

Smoking Kills

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Abstract

A short story about a man and woman.

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Story

With the habitual ease of fifty-seven years of doing so, they sat together in the familiar comfort of well-worn cushioned seats, moulded to the shape of their wizened backsides.

A couple, well into the winter of their lives. Both with pale blue toned skin, silvery hair and shaking, shivering bodies that seemed to be battling the frosts and coldness of their age. The old man reached into a tweed pocket with a trembling grip to draw out a smooth wooden pipe and a silver tobacco tin. The tin was speckled with brown tarnish, matching the liver spots on the hand that held it. The pipe was filled with a surprising deftness, lit with a long chef's match, and the first puff taken. A fit of coughing and gasping breaths cut through the musk of smoke that drifted upwards.

His companion gave a start at the noise and dropped her embroidery needle, which was soon lost to the floral blizzard of her skirted lap. She tutted and clucked in disapproval like a mother hen disturbed in her nest, shifting in her seat to find the needle and lean away from the wisps of smoke. The old man snatched clumsily at a heavy scotch bottle from underneath his chair and fumbled with the cap. His attempt to take a gulp was unsuccessful as his coughs sprayed the liquor back out of his leathery lips, down across his front and onto his velour slippers.

The woman rose unsteadily from her seat and clapped him on the back. Her frail hand gave a light but well practiced strike, banging out a last crackle of a cough. The pair then sunk back into their respective armchairs, quite exhausted. They looked at each other with watery, aged eyes. Her pink and wrinkled lips pursed in disapproval as he once again sucked noisily on the pipe. He raised his

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woolly caterpillar eyebrows in apology and wafted the smoke cloud towards the small window that was cracked open. Placated, she smiled as much as her heavy drooped cheeks would let her and returned to her embroidery.

Again they sat together. The silence of the room only interrupted by a small squeak of painful surprise when the lost needle was found again, piercing the thin skin of her thigh. The air in their small living room was heavy with the perfume of pipe smoke, liquor and cooking meat. The couple dozed in this heady air, their wheezing snores in rhythm with the tick of the brass mantle clock.

A short trill from a kitchen timer roused the woman, but not the man. Once again rising unsteadily, she got up to close the window and right her husband's glass tumbler. It had tilted in his sleeping hand and dribbled more scotch down his front. She shook her head as she patted his. She spoke softly to him: "My dear, they are your closest comforts but I'm afraid your pipe and scotch will be the death of you." She dabbed at his clothing with a handkerchief and left him sleeping.

Once she had made her way to the kitchen, the woman lifted the lid of a heavy pan that was bubbling on the stovetop. It was her husband's favourite dish. Strips of liver and bacon swam in thick brown gravy with onions and carrots. It was cooked through nicely so she turned the gas knob underneath to the faded off position, where it wobbled and tilted back towards the high marking, as it always did. There was no use in getting a new oven, not at their age. The oven was very similar to the couple, slightly faltering, but all in all, still working. She replaced the lid and began to tidy the used utensils and vegetable peelings that littered the kitchen counter.

As she tidied, the woman's nostrils were filled with the smells of sharp lemony kitchen cleaner, pungent garlic and vegetable scraps, and of course, the freshly cooked stew. The scent of gas was masked by the other odours filling the kitchen. The switch on the ancient oven had taken all the strain of years of twisting and pulling and finally given up.

The woman gathered up the vegetable scraps and stepped into large rubber boots that stood to attention at the back door. She closed the door firmly behind her to keep the warmth in and the cold out. Shuffling along the garden path, the old woman shook her woolly head at the weeds that were sprouting up and strangling her beloved flowers. She made her way to the compost bin that had provided the fertilizer that had grown the vegetables that had fed them for many years. In the house the gas spread, invading the other rooms, an invisible cloud mixing with the pipe smoke shrouding the sleeping old man.

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The man stirred and awoke from his nap and automatically flexed his bony fingers, which cracked and popped with the movement, then reached for his pipe and matches.

Outside, his wife closed the lid of the compost bin. She struggled with the weight of it, but a tender smile was on her worn face as she thought back to when her husband had made it for her. Inside the man drew out a match and turned the box on its side so that the honeycomb patterned strip faced upwards. At the strike of the match the house bellowed out a hot and forceful gust, throwing the old woman into the flowerbeds, newly widowed.

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