

## Night Smoke

By Adair Broughton

Holding a cigarette, watching the smoke rise like a graceful angel reluctant for heaven she sat staring through her reflection to the city street below. Warm lights that gave her no comfort gradually switched off in patterns of familiarity from the apartments opposite. People began to sleep with the night, lost to dreams and timeless peace. The ghosts from the burning cigarette filled her room and eased her into intimacy with the night. The smoke was her blanket of comfort. Instead of counting sheep she counted the cigarettes, finding a strange consolation in the soothing smoke as it filled her lungs. Each exhale was a slow, interminable release, prolonging her deep and quiet repose. She was adept at controlling the insouciant egress of the smoke, making it seem like a sigh but nurturing what patterns emerged to intricate detail.

It was usually dawn or the ashtray that informed her that she could close her eyes.

She could see things in the smoke, swirling recognition of people and places. It was something to ease the boredom of the night. They were not faces of friends or family, just images that would come and go, strangers she would never know. This eased the weight she felt, the burden of staying awake alone. It was safer to be awake with the night but often harder to kill time. People disliked disturbing it. Noise pushed time forwards. That's why time slowed down at night. They said it was a twenty-four hour city but she knew that was a false premise. There were many hours when she never saw a soul on the street below.

When she did she wanted to reach out to them, find what their story was, why they were alone walking the city streets. Often it was raining but it did nothing to either soothe or add to the melancholy, which seemed hers alone. There was one man she often saw, walking with purpose and long stride as if late for work but never consistent with time. It could be ten, fifteen or twenty cigarettes later when she saw him.

Once he suddenly stopped and looked up directly at her but she knew the red glow of the cigarette would not have been strong enough to form her silhouette. The hood of his coat kept his face hidden, for all she knew it could have been a shadow inside, part of the dreams encroaching into her real life. But just as quickly he lowered his head and strode forward in that meaningful gait. He was a man with intent, and that was what made him different, what stood out against the random and slow pace of the drunks she saw at intermittent intervals. It broke up the night.

She would follow the grey wisps with her eyes, curling and playing games. She preferred the smoking gun to the ticking clock. She like to watch the burning end of the cigarette through the window as she inhaled, watching it rise in brightness only to fade quickly moments later.

She smoked to see things in a haze, make things less clear and offer escape from thought. She never smoked in the day, just read books and watched television. Many

hours were absorbed on the computer, many more lying on the couch staring into space, tracing invisible paths on the ceiling for her eyes to follow.

She had recently starting drinking too.

She always woke mid morning following four hours sleep from dawn. But she woke to nothing, a helpless routine she could not escape from.

A part of her did miss having to work but she couldn't quite regain the energy to fulfil that aspect of life. She disliked conflict and stress, which her career had been built upon. Her own personality had been straining against it for so long, seeking answers of why she had to feel she was someone, why people had to feel they were important. It was a false confidence that made no sense considering everybody was the same when they were asleep. People were vulnerable, insecure and it was a constant battle to prove they weren't. She had accepted it. That's why she liked being awake at night, for different perspective she gained from knowing everyone else was asleep. It grouped them together, made life a level playing field. It also gave resonance to how different she felt, a separation she could utilise for personal analysis. There was no dichotomy in that. Even jigsaws could be two sided.

Some nights she didn't want to think. She wanted emptiness, a stoic renunciation of what she had been. There was an innocence and purity to her now that was less languid than calm. It felt good not to feel a thing.

Since her parents died the money had paid for her apartment outright and would continue to pay for bills for many years to come. There were no immediate worries. Yet she never lost herself to the future nor spent too long in the past. They both seemed fine where they were.

What separated everything from nothing? Only time. Something could mean the world one day and be abject and meaningless the next. Time was what mattered, either the glue or the crowbar. She was sure this was not a conflict with time.

That was not to say she had no regrets. She missed being told she was beautiful. She couldn't pretend emptiness forever. There was a yearning for warmth. The reflection that sat with her every night was not hers anymore. A little of her spirit was broken, but it had only been a fight for individuality and respect that controlled it. She wanted someone to say she was pretty, that her hair was soft and beautiful, and that she could have an affect on even the stoniest of hearts. It was a weakness but one she could forgive herself for. A smile was everything to her. It had been a long time since she had been held. She needed both.

She was a young girl again, wanting to be held for the first time.

Then she was the young woman who lied to boyfriends, not caring who she hurt. It took time for her to be honest with herself, to realise that could not be her future. There was sadness in that realisation but finding love with her most recent boyfriend allowed her to forget what she had done, dismiss it as growing up.

The money should have alleviated any worries she had, lessened the burden of stress felt in her job but she started taking days off sick until she eventually she never went in at all. Her boyfriend called round but she was indifferent to his conversation or his touch. They would argue and she would ask him to leave. Eventually he just stopped calling. There had been no definite ending like there had been no definite start to the dreams.

She could not remember when they started. It was like they had always been a part of her but she had no memory, no distinct recollection of this. There was nothing she had feared, no monster from her childhood or beast of imagination for it to feed from. She couldn't explain this to anyone, hated the idea of therapy. Sleeping tablets kept her confined in a cage while that entrapment fostered belief she would never wake up. She never took the pills again after that. Fear was controlling, dominating and by being awake during the night she held the power, the cage was open.

If she slept at night abject fear and fitful dreams haunted her. She slept instead for a few hours when the light could first be seen over the tops of apartment blocks that lined the streets. The sun itself was always a few hours behind, the buildings impressive in what they could block from view. They were sanctuaries of the masses, stone tombs and meaningless equities of possession. They could house a lot of people in a small space, like a graveyard. And at night they were just as silent.

She was encased too, seeing daylight to buy groceries and her lighted sticks of elongated death but nothing more. The bookshop nearby had closed down; the owner, a strange man with whom she had grown fond had told her he had been made to leave. She asked no questions wanting no answers but he had been kind enough to give her three boxes of books, enough to last her a year or more. It had become one less reason to go out, immerse her in the city, and feel the vibrancy of life.

She couldn't picture him now, his face vague and she wondered why she felt him strange knowing he probably thought the same of her. Was the gift of books his charity? She missed him yet their conversations had always been terse and awkward, never fluent with news of their lives. The bookshop had always been dusty and sombre with few customers yet she always felt she belonged there more than the boutiques and coffee shops her lunchtimes had often found her.

When they did speak it could be something simple like the weather but when she thought of his answers, it was atmospheric, filled with extra meaning, that the words were a smokescreen for something much deeper. She would spend hours dissecting the layers, trying to find the essence hidden inside and only managing to sense it rather than understand it. It was as if the actual words never said as much as how he said them, how his face looked in the process. The face she couldn't remember.

She remembered the first time she went in there, to find a book her boyfriend had sought after for a long time. She had asked the man and he never spoke at that point, just pointed to a shelf behind. It seemed an effort for him to sell books and a hassle for him to talk to a customer. She felt perturbed but didn't leave, focusing on the shelf rather than the abruptness of the man. But it had been there. She was delighted to have found it on the off chance and she knew her enthusiasm had irked the man. She had vowed never to go in there again.

It took more effort to be angry and moody than being happy, being oneself, so what was he hiding?

The city of rain stuck to its sobriquet with a fierce downpour just as she was passing. It was only one day after and she found herself back inside the shop, waiting for the rain to pass. Gradually they spoke, as her visits became frequent, but it was never in detail or for long. He opened up without telling her anything, as if he had lots of stories but no history and no inclination to explain them. There was an unmentioned understanding between them, which seemed to be mean more than the deliberate and cramped words would have them each believe. She never mentioned the bookshop to her boyfriend, not even when he had asked how she came across the book. She felt guilty, as if she was being unfaithful over someone who gave her less warmth than a stranger in the subway ticket booth.

It was just something else that did not matter. She had forgotten his face although not his aura. The smoke seemed somehow more real than him.

Often she would place her hand over the phone, ready to dial the number of forgiveness and say hello to her old boyfriend. Need battled the knowing reconciliation that would lead to forced conversation and false word. She would lie on the couch and softly caress her hand up and down her thigh thinking of nights when her bed was a warmer and safer place. Waves of want embraced her, allowing to finally drift off to a nicer place but with release often came a tear as much as a smile. She needed real arms to embrace her. Intimacy thrived off flesh not thought.

That was all gone and she never quite knew if she could have done anything about it, about not caring about feeling nothing meant anything.

It was another night of rain. It was something about this city that seemed to wash away any aspect of normality. It wore people down, slowly and unknowingly. Why did she stay? It made no sense when she thought upon it. So she didn't think upon it.

She sat on the windowsill her legs drawn into her chest; an ashtray of cigarette butts the only ornament. A bottle of red wine was open next to her, three quarters drunk. She liked the feeling, the warm glow the drink could give. Liquid friends.

She would not understand what she did next. But it was to be a strange night in that sense. She watched half a cigarette burn down, watched the ash grow longer, somehow sustaining itself against the inevitable fall and longer, like an ageing old man, remind her of white hair growing from pale skin. She knew the outcome but she was patient not to disturb the cigarette, allowing it to do what it wanted. The ash fell and she tapped the remainder from the end of the cigarette. It was then that she stared at it, seconds but seeming longer, and with protracted and deliberate action, she pressed the end of it into her arm.

She had wanted to burn the soul from her body, see if pain took her away from boredom, time and existence. It did none of these things, except burn a mark into her body, which would be a visual reminder of this period of her life. She was branding herself but for nobody's possession. Pain was interesting, a release that focussed on self, to feel alive. Hurt was a cure for the introverted. She surprised herself even more

when she had no need to cry out. Whether the wine had subdued her senses or she had become numb to what she had just inflicted on herself she did not know.

She stared at her arm indifferently.

It was then that she looked down at the street and saw the man entering the apartment opposite. Was he hiding from the rain the same way she had at the bookshop. It was the same man who had once looked up at her, hidden with the dark of the night and the streetlight that was reluctant to shine, its glow sobering and solemn. It was the same man she had seen on other occasions. The urge to reach put felt greater.

Strange she thought, as she lifted the cigarette from her arm and placed it with the others in the ashtray. Why would he be entering that building? He usually walked straight past.

It had sparked an interest in her but she did not know if it was the wine or intrigue that made her ask questions. Why did she suddenly care who he was or what he was doing? Her mind did not feel clear. Was she becoming bored with the deep quiet of the night? Was mystery the new condolence?

She felt confused more than the wine had ever affected her before.

The rain came down heavier almost hiding the apartments opposite. Her eyes closed, trying to release a weight that she felt around her. She couldn't risk falling asleep. She felt she didn't want to be here, in her comfort zone. Her arm was beginning to hurt. She closed her eyes imagining the rain falling on her skin soothing her recent idiocy. A scar lasts a lot longer than the moment to make the scar.

Maybe there were other events in life like that too.

She stood up hoping the rush of blood to her head would clear the cloud that fogged her judgement. She was being pulled by a tide that she couldn't see. She would get that fresh air and actually feel that rain. If something was going to drown her it may as well be the city rain.

A part of her wanted the comfort of her shelf by the window, the ageless waiting for dawn. It was routine now, her part in peace. Yet she felt she needed to talk to someone or that this man wanted to talk to her. They had some unfinished business that hadn't even started.

She walked into the lift, only in her nightdress but not caring or thinking who could see. She did not shiver as if protected in a dream where reality didn't matter so much. When she did think back she remembered the night he looked up, something she had not thought about since, the feeling that something bad was going to happen. Then when he walked off she had wanted to chase after him, stop the sensation that told her all was not ok with him.

She could not make that same mistake twice; the same feeling as then was either pulling or pushing her towards him now. She felt she could hear his thoughts and sense he was struggling with something and she could help. She stepped out of the

lift, walked to the main doors of the apartment block. She had never known the city so quiet and so still, the rain was now her heartbeat. When was the last time she had even taken a breath?

The rain felt warm which was strange. Was she really that cold that rain could feel like that? The voice was louder as if she could hear a private struggle of soul against self but somebody else's. She had wanted intimacy. She had wanted an escape from dream but reality seemed to be slipping away.

She reached the basement just as a tin can was blown by the wind, the noise making her jump. Her nerves were active, the fear now growing. She was trapped and she knew it. It felt like a final battle but not just for her. She was part of something she didn't understand just like the sleepless nights had formed from hidden insecurity or thought.

She needed no directions, no guessing of where he was. The layout of the apartment complex was identical to the one she lived in. There was only one place he could be and that was in the basement.

Her senses were alert but her control wasn't. Fear was the magnet. She had the feeling she was going to stop something happening, be a force of good, an angel just for a minute but somehow lasting a lifetime. That was not her motivation. It was the same unknown beckoning and chance that made her go into the bookshop on that second visit.

Confusion did nothing to lessen the angst. It was only when she saw the man staring at her could she exhale. How she longed for the simple world of her cigarettes at that moment.

He looked sad. She wanted to feel sorry for him but that itself seemed a trap. How had he brought her here? This made no sense, yet he seemed as shocked to see her as she did in not fighting the urge to resist those voices. There was more than one voice but still she had no words just a general meaning of what the words were meant to say.

She moved towards him, slowly but still not fighting. She was beginning to feel numb, sacrificing herself for a cause she didn't believe in or know about. What was compelling her to hold him, be near him?

They needed each other at that specific moment for reasons so far apart that they had converged. At that specific time she found fear was not as strong as wanting to be held. The man's thoughts were silent. She would never know who he was or why they had this strange connection.

It was every moment she had wanted to help the lonely people of the night rolled into one. She had to do this. It was a thank you for the seldom company they gave.

She thought about the man from the bookshop, how his thoughts had made her feel a little like this, that he spoke with his mind in subtle ways, his voice was just another form of communication. She had imagined all that. Was she imagining this too? The

world was too logical, too boring, too real. That was where her emptiness stemmed from.

She saw images of beautiful women as tired as she had never been, in a sleep like she could never have. It felt like he was giving her the gift of sleep but that he hadn't meant too, that there was a dark seed still being planted in her mind. It was comforting and frightening in equal measure. She was reassured by his firm grip, of being pressed against him. There was no lullaby, just his breathing. He was warm.

At that precise moment and the only time in her life she would ever feel it, she became aware of a strange acknowledgement that some things happen for a reason, that even chance was more than luck, that what she couldn't control or understand had hidden meanings but that a purpose did exist. It left her just as quickly, like her breath had as that grip closed even tighter

She remembered darkness and putting her head against his chest sensing the drops of rain on his coat, a musty smell of cold and dark places.

She felt nothing more.

When she woke she was asleep in her bed. She had vague memories of waking in the night, of having a cigarette, of feeling rain. She felt tired, consumed by it. That felt wonderful, to be so tired and in her bed.

She wouldn't analyse any of this. What would be the point? She had her spirit back and that only wanted to defeat time's essence and presence. If there was no reason for where her insomnia had stemmed from she cared less why it had left. It became just another small part of her life that became a recess in the back of her mind.

The man was not seen again but she never looked. She still read the books but thought less and less of where they came from.

She had seen and felt death. Even if she was not conscious of that, what was left to fear?

She was soon asleep again and it wasn't even dawn.