they’re just students; look at their book bags!”

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Another from the squad drawled, "You're right, Sergeant. They're just changin' classes and enjoyin' a smoke break. They ain't no outside radical protestors!"

The women face their interrogators, relieved, and smile wanly, cigarettes still dangling. Bobbi plucks her Vantage from her lips and defiantly proclaims, "Welcome to our College, gentlemen. It's been a busy day; you troopers wanna cigarette?"