

Smoke Gets In Your Eyes, Part 1

by Freida Theant

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"Look at this! My invitation's arrived," Eleanor chirped, tearing open the stylish lavender envelope addressed in elegant script. She reads, "Mlle. Leslie Stoppard requests the honor of your presence and a companion of your choice at 8:00 pm the Eighteenth of November at her residence on Olde Poste Road, Fairfield, Connecticut on the occasion of celebrating 2014's 'Great American Smokeout'."

"Oh Leslie, you big Goof!" Eleanor burst out laughing.

She reasoned, "Your typical crowd includes publishers, editors, writers, playwrights, artists, composers, screen artists, television personalities, and musicians. Everyone is some kind of creative powerhouse. That's why so many of them smoke. If you've invited your 'usual suspects' this 'Great American Smokeout' theme will become your best joke yet!" Eleanor mused aloud.

Reminded of cigarettes, a nicotine urge burst upon her, agitating Eleanor relentlessly until her lungs could once more bath in the minty, tingly smoke inhaled from a freshly lit menthol.

Desperate, she thrusts her hand into her Michael Kors handbag to seize her Newports where she snatches up the first available cigarette and rolls the filter slightly into her mouth before blanketing it with her flesh-glossed lips. Grasping her silvery Dunhill butane lighter, her pucker sweeps the flame into the cigarette's face and flash fires the tobacco grains into a sun-like shimmer. Glowering in sync with Eleanor's intense draw, the fiery film quickly burns its way to greater depth leaving a grey skin of ash where paper once dwelt. Blasting out the light-up puff, Eleanor takes her serious, soul-quenching pull on the Newport and gulps down the dose. She pours the river of chalky, spearmint burn into her lungs that so exquisitely rasps her inner walls. Imprisoning the soothing fumes to quash her immediate cravings, she reluctantly summons the spent vapors outwards via the portals of her nostrils and mouth. They roll outward unhurried as Eleanor expels this draft slowly enough to maximize its absorption onto her soul's inner lining.

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Her exhale splashes all over the invitation, all but clouding it from view; but with the envelope still in her hands, she reaches in to discover a small hand-lettered note on parchment folded next to invitation. She is fascinated as she reads:” P. S. To celebrate this year’s ‘smokeout’, I challenge you individually, or in pairs, to perform a one-to-two minute skit for the guests, acting out your favorite scene of any movie where the star you imitate is notable for her/his cigarette as their prop. The audience tries to guess who you portrayed and writes that on a card. The contestant(s) then collects up the cards, and at the end of the contest, the competitor displaying the most number of correct answers, wins. Double points if they guess the name of your movie, too!”

“Many of you will come looking like flappers and bootleggers at a ‘Roaring Twenties Speak Easy’ since so many actresses/actors starred in movies set during the 1920’s up to the 1950’s. Besides the honor of the thing, I haven’t yet settled on the prizes to be awarded, but won’t this just be a gas?” Then Leslie’s sweeping signature closes the Post Script.

Chuckling, Eleanor returns to her Newport to conjure up more relief for her nicotine-hungry karma. She squinted slightly; a slender ribbon of smoke crept up her cigarette’s shaft, sidling up into her eye, stinging her momentarily and tearing her eye over. But she barely notices, so thrilled is she over this ingenious competition. She merely brushes away the tear automatically while she frantically considers which actress she might channel.

She considers her best smoking scene choices. The classics occur to her first of all: Bette Davis in ‘Now Voyager,’ Marlene Dietrich in ‘Blue Angel,’ Bogey and Bacall in ‘To Have and Have Not,’ Katherine Hepburn in ‘The Philadelphia Story,’ Joan Crawford in ‘Grand Hotel,’ Myrna Loy in the ‘Thin Man’ series, Barbara Stanwyck in ‘Double Indemnity.’

She even thought something a bit more modern might be easier for the under forty crowd to guess; Sharon Stone in ‘Basic Instinct,’ Jane Fonda in ‘Walk on the Wild Side,’ Linda Fiorentino in ‘The Last Seduction,’ or Annette Benning in ‘Bugsy.’

She glanced at herself in the mirror on the hall table while she raised her Newport, wondering how many different ways each of these actresses portrayed smoking in their very own way in those critical scenes, and how she could imitate that. Maybe she should examine her own style?

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From this point, Eleanor is curious about the details of her own smoking gestures. After fifteen years of one-and-a-half packs per day, her ritual had grown dimly routine; not something she could describe to others as unique. But now she spies on herself, first on her own style, and later on watching other smokers amongst her friends, against whom she compares her own way. Finally she gets ahold of some DVD movies from Warner Bros and Universal and Fox studios to watch and research what the cinema greats of the Golden Era did in front of the camera with their Chesterfields, Lucky Strikes, Old Golds and Camels.

She discovers ten (maybe eleven) basic functions that distinguish one smoker from another, including where in her mouth the smoker places her cigarette, how she lights up, the angle at which she holds her cigarette, the kind of draw and intensity she uses to pull the draughts of smoke and the shape of the lips during this pull, the places she directs the smoke once inside her, the exhale and which by which passages she routes the exhale, the angle and force of exhales, and the frequency of hits taken during the life cycle of the cigarette as well as the timing of de-ashing the cigarette (how long an ash will she tolerate?). Possibly how the butt is crushed out forms a final category, but she's not convinced that applies to her character in the contest.

Feeling like she's on top of this project now, she phones Chaz, an associate from the advertisement firm where she writes copy, to invite him to play Paul Henreid against her Betty Davis. She proposes "Our entry into the contest would be exciting. In that famous final scene of 'Now Voyager' I hope to imitate Bette Davis in their closing scene. You already look like your character except maybe for the haircut, and I can do a Bette Davis with that cigarette part of that final shot. What do you say?"

Chaz, a sporting gent, was intrigued. He throws in with her; helping her tailor a script and practice their 'two minutes' until they have it de-bugged and can recited it error-free. From a Good Will store they dredged up some clothing with a 1940's look to further the illusion of the movie's critical scene. During the next two weeks, they perfected it through rehearsals and videotaped the results. Then they reviewed the shots of their scene together, criticizing the performances until they got it right. The singly most difficult gesture to imitate accurately was for Chaz to light the two cigarettes at one time, and pass off the one to Eleanor, but with enough thoughtful practice, they felt ready to go public.

The night of the party was upon them in no time.

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When the anxious couple drove under the lofty arches of the Stoppard iron gate, they obsessed over how many opponents they'd be vying against this evening. Their car was directed by attendants uniformed as servants in the Belle Époque, to the grand entrance of the white marble mansion. Chaz and Eleanor were surprised to note that some party-goers had even rented automobiles from the 1920's and 1930's. That cast a shadow of intimidation, realizing that the competition was spending its way to a winning position.

Nevertheless, in the black and white glare of the outdoor floodlights, tonight the Stoppard estate looked nothing less than the film set for a Great Gatsby or The Razor's Edge movie and it was great fun to be a part of such a fantasy.

The valet at the main entrance took their car while they made their formal entrance attended by household staff. Like in the flapper era, the air above them in the grand salon and the ballroom hung thick with the smoke of endless cigarettes [and a few cigars]. The band jazzed it up in the ballroom mostly in the swing tempo, but with breaks for the Lindy or the Charleston dances so the 'bright young things' could show off their Roaring Twenties skills on the dance floor.

The couple had no trouble locating their hostess, Leslie, who was enveloped by tipsy party goers clustering about her in hopes of greeting a movie or television star who checks in at the reception line.

Leslie's face lit up when she saw them approaching, "Eleanor, how divine! Who have you brought with you?"

"Leslie, so good to see you. Thanks for inviting me, and I want to present my partner in the competition, Chaz Bellanco," Eleanor said. "We are associates at my ad agency. Chaz, this is Leslie Stoppard."

Chaz kissed her hand and exchanged the proper pleasantries of etiquette to which Leslie replied, "You two look so awfully awfully 1940's! Of course you're doing the game tonight?"

"Yes, and if you like, I'll whisper into your ear the role we're going to reprise," Eleanor replied.

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Leslie bent forward toward Eleanor and squealed with delight upon hearing the choice, "Oh how simply delightful. I'll put you two on the list towards the very end of the presentations; it'll give you your best chance." She fairly danced with excitement.

After spending seemingly-endless minutes meeting and greeting second-string glitterati, nibbling on expensive oyster, salmon and shrimp canapés, and sipping martinis and other drinks from stemware crystal, Eleanor and Chaz realized the ballroom band had gone silent.

That was the signal that Leslie wanted to assemble the party for the game.

She announced from the dais, "Let us all come together now for the Great American Smokeout Movie Competition!" A ripple of laughter followed. The hostess then reiterated the rules, followed by the roster of entrants' in order of appearance. "I will announce the prizes at the same time as we award the winners," she concluded.

Eleanor and Chaz angled their way into the arched ceiling ballroom.

"Couple number one," Leslie broadcast. Then the first couple took the stage.

The female lead had a white skirt suit with a sleeveless blouse under the coat, and blond hair combed back straight. The male lead was dressed in a suit, from the 1990s. They set the scene in a police station interrogation room.

The dialog begins just after she sits down, when he asks the female lead, "Can I get you any coffee?"

She replies coldly, "No" and takes out her slim chrome cigarette case and lighter.

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“There’s no smoking in the police station,” he challenges as she inserts the cigarette deliberately in her mouth.

“So what are you going to do? Charge me with smoking?” she ripostes, defiantly continuing to light her cigarette. As she thoughtfully pulls on the cork filter, she sends the stream of exhaled smoke outwards and up in a nearly invisible stream.

The male lead questions her concerning her relationship with the murder victim, and she answers between leisurely pulls on the cigarette, paused by her lazy exhales. Then she removes her coat revealing a cutaway blouse that looks almost like a tank top.

Finally she did that famous leg crossing changeover that reveals she wore no underwear to this interrogation. The crowd gasped at this stunning reproduction of one of cinema’s most famous wardrobe malfunctions, then burst into applause.

“Sharon Stone,” Eleanor muttered, with pained resignation in her voice.

“Yup, Basic Instinct,” Chaz confirmed, “with Michael Douglas as the detective.

“We’re doomed,” Eleanor moaned. “Everyone will get that one; even Gen-Xers! I don’t even see why we should stick around any longer to do our piece here tonight! I’d rather go home.”

To Be Continued...