

### When the Smoke Clears

by Freida Theant

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Armed with scissors, thread and pins, Marianne flitted about the tight-fitting midnight-violet dress, tailoring it stylishly around her mother Élise's svelte curves. She was as fashion conscious as her mother was not, but then, being a working, single mom for the last fourteen years left little time or money for Élise to have a "life". Between her former marriage and later, an ill-fated flirtation with a male coworker, Élise came to avoid and distrust entanglements.

"Mom, hold still," Marianne urged. "Otherwise your outfit won't be ready for tonight."

Backing off to feel the impact of her creation, Marianne snatched up her Parliaments from the end table, and flash-flamed one into glowering life while scrutinizing her seamstressing. Wordless and staring fixedly, her thoughtful pulls on the cigarette flared the glowing tip to a fierce yellow-orange, highlights that coordinated her facial skin tones with her bobbed auburn coiffure.

"Turn around, Mom," bobbling the dangling Parliament in sync with the smoke-abraded consonants in her command. Each sweep of her eyes searched the garment to detect which seams were proper and if the fabric hung provocatively; when the results passed, she exhaled her satisfaction with cirrus nostril plumes.

Until today, Élise rarely consulted dressing mirrors, but peering through her daughter's floating strata of smoke she pondered her reflection, and when the smoke cleared she studied the image; Cajun-olive skin, brown eyes, crowned with more than 12 inches of rich chestnut hair brushed straight, capping her five and a half foot height. Élise colored her thin lips in an apricot shade that promoted the natural look, and she glossed her nails without added color. This woman wore her 42 years gracefully on a slender frame, and because exercise and diet kept her trim, and owing to genetics, she presented an aspect maybe a decade younger than her age. Nevertheless, she repressed that allure beneath a business wardrobe.

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Marianne, in public, was never assumed to be Élise's daughter; her frame was more robust over that same five-and-a-half foot stature. She bobbed her red hair stylishly, keeping it shorter than Élise, so with her sun-bronzed complexion showing a hint of freckles on her forearms, in combination with her emerald eyes, she displayed her long-absent father's genetics more than the maternal Thibodaux's of the Louisiana bayous. Marianne preferred glossy, lavender frost to accent her lips that complimented to perfection the chalky streams of smoke exiting her mouth. Her nails coordinated in silvery pastels matched her lip gloss, and provided an accent to whichever smoldering Parliament might be found between her fingers.

Marianne meant to reinvent her mother with this afternoon's makeover. Élise's agenda was simpler; she had driven down from Jacksonville just to spend the weekend catching up on chit-chat about her daughter's new job and waterfront condo in Daytona Beach.

"Tonight YOU are gonna turn heads," Marianne's announced. "Please Mom, just let yourself go! I just want us to party, and for you to get to know my friends."

Instead Élise pleaded, "Honey, do you hafta smoke? You know what it'll do to your health."

Marianne confronted her mom head on, clamped her lips taut, drew defiantly on the Parliament so hard it tilted upwards, and inundated her lungs with a smoke tsunami. Her breasts rose as she held that flood captive for seconds. When the tension peaked, she yanked her cigarette from her mouth in an angry arc, pouted her lips to blast a long, high velocity jet with an exaggerated sigh while rolling her eyes in pained consternation.

Élise broke the oppressive silence, "I know! I used to smoke, too. But I quit."

"Mom, let's not get into it again. Now that I'm graduated from college, I've got a professional job. I've changed since I lived at home, and you need to respect my adult decisions." Marianne rolled her cigarette's precariously drooping ash off into the glass ashtray in time to avoid burning the new carpet. With a mysterious glance, she looked ready to pursue this subject further, but reconsidered; "Now let's get off of this and focus on tonight's fun."

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Clearing the air that way brought peace for the rest of afternoon; Élise, naturally passive, bottled up her objections as Marianne flamed up each of her afternoon's parade of Parliaments. Around sunset, the pair launched the evening with dinner at the Blackwater Inn, a landmark Florida restaurant, and then drove back to Daytona Beach in Élise's Chevy for some night life.

But unexpectedly, as they left the parked car walking toward the night spot, Élise's anxiety shot up like a Cape Kennedy rocket. Marianne felt her mom's pace drag as the pair neared the entry with the Techno music blaring out into the otherwise calm evening.

"What's wrong, Mom?"

"I haven't done this in years...I'm out of place, here," Élise, stressed, just wanted to run away.

"But you'll love it inside, once you get used to it," Marianne replied. "I really want you to meet some of my friends. Look, I'll call you Beb, Okay?" Beb was Élise's Cajun nickname. "No one'll know you're my mom."

Marianne tugged her through the entry into what Élise construed as the gates of hell. Four of her five of senses were assaulted at once: jostled and bumped by the crowd of dancing bodies, awash in the overpowering aroma of cigarette smoke, stale liquor and designer fragrances, her protests were drowned in the hypnotic techno beat, and the sinister interior interrupted by brilliant flashes of multicolor lights or lesser glows as the tips of patrons' cigarettes flickered on and off. Shock and awe replaced her fears; stunned by sensory overload, she sensed being piloted to a skinny table with high stools somewhere within the underworld and seating herself opposite Marianne.

The events of the soiree flow past in hazy images. Marianne flagging an overburdened server. "What do you want, Beb? Beer, wine, or mixed drink?" she shouts.

Élise, stunned, considers her choices while Marianne retrieves her Parliaments from her purse. The lighter's flame blinds Elise while her daughter ignites her cigarette. To make herself heard, she leans in toward Marianne, who reciprocates.

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“Wine, white....something, maybe Sauterne?” Now head-to-head, Marianne’s exhaled billow envelops her and caught off guard, Élise’ drinks it in. Within her nostrils the old familiar corn-straw aroma, come back to her, from her younger, smoking days. Oddly, the sensation is pleasant.

The blur of penetrating music and flashing neon imagery distorts Élise perception of time and even perspective. She distinguishes gyrating dancers amid streams of slender figures flowing around the clustered tables. Marianne is clearly anxious, she crushes out her cigarette and burns in a successor; the server delivers her Sauterne and Marianne’s Long Island Iced tea; Marianne keeps watching nervously for signs of her friends, all in strobe light staccato.

Élise samples the Sauterne with healthy swallows; the warm inner glow from the wine permeates her body; the thaw melts her tension away. Marianne orders them more wine and another LI Iced Tea and then animated; frantically signals a pair of women Élise can barely distinguish in the shadowy recesses.

They jostle and shove their way through the undulating crowd; approaching, Marianne rises, “Beb, I wantcha to meet Beth and Ashley.” Brief handshakes; how are ya’s, and names exchanged, chairs pulled out, the newcomers sit; Mojitos, Cosmos and more LI Iced Teas ordered; purses opened, lighters click to emblazon fiery dots onto Winstons, Newports and Parliaments, ashtrays pilfered from someone’s table; Ashley speaks but Marianne interrupts, fluffy; stage-lights colorize their smoky exhales.

“I thought you were never gonna get here,” Marianne yells, almost accusingly. Ashley, the slender blond smiles, embarrassed but Beth, the buff brunette shakes her hair and drapes the cascade onto her shoulders, and smiles knowingly.

Beth slides her chair next to Marianne, lays her arm around her neighbor’s freckled bronze shoulders but actually turns to face Élise, “So Bebe, where are you from?” Beth cuddles her Newport between her mulberry-hued lips, and very slowly, very tenderly pulls on the filter for an extended draw. Opening her mouth a mass of smoke seeks flight, but with her snap, the billow pops back into her mouth, and disappears into her chest. Beth turns, enraptured, faces Marianne, and pulses the smoke toward her in a rolling tumble, bathing her face in an erotic fog.

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Beth's demeanor puzzles Élise. Her instincts tell her Beth is challenging her for Marianne's attention, but Élise dismisses the thought, "Jacksonville. I supervise an office at a mortgage house. How about you?"

Beth lifts her arm from Marianne's shoulder and runs her glinting nails smoothly through Marianne's hair carelessly, while replying "I moved here right after graduation about the same time as Marianne. I'm from Ohio. We've been friends since last year," Beth smiles but her eyes show no warmth, rather confrontational. The hidden tremor in her pronunciation of friends hints at the depth of her feelings.

The awakening reality rocks Élise. She orders another Sauterne. Ashley, quiet until now, intuitively feels Élise's distress. She asks, "Did you want a cigarette, Beb?"

She replies before she has a chance to think, "Yes, thank you, I'm gonna need one." For Élise the blur of images flow: an unfamiliar white cylinder projecting from her mouth; Ashley thrusting the flame toward her; the pull on the filter and the spindle of smoke gliding up the cigarette toward her eyes; the burn in her chest muted gently with the wine vapors as she inspires the mouthful of white solace and the momentary high just after breathing out the cloudy relief, followed by a subtle cough. Succeeding puffs go down more smoothly. The long-forgotten rites of tending her cigarette come back to her; her style of holding using her right hand, the myriad variations of trimming the ash, where she keeps the lighter flame during a light-up, which part of her mouth feels the most comfortable to lodge the filter. She craves another, "Can I have one more...?"

Ashley becomes her angel this night; it was she who offers, "Sure Beb. Take the rest of this pack. I've got a spare in my purse."

Marianne and Beth are murmuring so the others can't hear. Beth cradles Marianne's right cheek, with her fingers, lifts her jaw tenderly and asks, "Dance?" The anticipation in Beth's deep brown eyes suggests the invitation extends beyond the spoken request. Without needing an answer, the two arise and float toward the dance floor.

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“Don’t be put off by Beth,” Ashley apologizes. “She’s very possessive of Marianne, and she might’ve thought you were movin’ in on her!” She punctuates her sentence by hard tapping her Winston and flinging the ash away.

“It’s not like that....” Élise starts to protest, but when the absurdity of this misunderstanding crystallizes, she bursts out laughing. The smoke begins to clear away. She slides into a rolling laughter that clears away her tensions from having trespassed into a strange realm and feeling out of place; laughter that recognizes the irony of discovering jealousy in her daughter’s lover; and laughter that signaled just how much she had been out of touch until now.

“Well, I guess you’re okay with all this?” Ashley is confused but relieved that Élise is loosening up.

“Yes, Ashley. Everything is fine. I just needed the smoke to clear,” she reassured her. “You know what? If you could show me how to dance like that, I’d really appreciate it,” and she gestures toward the dance area.

Ashley stubs out her Winston and stands up, “Sure, let’s do it, Beb.”

As the pair squirm through the pulsing bodies, Élise passes Marianne and Beth dancing passionately but focused, enraptured, on each other. Marianne glances side wards and spots her mother entering with Ashley. She smiles, and nearing her lips to Beth’s ear, whispers, “Lets be clear about Beb. She’s very dear but you never hafta worry that she’ll put any moves on me!”

Beb smiles back, a wicked glint in her deep brown eyes, and winks.