

Red and White

by Freida Theant

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"When did I start cigarettes?" Babs said. "I was a junior at Elmwood High School, but even before that, I'd sneak a puff off of my mother's Kent smoldering in the ashtray. Jackie Kennedy set that year's fashion standards and everyone followed Liz Taylor's romance with Richard Burton."

Cigarette talk aroused Babs' cravings. Rescuing her menthols from the handbag she slid an alabaster filter into her mouth; raised her butane lighter until the flame energized the Newport's face from tan crumbs into a shimmering glower. Her strong, brief draw deepened the fiery wafer leaving a grey skin of ash. Jetting out the light-up smoke, she pulled seriously now for that first flavorful reward.

"So what happened in the 11th grade to get you started?" Jo asked. "Were you pressured into it?"

Before replying, Babs expelled a dense, rolling billow outward making pale, diminishing eddies like the images of her youth, fading into air. She savored the biting taste of the smoke and the high school memories replaying in this nostalgic narrative. "No, not really. It had more to do with cheerleading than anything else. It was my second year of being on the squad, but now I was Varsity and I felt so.... grown up. I was one of the popular girls now, and things I did would be in the school paper; that just came with that red and white uniform and pom-poms. Four or five of us carpooled so that after practice we had a ride home, no matter how late we got done."

"So you weren't a smoker at the start of the year?" Jo confirmed.

"No," she said, "I had to protect my reputation; boys labeled smoking high school girls as 'sluts'. But even so, there were cheerleaders who were already hooked. Like Tina DelVecchio who transferred to our school in her sophomore year from Saint Brenda's. She could have passed for a teen aged 'Suzanne Pleshette', and was already our heaviest smoker. Before practice she managed to burn a Salem right outside the locker room before we changed. She twisted her long, dark hair in her fingers and told us menthols 'were really medicinal'; 'Okay to smoke them as long as you brushed your teeth and kept fit'. The instant she dove into our car after practice,

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she had one Salem lit up and managed two more by the time we dropped her off."

"Besides her, there was Alice...something....I forget her name; she rode with her boyfriend, not in our carpool. Alice had pale blond hair bobbed short and was the thinnest of us all. Kind of a 'Sandra Dee' look. She smoked king-sized L & M's, because 'they coordinated'; at least that's what she told us. Our outfits were satiny white skirts and knit blouses that just barely let our breasts project, with red letters and trim. The pack of L & M's was red and white back in those days. Sometimes after an 'away' game, before we seated ourselves back in the bus, she and Tina hid in the bleacher shadows; the smoke streaking from their mouths...." She re-visualized the scene, and mused that maybe those sensual, forbidden white clouds and fiery tips shining out in the dark did accessorize their bright red lips and curvaceous white outfits, bobby socks and sneakers.

"Alice was our flyer, the tip of our pyramid stunt, because she weighed the least, and she felt her L & M's kept the weight off," Babs said, her mind returning to the present. "Our captain, Nellie Mills, used to drive the Chevy that took us home. She had the darkest hair, cut shorter than average and smoked rarely; only if we were at some private or unchaperoned event, usually bumming one off of Tina or Alice."

"Miss West was Elmwood's lady's gym teacher, and coached our cheerleader squad after classes. She taught us our routines and decided who got onto Varsity or JV. She was just under thirty; shoulder-length brunette hair, maybe a little auburn, a string bean build, and grey eyes."

Babs prolonged her suction on the Newport: recalling their coach still disturbed her; that austere, commanding composure, attentive to the mercurial feelings of pubescent girls. Those piercing eyes vigilant; missing nothing; seeking everywhere. "Miss West was there whenever we undressed in the locker room and got into the showers, watching over us. Sometimes I felt annoyed, and sometimes nervous."

Babs nudged the smoke out in lazy curls to rise via twisting streamers mingling into her blond hair. "Our coach knew more than she let on," Babs continued, "but she kept it to herself. She knew Tina and Alice smoked. That could get them thrown off the cheerleaders, but she didn't."

"Good thing, too," Jo added, "from what you told me, eventually nearly every cheerleader

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smoked."

"Miss West knew which rules to enforce and which to ignore. She seemed a non-smoker: since PE Teachers are supposed to set the example for their students." Babs tapped her Newport over the heavy green glass ashtray. Her next thoughts subconsciously clenched her jaw and projected her lower lip. The powdery fumes flowed out in a fountain spray.

"As football season moved on, we developed two new routines to unveil at the county-wide cheerleading competition during Halloween week. We had to limber up for some of the splits, and because the choreography was complicated, we practiced timing exhaustively; we did grueling exercises and spent extra time rehearsing the new cheers. We got home later each night, giving us less time for TV and homework. The pressure kept building: book reports came due; science projects had to be turned in, Algebra midterms a week away; we had to prepare for the Homecoming dance and College Board testing started in December."

Jo said, "So that was 'crunch time' for the squad?" sipping, she stained the rim of her Frappécinno with lip-gloss; then convinced a Benson and Hedges to quell her other craving with the snap of her lighter. She awoke its dormant smoke and compelled it to penetrate her where the soothing clouds tamed her persisting urges.

"The school paper photographed us during one practice session. That picture ended up being the yearbook shot for the football cheerleaders, but our lost time had to be made up and we didn't get out until dark! Us carpoolers had no more than piled into the Chevy when I realized my notebook was still in the locker room! 'Wait for me', I told them and raced silently in my white sneakers back to the girls' locker, now illuminated only by night lights. The smell of tobacco smoke greeted me and I heard low voices. The lights were on in the coach's office, but I sped by and snatched my notebook from the bench where I'd left it." Babs crushed her butt out.

"Did you see anyone in her Office?" Jo asked.

"On my way back out, yes," Babs answered. "I could see Alice leaning against the wall, tears streaking down her face, a cigarette burning in her left hand. It was Miss West who faced her, and wiped the tears with her thumb, cradling and caressing her face with her left hand, and holding Alice's free hand with her own. Then our coach took the cigarette from Alice and stole a

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long pull before giving it back."

"I flew out of there, stunned. No one saw or heard me so absolutely nobody knew what I'd seen. As I piled in the back seat, Tina and Nellie asked, 'if I'd gotten it okay?' I displayed my notebook, so they chatted on, Tina absorbed in her Salem while I just trembled wordless in my anxiety. When the car pulled out of the parking lot I ordered Tina, 'Give me one of your Salems, and your lighter.'"

"I bet she was surprised," Jo said.

"No, she just gave me that 'it took you long enough' look as she passed me the pack. She lit the cigarette for me; I had trouble holding it still, even steadying it with my fingers." Babs remembered the feel of her first mixed-flavor smoke; the bitter taste was only background to the wintergreen warmth that filled her face, and she tried gulping a little into her chest. Mixed with air, it went down smoothly and invited her to try for more. Only a token cloud marked her virgin exhale, but the next hits, while stronger, also satisfied more.

"You didn't choke or cough?" Jo asked.

"I wasn't aware of it. I kept thinking I had to keep this awful secret inside me, unlike the smoke I released after each puff. The glowing ember in the dark, the calming smoke, the minty fumes; tapping off the ash; they all distracted me and helped me stay quiet. I simply smoked and toyed with my cigarette and they went on gossiping."

"You wanted more after that one was finished?" Jo proposed.

"Yes, in the days afterwards, whenever I thought about what I'd seen, along with the other stuff happening all-at-once, I felt like I would pop. There's no pressure worse than keeping a secret from everyone! At least cigarette vending machines didn't have enforceable age limits. Anyone could slide their coins into the slot and pull the lever," and Babs' mouth thrust a projecting Newport into her butane flame with the predictably smoky outcome. With her supply of smoke assured once again, she continued. "That's how I got my own Salems, and I bought a woman's

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lighter. I did what I could to hide my new habit, but the girls spread the word anyway. I knew nearly everyone on the squad knew. It wasn't just Tina and Alice under the bleachers now, I was there too."

"Did you tell Alice what you'd seen?" Jo said.

"Let's just say that I finally brought it up." Reliving that stressful afternoon shortened her Newport prematurely with pulls that demanded increasingly greater solace. "It was the Saturday of the County-Wide Cheerleading Competition. It was held at the county seat and the school grounds were unfamiliar. We completed our first routine in the morning; a group of us wandered around waiting to do our afternoon piece, and then attend the awards ceremony."

"And you were dying for a cigarette?" Jo offered.

"Yeah, but getting far enough away from the crowd was hard," Babs confessed. "Still, Alice and I found an obscure loading dock in the rear, so she whipped out her L&M's and me my Salems. She offered her flame to light me up, and that shared kindness warmed me up to the possibility of a broaching the secret."

"She didn't know what you'd seen?"

"No, so I said, 'Do you and Miss West have a special...uhhh, understanding?' and I flicked the filter with my thumbnail. Her answer? 'Not really, she's just our coach...', so I laid out what I'd seen that night. She took a short pull, and then another before jetting out the combined puffs...'Okay...I know what you saw, but Miss West doesn't...she isn't my...,' and then she teared up.

"Her voice cracked, 'Miss West noticed that I wasn't performing up to speed, and wanted to know what was going on. That night she brought me into her office,' Alice explained. I felt wary, so I had to ask, 'Was she trying to put moves on you? Is that why you were crying?'"

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"Alice protested, 'No, that's not it at all. I finally told Miss West the reason I was doing so bad was that I'd missed my period for two months now!! She was trying to console me, and let me have a cigarette to calm down, that's all. I guess she felt nervous, too, 'because she shared part of it with me.'"

Jo raised her eyebrows, "Alice was pregnant?"

"Yes she finished 11th grade and then dropped out. We lost touch with her after that. She probably moved away to have the baby; abortions were dangerous and rare."