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Grape Smoke

Elizabeth Goby

His hand was warm in mine. Everything was warm. The heat was cranked to fight off the chill coming in from the wide-open windows. We were smoking little fruit-flavored cigars, little tan tubes with gold tips ends.

“No way! You tell me first,” I laughed at him, twisting some more in my seat so I could see him better. I didn’t know how to hold the cigar, but I tried my best to look mature as I brought it to my lips. Let it rest between your first and second fingers. Don’t squish it. Let it go when it rests on your lips. Breath in deep before you pluck it back. Don’t cough! Whatever you do, don’t you dare cough.

“No. Nuh uh. No way, no how.” He blew out his smoke in a straight and steady stream and tossed me a sly grin. His smoke hit the steering wheel in a ghostly explosion and dissolved.

I couldn’t help smiling back. I didn’t know if it was the blast from the heater making my cheeks warm or if it was how he looked at me. The seat groaned softly when I settled back into it. He let his left arm dangle out the driver side window, and I watched him hold the cigar between his thumb and tab it with the top of his middle finger. The ashes leapt from the edge of his cigar and dove down into the snow. He pondered it a moment, wondering if it was worth smoking the very last bit that ran just before the filter, but decided against and flicked the remaining gold cigar out of the window. I wonder if it hissed when it hit the snow, but the music was too loud and we didn’t hear it.

I shivered when goosebumps rose up and down my arms. The window was open on my right and the winter wind was making itself welcome. We couldn’t close them because he didn’t want his jeep to smell like smoke. If it smelt like smoke when he got home, his Dad would lose his shit and then no more driving privileges. I watch him as he lights another. It rested effortlessly, dangling dangerously on the edge of his lips, he ducked his head and cupped his hand over the flame. The car filled with the scent of grape as he puffed to get it going. He was blurred by a cloud of smoke curling around him as he worked at short quick puffs to make sure it

was lit all the way around. His collar was popped and his hair was messy from the wind passing through both our open windows; he looks like possibility to me.

“You asked me first, now you have to tell me first.” I smirked at him before trying again to look good with that little stick poised at my lips. It was my first one, ever. The grape taste filled your mouth and seemed to stick to your teeth. I couldn’t blow my smoke out in a smooth line like how he did; mine just kind of escaped out of my mouth when I opened it. His was full of direction and purpose. Mine was just let loose in a weak puff. He said it was cute.

“I guess that’s fair,” he laughed and then grimaced, barring his teeth playfully. “What if I don’t like anyone?”

“Then you’re fucking lying!” I shot back to him. “You already told me you do. Fess up.” My nose burned when I let loose another directionless cloud. My eyes stung a bit because of the smoke, but I wasn’t going to let that show. I hid behind my hair and a smile.

His left wrist rested lazily on the wheel as he looked ahead out the windshield. The snow-covered baseball diamonds light up because of the headlights. It looks ghostly. The edge of town wasn’t a friendly place there was nothing out here but deep ruts in the snow from snow cleaning, and deteriorating fences bent down from their framing and curling in on themselves. The headlights made the snow in front of us look bright and startling, but all the snow beyond that melted into darkness and shadows.

“Do you like this song?” he asked, turning on the radio before taking a drag. The song was some Blink 182 song that I was trying hard to like because he liked them. The little red embers lighting up his face as he inhaled cast him in a warm glow.

Hello there, the angel from my nightmare...

I rolled my eyes but let him change the subject. “Hey, show me again how to flick the ash off?” I asked him, offering up the smoke in my hand awkwardly. There was quite a long line of ash building on the end of it, but I had no idea how to flick it just right so the ash leapt off. I didn’t want to look silly. He took it from me, his cold hand brushed my fingers when he did. I leaned over to see what he was doing with it as he held it out the window.

“Like this,” he said before running his thumb quickly along the butt end so it bobbed and the ashes dove down into the snow like a driver off a board.

I cannot sleep and I cannot dream tonight...

“Oh, okay,” I said and clumsily took it back from him, settling back into my seat as I puffed at it again. My mouth felt cloudy and sticky from smoke and grape. The heat still cranked. It was almost like a sauna in that jeep. I had taken off my coat earlier and now I was just hot and uncomfortable. But every now and again a violent icy breeze sweeps through the car and I’m reminded why we kept the heat on. It was a constant assault of hot and cold. The artificial warmth from the front of the car beat down on us until a violent waft of winter wind brought in the soft dusty layer off the snow drifts. The snow settles on our arms and melted almost instantly.

“Seriously, you have to tell me. You have to, have to, have to,” I smiled at him playfully and chanted. He flicked his cigar out the window, half smoked, and he turned to look at me. Twisting in his seat so his focus was all on me. His face was no longer fun. His playful smiles left and he looked serious. Suddenly the car felt a lot hotter than it had a moment ago.

“What if...” he paused.

His bright eyes flicked down nervously between us. The music got quiet behind us and the hot didn’t feel so hot or the cold so cold. His face was soft but serious: business. Of course, I knew what he was going to say, we both did. I knew that he liked me, and he knew that I knew, but the saying it made it real. We’d spent the past few summer months trying to sit beside each other at every bonfire without making it obvious. We would sit beside each other but angle away so we could turn and focus on our own friends, our knees knocking occasionally. He’d make smores and hand them all around the fire, but when he’d made the perfect one he would present it to me, out of order from the circle. When I didn’t pursue and neither did he, the constant texts became occasional texts, the meaningful glances across a busy room of friends turned sour. But here we were, in his jeep at 2 am, a few months past summer. If not for the gearshift, we’d still be knocking knees.

I’m still staring at him and he’s still staring down and I can tell he’s having some big internal battle about whether or not to say it. And there’s a little part of me that’s beginning to

doubt every stolen glance over every fire and every midnight text of “r u up?” and every time I thought there was something when maybe there was nothing.

Oh god, what if there was nothing?

“...if it were you that I liked?” His eyes finally flick up and he’s studying me and he doesn’t look nervous, scared, hopeful or happy. He is expressionless as he waits for my answer.

And I am all butterflies and bright red cheeks and I can’t breathe, but maybe that’s the cigar I’ve been trying to smoke for a while now, and I grin back at him and then quickly try to smile slyly, “Well, maybe I like you too.”

His hands are warm in mine and he’s smiling a little, and I think he’s gone shy and he tells me that he wants to date me. But not yet.

“I’m just dealing with some stuff, but I once I got it all figured out we can totally date! I just don’t know if I’m ready for a relationship right now, but once I figure things out...” He tells me and I smile and nod because he likes me and I like him and he wants me and I want him and that’s all that matters.

He gives me a smile then, looking almost relieved. Then he’s reaching across to me and his hand is kind of hovering by my cheek, he was just about to touch it but then paused just before skin would have met skin. I was looking up at him but his eyes were locked onto my lips. My cigar was lying forgotten and dead in my hand, the ash smeared onto my jeans. His breath smelt like smoke and grapes and his hand met my cheek and he went for it.

“Are you going to kiss me!?” I blurt out because that’s never happened before and I wanted to make sure that I understood what was happening.

His expression doesn’t change when he replies. “Yes. Is that okay?”

He’s awkwardly hovering, his face nearly touching mine. His one hand on my cheek and his other arm on the center console holding him up as he leans heavily over to me. He keeps leaning in, inch by inch by inch, and I keep leaning back. The open window seemed more inviting.

And something tells me to wait so I say, “Let’s wait till we’re dating.”

He nods and is gone instantly. He sits back in his seat and I toss the long dead cigar out the window.

Don't waste your time on me. You're already the voice inside my head.

He began to drive away before the windows roll up. The chill is stolen from the air almost instantly. The full onslaught of heat hits us like a wall. He peels away from the baseball diamonds and turns back towards town. His hand slips away from mine. All I can taste is grape and smoke and I bet he tastes the same.