

Left-Handed Smoking

Celine transfers her cigarette to her left hand so she can grab a handful of Julian's ass as he walks past her. She tries to recapture their enthusiasm from earlier in the morning. The gesture startles her English lover, and he laughs to cover his embarrassment, his pale face flushing red. With paint box in one hand and lunch pail in the other, he dutifully leaves for the part-time sign painting job that barely pays their bills.

She watches from the open window as he makes his way down the road. He never looks back so she isn't obligated to wave. Her cigarette remains in her left hand as she flicks bird droppings from the window sill with her thumb and forefinger. When she looks up, he has already turned the corner.

She quickly slips into a warm bath and finishes what Julian was incapable of achieving during their lovemaking. Her cigarette nearly burns down to the fingers of her left hand before those on her right have completed their task. Then she lights another cigarette which stays in her left hand as she shaves her legs. She is careful not to rake the little mole on her ankle.

When the water is too cool for her liking, she contemplates leaving the bathtub but is feeling particularly lazy today. Instead, she passes a third cigarette to her left hand so she can empty the tub and refill it with fresh, hot water. This should thoroughly piss off the other tenants.

Celine reclines in the steaming bath and considers her boyfriend yet again. Already her mind is making excuses for his self-centeredness and immaturity with sex. The depressing thoughts threaten to drive her from the bathtub so she lights another cigarette to relax. It finds its way into her left hand as she reaches for a magazine on the floor. She has to remind herself not to drop her hand into the water as she turns pages with her right.

After her bath, she towels her body dry but shuns her silk wrapper. She goes to the bedroom she shares with Julian and sits at her vanity applying makeup with her right hand while smoking with her left. Small flecks of ash drop from the smoldering end, falling onto her bare thighs. The soft tinge of heat excites her. When she's finished, she walks to her closet to decide upon an outfit. Nothing appeals to her so she remains naked.

She strays back into the living room where Julian has set up an easel. His latest attempt toward a more serious career in art leans against the stand. It's hard to believe his amateur effort is the result of ten years of lessons at the best art schools in Europe. Switching her cigarette to her left hand, she picks up a brush from where he placed it and dabs it in a dollop of paint. She repairs the reflection in the eyes of a woman's face he is trying to capture. He probably won't even notice her corrections, and if he does, he will vainly believe it is his own work.

The mistake he made is a simple one; it's the type of error the first year students she used to teach in France made all the time. She inhales deeply from the cigarette in her left hand and laments again the prominent position she gave up to follow him to England. This drab country with its lousy weather and shitty apartment on the docks was not what she had in mind when her young lover promised to sweep her off her feet. But it makes the perfect location for Julian to play the role of the starving artist.

Celine had been his private tutor last summer in Paris. The lessons were a gift from his parents who, contrary to most English aristocrats, actually support their only son's dream to become an artist. Julian was pleased with the beautiful instructor his father had employed and became even more so when they started sleeping together. Against her better judgment, she yielded to his desire to be tutored in the art of intercourse rather than painting. Their frequent bedroom activities are the reason she doesn't know how dismal his skills really are.

Although she is eleven years his senior, she only looks to be a couple of years older. She knows he loves being seen with a mature, experienced woman in public. She suspects it makes him feel sophisticated and worldly. *Immature twat*, she thinks to herself using an insult she picked up in the pub. Her left hand crushes out the spent cigarette on his palette.

Later, while smoking, she rummages through the trash with her right hand looking for clues that he is cheating on her. She's been sure that he is ever since she found a tube of lipstick that isn't her shade in his paint box. When she confronted him about it, he claimed he had used it as a sample of the color he attempted to mix. With lightening quickness, she passed her cigarette to her left hand and slapped him hard across the face. The sheer audacity of him to have an affair infuriates Celine.

She plunges her right hand deeper into the dustbin but only encounters cold gravy, making her grimace. She pushes her bangs back from her forehead with her left hand, careful not to singe her hair with the burning cigarette, and wonders if the woman in the painting is the one with whom Julian is cheating? A quick trip around town would reveal her identity. Julian would never think to travel far for a clandestine liaison; he's not that imaginative. She tosses the cigarette from her left hand into the trash without making sure it is extinguished and leaves the apartment.

Before reaching the end of the street, she has given up on the idea of looking for Julian's mystery lover. Celine purposefully wanders to the docks. She looks for a particular boat flying a Greek flag and is pleased to find it. It is illegal for her to board the ship, but the man she wants to see is on deck and spies her at the same moment she sees him. She takes her cigarette from her mouth with her left hand then rewards him with an inviting smile. Her right hand beckons to her lover, Nikos.

On a bed in another dingy apartment, the pair expends a vast supply of pent up lust. Neither speaks the language of the other, but communication is not a problem. Celine's arms

and legs hardly wrap around Nikos' body as they make love. His robust frame is covered in soft, dark hair reminding her of a bear. His sweat pools in her navel, both thrilling and disgusting her at the same time.

When her left hand is no longer busy grasping him, she smokes a cigarette while raking the fingers of her right hand through his chest hair. *How unlike Julian's body*, she thinks. She takes a drag from the cigarette in her left hand to stifle a laugh as she recalls the Englishman's lean frame. He lacks any muscle definition; it's like making love to a gangly teenager.

Unfortunately, she doesn't have time to enjoy a nap this afternoon. With an unlit cigarette waiting in her left hand, she dresses quickly and leaves Nikos snoring on the bed. She gently pulls the door closed with her right hand, the cigarette in her left now burning. Her dreary walk back to Julian's apartment begins.

As she meanders along, the other women in town stop to stare at her. They are curious about the exotic French woman who recently moved to their neighborhood with her young English lover. They pause in the middle of hanging their laundry or sweeping the steps to watch her stroll by but never make a move to welcome her. A mouthful of smoke inhaled from the cigarette in Celine's left hand is exhaled as smoke rings while she signs a V, the palm of her right hand facing her. "French whore," one of the women mutters just loud enough for her to hear.

Back in the apartment she straightens up a bit to make herself feel less guilty about spending the afternoon away. Then she pulls a cookbook off a shelf and sits at the table turning pages with her right hand, the left holds her cigarette. She wants to make a nice dinner for herself and Julian, but the selections in the cookbook are boring. If only he would keep some spices or seasonings on hand she would make him something delicious.

An hour later, she stands alone at the stove, stirring with her right hand. Ash from the cigarette in her left falls into the soup she made, but she doesn't notice. It is stirred in as she stares out the window remembering her time with Nikos. When the soup is done, she ladles it into two bowls and sits down to wait for Julian. He should have been home by now.

Two hours later, he is still not home. A knock on the door sends Celine rushing down the stairs to answer it. The door sticks, and she is forced to switch her cigarette to her left hand so she can tug it open. Two policemen stand on the steps. She takes a last drag from the cigarette in her left hand then follows them to the station per their request.

On the way, they tell her Julian had been fatally hit by a bread lorry this morning right around the corner from where he worked. She is stunned to realize that he has been dead all day. They explain that he was rushed to the hospital but had no identification on his person, only her card in his paint box. People who live on their street said he was new to the area and didn't know where to find her. The police waited until she returned. Trembling in her left hand causes the cigarette to shake, and she can hardly bring it to her lips.

So many papers need to be filled out just so she can acquire Julian's personal effects; every single cigarette has to be held in her left hand. Then there is more paperwork at the hospital so his body can be released to a funeral home of her choosing. Her right hand is cramped by the time she is done, and she still hasn't telephoned his parents. Celine doesn't even try to light her next cigarette with her right hand let alone dial the phone. Her left hand will be in control now.

Two days are spent smoking with her left hand as her right stays in a fist clutched to her heart. On the third day, Julian's parents summon her to attend his funeral. He has been cremated which she finds to be barbaric. It reminds her of the ash on the tip of the cigarette in her left hand.

The service is held at the church in the neighborhood where she lived with Julian. People from three streets over attend just to catch a glimpse of Celine, and she hates them for it. They have obviously told many tales about her over the past few days for Julian's parents are extremely cool with her. Through the haze of the cigarette smoke drifting up from her left hand, she begs them to allow her to spread his ashes. They deny her this.

Alone in the apartment that is now just hers, she sits at the window and holds a lit cigarette in her left hand but never raises it to her mouth. She needs to think about employment, but the image of Julian walking away from her troubles her mind. Her right hand is still uselessly held to her breast. By morning she is still sitting at the window. Her left hand has worked its way through two packs of cigarettes. The ashtray overflows on the sill.

As her left hand reaches for yet another cigarette, she hears soft knocking on the door. She laughs aloud at the cruelty that usually accompanies knocking at odd hours of the day and night. Her mind wants to know who is there while her heart shrinks in fear. Her left hand heads for the cigarette pack, but she is already holding a lit cigarette.

It is hard to open a misaligned door with rusty hinges that has swelled in the summer humidity, but Celine's left hand, still holding a cigarette, manages to do so. This time the visitor is a well-dressed woman who smiles at her and asks if this is where Julian lives. Without thinking, Celine says *yes* as she scans the woman's face to see if she is the one in the portrait upstairs.

The woman proceeds to hand her a large envelope which holds the last payment for Julian's work on a picture she commissioned. She gushes with praise for his abilities and declares him to be ahead of his time. Celine has no idea what the woman is talking about and conveys as much by smoking throughout the woman's speech. Her right hand slips to her stomach.

An invitation to view the picture is extended, and Celine doesn't hesitate to go that very minute to see it. The elegant woman wavers for a moment before leading her to a waiting car.

They ride in silence. Celine smokes with her left hand; her right is clenched on the seat beside her.

In the drawing room of the woman's beautiful home, Celine stands before a masterpiece of painting. The scene is breathtaking in scope alone, and she cannot believe that Julian is responsible for this. Her left hand fidgets with the cigarette pack in her skirt pocket; the woman has asked that she not smoke around the picture. She complies until the woman leaves the room to answer her telephone.

Her right hand cradles her elbow as she smokes the cigarette in her left hand. Celine stares in awe of the painting. She recognizes the single human figure in the middle of the picture as herself. She did not believe he knew her body and face as well as he has accurately portrayed, right down to the mole on her ankle. Without saying anything further to the woman, she leaves.

Back home in the apartment, she musters the courage to go through his paint box. The accident left the surface scratched and several items inside are out of place. She rearranges them with her right hand while smoking with her left. When she lifts out a tray of paint tubes to reorganize them, she sees a letter addressed to her underneath. Still smoking, she opens it.

My Darling Celine,

I promised to make all your dreams come true and have finally found a way to do so. The short hours at Howard's Signs have allowed me to work on a commissioned piece that will pay spectacularly.

I have received three payments already and will collect the fourth upon completion. I wanted to surprise you by putting a down payment on a house but think we should decide together what to do with the money. Perhaps an art store where you can give lessons?

All my love,

Julian

P.S. What do you think of the portrait in the living room? A hideous piece I did when I was fourteen!

Her left hand crushes out the cigarette on the floor beside her. Her right wipes away tears. An art store near the docks isn't her idea of a happy ending, but refinement may be the very thing this lackluster neighborhood needs. She lays both empty hands in her lap and waits to see which one will move first.