

SMOKE BRAKE



--KRISTI PETERSEN SCHOONOVER--

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Cigarette fiend, Josie is. She'd wear tobacco lipstick if she could—it'd get into her bloodstream faster. She says this on a summer night at a scummy lake-side bar that reeks of dead fish. She puffs from every orifice, celebrating her addiction even as we're being shut down: St. Patrick's Day's the last day that smoking's gonna be legal. After that, they'll be able to raid our business, our homes, our cars.

And Josie sees this as a glorious challenge. An opportunity to be the first nicotine-runners in the history of the world.

"We could make ourselves quite a nice little kitty," she says, rolling a cigarette between her stubby fingers. She grips a bottle of beer. "We roll the cigarettes here, pack them in, say, tampon boxes, and drive everywhere and deliver them. The addicted will pay, Jake. They will."

I think about the miles we'll cover, her hand on the gearshift, her naked tan legs working the clutch and the gas. And law or no law, she'll light up in the car. If we get caught, it's tickets and fines. God help us if we pitch butts out the window in the land of cacti or the northern pine forests. God help us we gotta camp on all that barren sand or pine needles, neither of which effectively bury the butts.

“Wyoming’ll be bad. All those buttes. Cops slither in the dirt waiting to pull over anybody,” I say.

“And what cop is going to slither up out of the dirt, give a pretty girl and a perfectly respectable looking young man tickets when he opens the trunk and finds boxes of O.B.?” She’s wearing a new dress with crazy tropical scenes on it; a resident of Martinique dances under a palm tree on her left breast. She sets her hand on my wrist and drops her voice. “We could be heroes, Jake! We could ensure nicotine keeps flowing through every bloodstream in this country.” She crushes out a cigarette and reaches for her pack, extracts another, sticks it between two smears of lipstick. “We can save hundreds, maybe thousands, from the indignity of withdrawal.”

I consider this. The indignity of withdrawal to me sounds like the indignity, say, of incontinence. But we’re not delivering diapers here. We’re talking serious crime. “You think it’s worth it?”

“Come on, Jake.”

“No, seriously.” I look over to the bar just in time to catch the barmaid wiping a spill off her bosom; a woman with chicken-skinny legs hikes up on a bar stool and blocks my view, flips her hair over her shoulder, and looks at me as though she knows I’ve had sinful thoughts. *Stop that, young man.* “What would your mother say?”

Josephine averts her eyes to the lighter in her hand and takes a puff. “Nothing.”

“I know my parents would—”

“She’s not a quitter, either, Jake. I have to do this. Are you in or not?”

I’ve wanted to quit; I’ve tried five or six times. Once I even didn’t smoke for three years, but I just didn’t feel like myself. Worse, I looked at others who still did it with lust. That’s when I met Josephine. And I confess I looked at her with lust because I was a virgin—yes, a virgin, because the girls in high school found me less appetizing than the pin-ups in their lockers—and she lit up a smoke in front of me while she caressed the lump in my pants and on the ride home I bought a pack. She explained, on our first date, that she didn’t care what I thought of her smoking. Her last two boyfriends before me she’d quit for, and she’d been miserable. Her ex-husband, also a smoker, had married some daughter of a Baptist preacher down in Georgia, one, she said, who couldn’t write a literate sentence (she’d seen the girl’s description of herself on the church website, she had a habit of keeping tabs on her ex’s, she explained), and had brainwashed him into quitting. “I knew he married a loser when I read his personal testimony about how God

had saved him from the pit of despair and addiction, and how he now has a nice trailer with a big back yard and that fucking dog he always wanted.” She took a drag. I wanted to eat her cigarette—never mind smoke it—eat it all the way up to her lips. “So, don’t even ask me to quit. Because I won’t. In fact, not only will I refuse to quit, I’ll send you packing.”

That was the end of it. And the beginning again for me.

Now I’m thinking about the indignity of withdrawal again and realize that what she’d said back on that first date made me feel undignified.

“I’ll screw you,” she says now, “in every state.” At last the offer. She started crashing on my couch six months ago but hasn’t, up until now, suggested anything other than heavy petting. The dancer on her dress is moving again. “How many of your pool buddies can say that?”

She has a point.

I look at her. She bites her lip and there is something in her eyes, an arrowhead of intensity. Then it’s gone, and she shoulders her purse. “You don’t wanna go? Well, I have to. And you’d better keep your mouth shut.” She moves to get out of the chair.

“Wait, no, I’m in!” I say. “I’m in. Jeez.”

We stay up all night, beer flowing in our veins like lubricant in a car engine. We're a well-oiled machine: I ram the shredded tobacco into the slit at the top of the silver cigarette maker; she loads the white papers with the filters on the ends and yanks the lever. She kicks off her shoes and nails the windows shut, because we're gonna be gone a long time, possibly forever, and if anybody wants to get in here and steal what little she's got she's gonna force them to at least have to shatter a window and risk cutting a major artery. She's stepping over big brown boxes she ripped off from her job, copy paper boxes with fat bold letters that talk about how great paper makes great projects. She opens the flimsy closet door with a broken, cloudy mirror tacked to it and pastel tampon boxes tumble down in a shower. Apparently she's been knitting this scheme for awhile.

"Can we take the dog?" I ask.

She bends over and chucks the hail of boxes at me. One of them beans me on the head. "I guess so. Open these up and dump the tampons in the garbage." She lights up two cigarettes and has one hanging out of each corner of her mouth, so her next sentence is muffled. "As long's he doesn't bark too much."

“He could be a warning.” I rip off the top of the box. “Anybody gets near us.”

“Keep the boxes intact!” she says. “They’re no good if they got no tops on them!” She goes back to rummaging in the closet and yanks out a box marked AFTERNOON STUFF. She opens it up and mines inside it, whipping out a matador’s pants and jacket. “I’m going incognito,” she says. The cigarettes jut from her mouth like elephant tusks.

We load the trunk with supplies (mostly the envelopes of rolling paper and the tampon boxes now crammed with mini-smokes), and we get a cooler and go from store to store filling it. She’s got the clothes on her back, and in a bandanna duffel she’s got stuff she bought just for the trip: a pink slip, a pair of Chinese slippers, jeans embroidered with gold thread and her first initial, J, and a T-shirt advertising EET AT K’S! AMERICA’S LAST SMOKING DINER! There’s an extra bra, tag still on it, a pair of sunglasses, and a paper bag stuffed with all the cash she owns (about sixteen thousand dollars). “Last count it was. Not sure,” she says. Me, I’ve got a whole suitcase. If we were gonna be gone forever, I had to have new expensive stuff that was gonna last awhile.

In the back seat, Harry the dog. Harry's got big nasty teeth but doesn't know how to use them. He's a Doberman Pincer and I think that's strange for a Doberman, but she says it's 'cuz he's an unrealistic woos like his owner.

When we back out of the driveway, I watch the red door recede through the back window and I feel like Alice, falling down the hole, the door getting smaller and smaller. The life we knew in the tiny apartment is gone and now there's just rolling papers and rolling tires.

We streak across fifty states in her little red hatchback that got the back smashed in. She claims this happened when she plowed into a stop sign while drunk but I'm sure there's more to it than that. People notice the car, but she says that's what she wants, because nobody's gonna think we're doing anything bad in such a conspicuous vehicle. When she stops at a stop sign, she glances in the car across from her. If it's not a cop or a young person (the guys in the twilight of their teen years are the worst, they've been raised with the idea that smoking is poison, the whole mess really started with their parents), she straightens her back and tips the matador cap sideways on her head and blows a kiss. Every time she does

that it makes me want those lips on me, quite frankly. I light up a cigarette. “How are we gonna know where it’s safe to make sales?”

She laughs and accelerates; we’re whipping around corners like there’s no possible way we could fly off the road and I have this vision of us, splayed in the ditches, her matador pants ripped open, me with full hard-on, and the car, upside down, tires spinning, contraband cigarettes vomiting out the back hatch.

“Look for the film,” she says. “See?” She sticks out her finger and smears it across the windshield, and the sweep it leaves behind is pretty clear. “Windows, doors, white paint and curtains, it’s there, ya just gotta look.”

I touch my finger to the windshield and write “J + J” with a big heart around it.

“Nice,” she says. She turns on the radio.

When I was five, my mother smoked. Like a chimney. The film was on the pale pink wallpaper, and in her pale yellow painted bathroom, and every morning there was this orange rust-colored stuff that would run down the walls like tears: the condensation from the shower, it would pick up the nicotine. She’d clean it with her bleach or whatever it was. Up on the ladder, on her tip-toes, and I could look up her skirt and see her silk panties that had butterflies

on them. What lurked under the depths of my mother's skirt? I didn't know. It was something I wasn't supposed to see.

I take my hand and set it on the gear shift and then work my way down to her thigh, my fingers crawling, like spiders on narcotics.

She thwacks my hand away. "Not now. Delivery to make."

She pulls into a hot dog stand and the service window opens; a shadow moves inside. She steps out of the car and meanders up to the joint, hand in her pocket, throwing her weight to the back of her body, back on those block-heeled red pumps that shine and glimmer in the sun. Next to my worn leather moccasins, it's the difference between the new arrivals and the clearance rack. She leans down on the counter. "I need Jimboo," she says to the round-faced blond who has a smear of what looks like strawberry ice cream on the red shirt in the valley between her breasts. "He around?"

The girl eyes Josephine, then peers around me at the car. She pulls out a cigarette and lights up, and the girl's eyes widen. She bites her lip. "Please," she squeaks, like a strange zoo creature that you know is in the cage but you can't see it. "Don't."

Josephine ignores this and blows smoke inside the tiny window, past the sign that says “WHITE’S OUR BEST COLOR! TRY OUR PURE VANILLA!”

The girl does not step back. She cranes her neck forward, thrusts her nose out, sniffs like a woman who’s been fleeing the concrete jungle and has just set foot on a Florida beach. “Jimboo,” she says, and she blinks. I notice a square in her right pocket, under a smear of cooking grease punctuated with a spot of egg. She fishes into it and pulls out a pack of cigarettes. I recognize the gold and maroon lettering. I’d forgotten about that brand. Mom smoked it. I step forward and lean in, and the pack disappears again. “May I?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “They’re not real. Fakes. Jimboo makes ’em in the back. But sure.” She hands me one and moves to the side door. I see there’s a thick silver bolt. She unlatches it with a ratchet sound and the door squeaks open. Once we’re inside, she turns over the OPEN sign and pulls down thick shades brown and yellow with age, grease, nicotine, or all three. “They’re lettuce. We make ’em out of lettuce. You the lettuce dealer?”

Josephine throws back her head and laughs. The girl titters. It's a steam roller versus an engine with a bad fan belt. "I sell the real shit."

The girl thrusts her hand out. "Real nicotine?"

My girl nods and blows smoke. It slithers up and huddles about a bare light bulb hanging from a black rubber thong.

The girl's lip quivers. She's looking at the cigarette. She looks at Josephine. She glances hesitantly at the door that reads **EMPLOYEES ONLY** and in black marker "this means you" like graffiti on an underpass, and she looks at me. Then she thrusts out her hand. "One puff. One. Then I get Jimboo. But not before you sell me a pack. A real pack. I got fifty dollars in my Volkswagen bank."

I don't understand the whole Volkswagen thing. It sounds childish. Doesn't match her. But I say nothing. Josephine looks at me. Her eyebrow raises. I look down. Fifty bucks. She wasn't kidding; we were going to make a killing. But it's this desperation in Red Shirt's eyes. Her wide blues are the type I'd've gone for back in high school. They don't have much going on behind them but lots in front of them. Hot lifeguards, make-up applications, sex-and-date advice columns in their mothers' magazines that insist they've got the definitive list of what all wives should know about their

husband's penises, shoe sales, how they look in their green and white cheerleading uniforms. But this girl's deader than that, and it's not because she's a dumb bunny. It's because something inside her died. I don't know if showing her shiny lipsticks would even wake her up. But this cigarette, it just might.

"Give her the cigarettes, Josephine."

She winces. "Jake, I think—"

"Just give them."

Her lip curls up on one side, and then she sticks out her tongue at me and smiles at the girl. "Tell you what. Give us your fifty, we'll give you three packs."

Red Shirt looks like her Mom's just given her the bike she wanted for Christmas. The three packs Josephine presents her after she's handed over the bank—a small pink Volkswagen bug splattered with green, orange, and pink flowers that says MARYLAND on its bumper—might as well have been wrapped in a bow. "Jimboo!" Red Shirt cries, even as she's ripping off the cellophane wrapper like a diabetic in a sugar crash. "Jimboo! Come on, someone's here to see you!" She rams one of the butts in her mouth and waves her fingers at me for a lighter.

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We run smokes all over the country. Make deliveries on the sides of roads and in dumpsters behind bars. On Indian reservations and ghettos, at country clubs and speak-easy cigar lounges. Still she hasn't given me the fuck she's promised, not even in one state, let alone fifty, and I start to view myself not as a criminal but as a hobo. We crash in shit bag hotels, the types that have sagging mattresses, torn curtains, and TVs that only broadcast one station—usually the station that's all news and broadcasts nothing but stories about how many people they're busting for illegal cigarette smoking.

Somewhere in Tornado Alley, we shack up in this dive right next to a drive-in, and even though and it makes me nervous because it's in the middle of this expansive plain where sure-as-hell a twister could sneak up on you in the oily night. I make friends with it, though, because we can watch the movies right from the window. We can even hear the broadcast coming from somebody's car if we don't keep the rattling AC unit on. There's the usual pre-show entourage of cartoons with prancing popcorn and candy. DON'T MISS OUT ON WHAT'S YUMMY! sings a grotesquely-laden box of fries. A SNACK AT MIDNIGHT IS ALWAYS A GREAT LIFT! Then there's something new, something we've not seen before on the big

screen. IF YOU SEE SOMEONE SMOKING, DIAL THE AUTHORITIES IMMEDIATELY. IT'S YOUR AIR. THEY HAVE NO RIGHT TO TAKE IT FROM YOU. REMEMBER, SMOKING-RELATED ILLNESSES ARE NOT TREATABLE.

Josephine sighs in disgust. She stretches out in the lounge chair we've set in front of the window and spreads her legs slightly. I'm thinking about what color panties she's got on; I can see the aqua sequins if I sit in just the right position, pretending to lean over and grab my butts, which I've conveniently planted at my feet for just such reason. She lights up two smokes even though she's got two burning in the ashtray. The motel's DROPSEY DRIVE-INN logo has long since been veiled under a pile of ash. "Jesus." She blows smoke. "It's okay to overeat and be fat, because, you know, that can't really affect other people. What if it makes me sick to physically look at them?"

I don't know why but my mother's skirt pops into my head. Then it goes beyond that, to the way her thighs looked when she sat on the beach in that black bathing suit splashed with huge white flowers—it was one of those skirt bathing suits. Skirt bathing suits that she told me were the only things that "held her in." And then I remember her telling her friends she was losing weight, she really

was, but at the same time she was digging into the fridge and plunging spoons into gallon containers of mint chocolate chip ice cream. My mother smoked five packs a day.

She was also fat.

And suddenly, I'm annoyed. Annoyed that for over a year now I've been living with and following Josephine around on the promise of getting laid, believing there wouldn't possibly be any way she'd string me along, but she had. She had, and I had fallen for it.

Then I do something completely out of character. Because I'm a woos, like my Doberman, who's sleeping on the mildewed tiles in the bathroom. "What if it makes me pissed off you haven't fucked me yet?"

"You want out? Then go," she says. Then she coughs. It's the first time I've ever heard her cough, and I recognize it. That watery, deep-in-the-lungs cough. The cough I try to fool myself I'll never have. And she coughs and coughs and coughs and I'm wondering how the hell she's kept it from me all this time. I grab her wrist.

"You're coughing," I say.

She's wheezing. "It's nothing. Allergies." She rummages in the cooler between us; the cooler's so beat up it doesn't keep the

cold in like it should, and the ice we loaded from the half-dead ice machine by the long-ago drained pool has melted.

“My ass,” I say. I take a lighter out of my pocket and make ready to light up the cigarette. Then I give it a second thought. I put it down on the arm of the patio chair. “You’re smoking yourself to death. It’s true. All their ads and shit. Maybe they have a point.”

She glares at me. “It’s not about smoking. It’s about the RIGHT to smoke. The RIGHT to do what you want. I thought you were with me on this, Jake. Don’t be a dick. I thought you were for freedom and rights and the American way.”

I stand up, and the ciggie I’d perched on the arm of the chair falls to the carpet. The torn curtains are willowing in a light wind. I’m thinking about that sound they say you hear before a twister rips through. Like a train. I’m thinking I’m hearing a train coming. “There’s a difference between freedom and enabling.”

She lets out a Lolita-like sigh. “Is there?”

“Yes.”

She cracks open the beer and swigs it. “Fuck you there’s not. Freedom is enabling. If you can call people being in charge of themselves ‘enabling’, which is apparently what this government thinks. That’s why we’re doing this.”

“To enable everybody to kill himself?”

In the reflection on the glass I see her scowl in disapproval. “If that’s what they want.” She got up out of the chair and turned her back to me, marching in the direction of the closet the management calls a bathroom, but she hasn’t finished speaking. I don’t think I’m supposed to hear what she says next—it’s a mutter, like the kind I used to make after my mother was done yelling at me and I had to get the last word in. Just so long as she didn’t, God forbid, hear what my last words were. “That’s what my mother wanted and I sure as hell wasn’t going to let anybody take that away from her.”

The revelation’s so unsettling I wish I’d thought to turn the crappy AC back on. “What?”

I see her back stiffen and she sets a hand on a hip and turns on me. “My mother. You never asked, did you, Jake? Always thinking with your dick. Just like they all do. I have to pee.” She moves toward the bathroom again.

“Come on. Don’t build me up like that and leave me blue-balled.”

“No.”

“You have to be a tease with everything, don’t you?” it’s out of my mouth before I can stop it.

She stops. She slams her beer on top of the dresser. Its circular stain will join the others, a collage of the unfinished. “Jesus. Dad left my mother when she was pregnant with me, if you have to know. Because she’d quit smoking and without cigarettes she couldn’t do a thing. Her personality got nasty. She couldn’t think straight. She didn’t smile. So he left her. Said she wasn’t who he married. And he took off.” She swallows, and I see something change in her eyes. They’re getting moist. “And I was born, and she went back to smoking. She said she’d never quit. She never did. She said it was staying true to herself. She said I’d have a father if only she hadn’t quit. Then when there was the ban she begged me to get everybody in this fucking world who couldn’t possibly go without them, smokes. Because that was gonna be her plan as soon as she found out about the smoking ban. She was supposed to be doing this. Only she got it. The cancer. So I fucking did what she asked. I did.” She picks up the beer and takes a long swallow. Then her eyes bore into mine. “Are you satisfied with that explanation? Can I please pee now?”

I swallow. She takes this reflective act as permission to go relieve herself. But I stop her again. “You could have done it alone. Why’d you bring me?”

“Because.”

“Why.”

“Jee-sus!” She whirls around to face me. Her hands are clenched. Her heaving breasts remind me of melons now. Big, hung-down melons. Anger has suddenly made her a cow. “Because maybe I’m dying and I wanted to do something good before I died and I didn’t want to do it alone! You know what it’s like to die alone? Do you? No you don’t. You wouldn’t. My ma’s gonna die alone and I’ll be fucked sideways if I’m going to do the same thing. You shit.” Then she starts to cry. “You shit! You made me spill all that!” She tromps off to the cube of a bathroom and slams the door. Even though Harry’s in there, I don’t hear the soft tinkle of bells from his collar indicating he moved. She could have stepped right in the middle of his back and he would’ve taken it. I think I should reward my dog more. Like with a salami. He’s certainly earned it in the last year.

I go to the door and consider yelling in after her—*Freedom, I actually bought that shit from you! Freedom! It hasn’t been about freedom for you the whole time! It has been about getting revenge!*—but then think better of it. Fuck her. I’ve had blue balls for a year. It appears she’s had them too. But now she’s done with me. She got what she needed. She’s going to be like a call girl at the end

of the paid-in-full hour: out the door. The curtains in the window flutter; the wind has picked up even more. I could beat her to it. I could pack up my stuff and get out of here, and when she comes out, I'd be tooling away in her little red hatchback.

But the anger subsides when, over the rush of water, I hear sobs. I remember when Mom used to cry. She used to cry when Dad said bad stuff to her. Called her a whore or demanded to know why she was a sucky cook. Or he'd say something like "I never should have knocked you up" and slam the door on his way back out to the bar.

And then I think, I am a shit. I am a shit, and I admit it. Mostly because this whole mission for me has been about getting laid. Because before this I never saw Josephine as a whole person. She's been a conquest, a thing to which my wife will someday be compared to. Now she has a mother. She has a mother, and a reason to do what she's doing. Not just a motive. She is doing this because she loves her mother.

I shouldn't take her car. I shouldn't leave, period. I like her—maybe I even love her. Maybe I should just—hold her. Hug her. Or bring her a tissue. Or a smoke. Or the rest of her beer, which cries condensation all over the dresser. I knock.

“Yes?” It doesn’t sound like Josephine. It sounds...small.

“Unlock the door.”

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They say that if you can survive a road trip as a couple without fighting, it’s probably a good bet you can survive a marriage, too. My Mom used to say that. And as we hop from state to state, I start to get antsy not just to fuck Jose anymore, but to *know* her. Because of the something sad in her eyes. Because now I know why she’ll jam a cigarette into her but not me, and I envision throwing her down in a field of crazy yellow flowers and making love to her so I can soothe it, this why of it. So I can sow new things in the dirt buried beneath her crazy meadow.

We run out of tampon boxes in the Adirondack State Park, right in front of a sign that advertises HERKIMER COUNTY FOREVER WILD.

It’s hot up here in summers, but nobody’s got air conditioning. “They don’t need it,” she says. “Cool mountain air at night keeps everybody happy and sleeping good.” She pulls over to a white building with a broken gas pump and deer antlers scaling the walls.

“What’s here?”

She lights up a cigarette, and the trees and the gas pumps gasp. The red checkered curtain across the window in the main building pulls aside, then back across. She takes off her sunglasses and squints into the darkened window. “Ice cream,” she says, “and rolling papers.”

“How do you know this place’s friendly?”

She bites her lip, sets her hand on her hip and nods. “I just know.” She struts forward, slings her small pouch of a bag over her right shoulder.

The property’s run-down; there’s an overturned wheelbarrow in the shadow of a tractor with two flat tires, and weeds spring up through the boards in the paint-chipped front wooden steps. Josie doesn’t knock, she just yanks on the tattered screen door, but it doesn’t come free. Well, not immediately. She puts both her hands on the handle and yanks, hard, and I see one of the flowers on the back of her skirt moves with the flexing of her ass muscles.

“Yo, Ma!” she calls inside. It’s a run-down General Store. An empty deli case stands in the corner, its fluorescent light fritzing on and off. “Ma!” She leads me past half-empty shelves. I notice there’s a thick layer of brown dust on the rolls of toilet paper and Kleenex® purse packs, and the snack products sport expiration dates from

last year. She stops at the bottom of a staircase and turns to me, blocking it. "I've just got to drop off some cigarettes," she says. "You wait here."

I reach out and touch her arm. The hairs on it are downy soft. She coughs a few times. I wait for the coughing to subside. "I'll go with you."

She is quiet. From the room upstairs, I hear a hish-hish and a woman's voice, weak. "Josie?" Silence. Josie bites her lip and looks up; her fingers clutch more tightly around the handle of her bag.

"Josie, did you bring my sticks?"

She beholds me again with fearful eyes.

"They won't fix her," she says. "She might as well smoke until the end."

"You don't have to justify," I say.

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We get back in the car. Josie sets her hands at the ten and two position on the steering wheel, but doesn't try to find her keys or even take her sunglasses off the dash. I think about that sound, the sound her mother had made just as she'd taken her last breath, that hish-wheeze, but the contraband medical equipment Josie'd ripped off from a hospital, the pump, it had still been going, forcing

air into her lungs long after she'd died. I reach for her hand. "I'm here," I say.

She turns to look at me. Her mascara has made a black ring around her eye; it looks like she got punched. She moves her cherry lips like she's gonna talk. Then she doesn't. She reaches into her bandanna sack and pulls out a pack of cigarettes, whips one out, jams it between her teeth, then dives for the dash and slaps her sunglasses on her head. She sits, staring, I suppose, at the room above the defunct store, the room where the body is already stiffening.

I brace my feet against the floor of the car and squirm to wriggle a lighter from my pocket. I push down the lever and offer her the open flame.

She looks at me again. The flame's reflection in her sunglasses give her two demon-eyes. She reaches out with her hand and wraps it around the lighter—flame and all. "No," she says as the fire burns the skin on her palm. "I think there's something else we ought to be doing instead."

And she puts the lighter down and holds my hand, takes the cigarette from her lips, and softly, very softly, she kisses me, and I taste the salt of a single tear.