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Westerly

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Tom had been fighting with our parents again. When it was over, he came to my room and said, “Let’s go.” I didn’t like it when he gave me orders, but he was in a bad mood, so I didn’t argue. He took me outside, into the woods behind our house, where my parents forbade me to go unless it was with Tom. Tom was fourteen and I was eleven.

He took me far into the woods, farther than I had ever been. I stayed behind him and watched his feet as he moved forward, swishing leaves. Every time I expected Tom to stop, he kept going. Mom and Dad wouldn’t like it if they knew we were going this far. Kids came in here to smoke and drink and do all sorts of stuff.

Tom and I kept walking. Gray tree trunks and orange leaves surrounded us and I wasn’t sure in what direction I’d have to walk to get back to our house. After what seemed like miles, Tom stopped and leaned against a tree. I did the same, taking the strain off my legs. “I want to show you something,” Tom said and reached into his pockets. When his hands came out, they held a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

“Whoa,” I said. “You smoke?” I whispered the word “smoke,” as if it was a curse word, something forbidden. Which it was—Mom and Dad said that smoking would make your lungs fall apart. The image kept me awake some nights—I pictured my lungs with big holes in them, bits of lung falling out in clumps.

But watching Tom smoke, you wouldn’t think that anything so horrible was happening in his body. It seemed like the most natural act in the world. He took out a cigarette and put it in his mouth. I watched with silent fascination as he smoothly performed the ritual I had only seen on TV—flicking the lighter, covering it with his hand, tilting his head down and sideways to join the tip of the cigarette with the faint yellow flame. He looked so smooth, so adult, and I thought I’d never be like Tom, no matter how hard I tried.

“Wanna try it?” he said, coolly exhaling a stream of smoke.

“Nah-ah,” I said. Our parents would go berserk if they found out.

He shook the pack of cigarettes and held it out to me. A single cigarette jutted out perfectly.

“I don’t want to, Tom,” I said.

He looked at me steadily. “Why do you think I brought you out here?”
"I don't know." But I had gotten the idea he brought me here to talk. Which was unusual for him—he didn't come to me to discuss his problems. He never discussed them with anybody. Tom held the pack firmly in front of me, and I wondered if maybe this was his way of talking about whatever was on his mind, his way of asking for help. I reached forward and slowly pulled the cigarette out. It was little and smooth and papery and I put it between my index and middle fingers, which I thought was the way you were supposed to hold a cigarette, even though Tom held it between his thumb and index finger. He held out the lighter and I stuck the tip of the cigarette into the flame.

"Put it in your mouth, stupid," he said.

I did and he lit the cigarette, then pulled the lighter away. It was like having a twig or a stick of grass between your teeth. I opened the side of my mouth so I could breathe. I tasted nothing.

"Close your mouth, dumbshit."

I did, but it was hard to breathe.

"Now take a drag off it."

I didn't know exactly how to "take a drag," so I just sort of sucked on the cigarette, and my first sensation was one of surprise at seeing the tip of the cigarette, situated oddly in front of my nose, light up. Then my lungs convulsed and I coughed hard and the cigarette flew from my mouth to the ground, settling in a muddy patch at the base of a tree. My throat was dry and scratchy and I kept coughing.

"Asshole, you wasted one!"

"I'm . . . sorry," I squeezed out between coughs.

"Oh, cut it out. It wasn't that bad."

I cleared my throat and said, "If Mom and Dad saw this, they'd kill both of us."

"Who cares," he said and took another drag off his cigarette.

I don't know why the remark bothered me so much, but I felt annoyance grow in my stomach, tense my shoulders. "Look," I said, "you know, if you wouldn't put up a fight all the time, you wouldn't—well you wouldn't have to fight all the time."

"That's real profound. Shakespeare say that?"

"Smoking's bad for you, Tom," I said.

He laughed. He put his hands on his knees and leaned against a tree, he was laughing so hard.

"What?" I said.

He kept laughing.

"What?!"

"A lotta things're bad for you, Pete."

I said nothing. Yeah, a lot of things were bad for you, but I figured if you didn't do stuff that hurt you, you would live longer. My teacher told us that every cigarette you smoke takes two hours off your life. How much time had I lost with that one drag? Five minutes? Seven? More than that?
Tom took out the pack again. “Why don’t you try another one.”
“No way!”
He studied me. “You’re not gonna tell Mom and Dad, are you?”
I hadn’t thought of it until he said it, but now that he had, it seemed like
something I might do. I shrugged and said, “I dunno.”
He stepped towards me and grabbed my shoulders. “Pete, I swear to
God, you say anything, and you’re dead! Hear me? Fuckin’ dead!”
But this only made me want to tell Mom and Dad more. “Let go of me!”
I said.
“Goddamnit, Pete, they grounded me once already. For a month.” He
relaxed his grip and started pacing. Leaves cracked under his feet. “Dad
found . . . stuff in the bathroom. He said—”
“What stuff?”
“They threatened to throw me out of the house. Outta the fuckin’ house,
Pete! They were serious. They make a lotta threats, you know, but this . . . .”
He stopped pacing and stared into the trees.
“What stuff?” I asked again. “Cigarettes.”
“Yeah,” he said softly. “Stuff like that.” I watched a stream of smoke
move lazily from the cigarette in his hand slowly up the side of his arm; it
stood out against his black jacket. He looked helpless. Pathetic. He had
problems, big problems, more than he was telling me about. I’d never seen
him like this.
He turned to me and flicked the cigarette away. “Pete, don’t tell them.
Just, please . . . okay?”
I didn’t know what to say. It was the first time he had asked me for
something so directly, the first time he admitted that he needed something
from me.
He turned and threw up an arm. “Fine, tell ’em what you want.” He
started walking away and I hurried after him, afraid of being left alone. I
wasn’t supposed to be alone in the woods.
Tom and I walked for what seemed like an hour, and I began to wonder
if we were lost. Or maybe he wasn’t leading me back to the house, but deeper
into the woods, to a spot where he could kill me. He stayed three steps ahead
of me, saying nothing.
I felt relieved when I saw our house, at the edge of the trees. I followed
Tom into our yard. Mom and Dad were on the porch, enjoying the afternoon
I guess. Mom sat in a chair by the back door, which led into the kitchen and
Dad paced slowly, back and forth across one half of the porch. Tom didn’t
greet either of them. He walked to the door and as he passed my mother she
brushed his arm. He went into the house. My mother brought her hand to her
face and sniffed.
That’s when I understood the difference between me and Tom. When
Mom brushed my arm, it was a gesture of affection. With Tom, it was a trick,
a test in the guise of affection. Tom was someone who had to be monitored,
because you never knew what he was going to do. But you always knew what I was going to do. The right thing. The thing I’d been told to do. I was a simple, predictable child, and it seemed a pathetic form of existance.

I went onto the porch. “Hi, Dad.” I turned to Mom. “Hi, Mom.”

She waved me over to her. “Pete,” she said slowly. “I want to ask you something, and you don’t have to be afraid to tell me. Did Tom take you to smoke?”

Dad’s pacing stopped somewhere behind me. He was listening for my response. I looked into my mother’s eyes, knowing she would believe whatever I told her, because I never lied. I was caught between loyalty to my parents and a promise I had never made. I felt trapped by the smells of grass and dew and autumn and my mother’s soap. My future widened, and I knew that my answer would mean something—I didn’t know exactly what, but something—for the course my life would take. Desire struck me in the gut—the desire to surprise everybody, even Tom, even myself. I wished I’d smoked the entire cigarette.

I said, “No, Mom. Nothin’ like that.”