

The Smoking Deck

Written by Smoke Signals

Tuesday, 31 December 2013 17:08 - Last Updated Tuesday, 31 December 2013 17:23

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by Freida Theant

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This is the favorite part of Deirdre's morning; arriving at Imperial Port, to board the early morning ferry departing the New Jersey dock for midtown Manhattan, a relaxed crossing of the Hudson River. She finds it good for half an hour's relaxation with (maybe) three Virginia Slims. A trim five foot seven brunette with a pageboy cut, and soft grey three-quarter length coat, accessorized with black rabbit gloves, she cuts the image of a woman sensitive to fashion but flavored heavily by conservative couture.

This overcast morning the boisterous crowd is greater than usual. Despite the early hour, she finds herself jostled whilst elbowing her way through the dockside queue, noticing an older man next to her, pale, thin, clean-shaven, and greying hair in a full length overcoat and broad-brimmed hat. He apologizes as they collide momentarily, and she detects a European accent. Nevertheless Deirdre sidles through and ascends the ladder to the top level 'smoking deck'.

Glancing over the rail, she gauges the chilling atmosphere of this foggy, grey weather that sent the non-smokers to the heated, dry interior. Her elderly foreign 'gent' and other smokers have all moved to the rail or seated themselves on the dew-moistened benches. She rests her briefcase on a nearby bench and retrieves her Virginia Slims and her gleaming chrome lighter. The almost scruffy 'old man' has already seated himself a few benches away and smokes his cigarette placidly while staring off into the grey horizon; eyes fixed on infinity.

As she brings the lighter up to the edge of her Virginia Slim, several clicks in a row fail to bring a flame no matter how vigorously she presses the lever. Taking the unlit cigarette from her mouth, she blasts a jet of the air into the orifice in the hopes of clearing any debris obstructing the flint wheel.

Deirdre retries igniting her lighter. Getting the same result as the last try, she up ends the lighter and taps it in an inverted position so as to dislodge any offending particles. She tries once more to bring flame but the lighter clearly has insufficient fuel.

"Damn," she curses. She looks up with despair and a voiceless plea for help, and to her

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surprise and gratification, a medium height blond, sporting fashionable black boots and a conservative full-length coat strides towards her with her lit cigarette dangling from her lips but with her lighter still entwined within her fingers; approaching her with a blessed remedy.

“Can I help?” the savior offers, cupping her hand around the Zippo flame fluttering bravely in the brisk maritime gusts and thrusting it toward her.

Deirdre bends in to dock the edge of her Virginia Slim within the furnace of the flame and draws hard on the filter. She concentrates on the flame at the tip of her VS to coordinate the ignition. Now the surface tobacco grains flash into scarlet, orange and gold miniature stars; then the smoke streamers shoot up. She jets off the light-up draft and draws fully on the filter to get her promised relief from her nicotine angst. The burning wafer flares and broadens, consuming the char-black band leading the coal, and inches toward her tightened mouth. Gulping the rich cloud, she plunges her narcotizing draft profoundly within her innermost being, and maintains the stimulating burn for a few exhilarating heartbeats. When she expels the spent fumes through her nose and mouth, the Maritime breezes gust sharply, carrying her exhale in a smear of white that quickly washes out to invisible.

“Thanks so awfully,” Deirdre replies. “I can’t believe I actually went to the ‘City’ without checking my lighter first.”

“It’s nothing! I’ve done that myself, right here on the ‘smoking deck’,” the genial stranger said, mild amusement coloring her warm expression. “You commuting to work?” “Well, yes and no,” Deirdre replies, “I have an appointment with one of my clients today, but I don’t make daily trips.”

“So, are you a consultant?” her blond neighbor asked. She shot a look over toward the nearby bench and then brought her patiently smoldering Newport to her parted lips. During her long draw the energized coal glowed fiercely as it ate its way backwards growing intense and larger; engaging the full diameter of the cigarette as a shimmering golden-orange band. She lowered her jaw slightly and let the wind sweep the smoke away in a white smear tapering off into the Hudson River gusts.

“An auditor, actually,” she said. “I audit my clients operations for compliance with Federal

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regulatory agencies. By the way, my name is Deirdre,” and she offered her business card. “How about you?”

“I’m Marlene. Like you, I don’t go into Manhattan daily; just when I absolutely have to meet with corporate officers from our 42nd street H Q.” She pulled a final drag on the exhausted Newport, turned to the rail and flicked this butt spinning, showering off sparks into the choppy grey waters. The thrum of the ferry’s engines and the shudder of the propellers announce they’re getting underway. Dockworkers cast off the lines while Marlene whitens the space in front of her with a massive opaque exhale which when reversed by the prevailing breeze, momentarily obscures her head in the diluted smoke.

Deirdre fascinated, takes it as a metaphor for the mystery enshrouding her fellow traveler’s lifestyle, and then asks, “Are you an independent?”

“Not officially, but in my position, I’m free to work at my own pace.” Marlene looks out at the classic Manhattan skyline before qualifying, “As long as I get results, they leave it to me to set my own schedule.”

Deirdre took a long pull on her cigarette and then a second before routing it away through her nostrils to fill her system with the nicotine residual she was going to need for a morning of No-Smoking in her clients’ offices. “Well what it is that you do?” she continued.

“I’m an insurance fraud investigator.”

“You mean fires and car accidents?” Deirdre asked.

“Yes, but not that kind of claim. I’m the investigator for losses or damages involving antiques, art works and historical documents. I look into loss of valuables, like classic paintings, letters from the famous authors and glitterati, antique furniture and jewelry and clothing belonging to anyone like kings and queens to train robbers. It’s not unusual for me to work with law enforcement in cases of forgeries and theft, as well,” she said.

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“Really! Kind of like on TV?” Deirdre comments.

“Television portrays a glamorized view where the high-tech forensic instruments always work and results are never ambiguous.” Marlene’s chilled fingers groped her purse to dredge up some more precious Newports. “But TV writers leave out the territorial squabbling between governments and their agencies and the old-fashioned incompetence of publicity-seeking jurisdictions. They never show the long hours of reading background files and red-eye stake outs that good case-work requires.”

“Yeah but don’t you get in on the arrest?” Deirdre asked, energized by the excitement of this unexpected lifestyle.

While Marlene spoke, Deirdre noticed her scrutinizing the adjacent bench. Marlene sustained her eagle-eyed gaze over the passengers as she produced a Newport without ever looking at it and raised it to her exquisitely painted mouth. Knowing that the steady wind would thwart her companion’s success in getting it to ignition, Deirdre huddled in close to the svelte blond and cupped her hands to form a screen as Marlene seated the Newport firmly betwixt her tensed lips and sparked the Zippo into action. Plunging the cigarette’s front into the orange aura, she hauled a steady pull that quickly transitioned from flowing air to smoke and flooded her mouth with the desired effect. Then she opened wide her lips and shoved the cottony ball ‘en mass’ out with a pulse from her diaphragm, creating an almost Apache-style smoke signal. Satisfied with the result, she reseats the filter in her smile and draws down a toke she plunges into her lungs for that initial hit that is at once both abrasively mellow and yet mildly inadequate. To absorb the last scintilla of satisfaction, she routes the exhale up over to her nostrils, expelling the milky spray in two fluffy cones.

Marlene returns her gaze to Deirdre, “No I’m not in on the ‘collar’. But I usually appear in court for the prosecution. What takes up much of my time are the days of reporting, filing out expense reports and legal forms.”

“So you work out of your home a lot?”

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“Yeah. For someone who depends on cigarettes, it’s one of the ‘bennies’ of my position,” Marlene reassures her, and resumes her surveillance of the ‘old gent’ at the neighboring bench. Cigarettes burn quickly in these stiff breezes so she double pumps it to make up for lost time, and the increased strength of those tokes restore her serenity. “Yeah, without cigarettes, this line of work would be unthinkable. Stake-outs last forever, and there are times when you’re shadowing someone standing around on the sidewalk or sitting on the park bench and you need some kind of distraction so you don’t stand out. Smoking lets you stay vigilant while blending in at the same time.”

The harsh sound of a ringtone interrupts, and it’s Marlene who takes the cell phone from her pocket, reads the caller’s title and responds, “Yeah, he’s right here....that’s right, the ferry crossing. No, he’s alone. Meet me dockside...OK, Okay ten four.” She clacked the phone shut and checked the bench to make sure that the senior passenger was still seated. He was.

“You’re tailing that ‘little old gent’, aren’t you?” Deirdre blurts out.

“Shhh,” Marlene cautions. “This ‘little old gent’ as you call him, is one of Europe’s most accomplished forgers. Over the last four decades, he has probably swindled antiquarians and insurance companies out of forty or more million Euros and/or dollars combined.” She tore an angry pull out of her Newport while keeping her gaze on her prey, and blurts out the exhale in an aggressive thrust from her lungs. “I needed to get a conversation going with you so I could keep close to him and blend in. I’ve been after him for nearly a year and a half!”

“So the telephone call....you gonna arrest him?”

“No, I’m not. But the NYPD is,” she said. “They’re going to meet me at the pier and we’ll take him into custody at the gangway.”

They spent the final moments of the river-crossing finishing off this scenario; two women, strangers until this moment, chatting about their common bonds in a professional lifestyle.

The Ferry slowed; deckhands cast the mooring lines, just as Marlene bid her companion

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farewell. She moved toward the gate and disappeared among the disembarking passengers. Once the vessel was secured, the crowd's initial frantic pulse flooded the dock.

Deirdre delayed descending the ladder to the exit portal. Setting foot on the concrete of the pier, she looks around for any sign of the police, or the old forger or her insurance investigator, but there were no signs of anything out of the ordinary. "He must have escaped her once more," she mused aloud.

Just then, her 'old-gent' surprised her, stepping out from behind a concrete column. He paused her while thrusting forward an Interpol Photo Identity placard, proving that it was he who was an international law enforcement officer.

His accent was unmistakably Germanic, "Your traveling companion, did she say where she was going after landing here?"

"Yes, she did....to her corporate headquarters, some insurance company on 42nd street," Deirdre blurted out. "She said you were the forger that's wanted by the Law!"

"Of course she did," he replied knowingly, "she's talented at fabricating cover stories on the spot. Hungary and the Czech Republic have been after her for almost twenty years; she is one of Austria's most accomplished forgers. Over the last decade alone she has probably swindled antiquarians and insurance companies out of forty or more million Euros and/or dollars combined."