

Cigs and Things

The day my parents caught whiff of my cigarette habit, I literally felt the ground beneath their feet crumble and give out. I saw them falling further away from me, the distance between us re-emerging. My heart jumped after them, but both were beyond saving. This wasn't the first time my actions had effectively worked to disintegrate the family trust and it wouldn't be the last.

I was back for the summer, a confusing time for those headed home after their first year away at school. I felt divine as I busted through the confinements of my final exam. Freedom pulsed through my body and I could hear the birds cheering - cheesy, I know. Still, I chimed in, feeling as if I had become one with these eternally cheerful songstresses. But as quickly as the sensationalized ecstasy began, reality struck deep and every membrane of my body went numb.

It was time to go home... not to the estrogen-pumped fantasyland I had been retreating to after each class or after a night of achieving enlightened inebriation. It was time to go *home-home*...where parents roam and freedom goes to die.

There's a complexity of conflicting emotions that come packaged with the idea of leaving the place you had just begun envisioning as home and returning to the one you so eagerly left behind. Spring finals come and go and suddenly the old stomping grounds are summoning you back for one more whirlwind adventure – one you're entirely unprepared for and unwilling to endure.

As I rounded the corner onto Maryland Blvd., the warm, familiar air felt nice for once. If Mendham Township wasn't synonymous with money, no one would know that beyond the unreasonably long

driveways, the lush landscapes strategically hid multi-million dollar gems that fortunate individuals - like my family - were lucky enough to call home.

Before I left for school, my parents and I had a particularly bad falling out. So bad, in fact, on move-in day, I packed my bags and moved onto campus myself. For the majority of my first two semesters away, I kept my distance, religiously sticking to semi-forced, biweekly phone calls home.

Maybe I took the idea of using distance as a fix to an extreme, but it was so easy. Once I realized I could leave the stress behind, life became simpler and my feet felt lighter, like the delicate breeze in the peaceful eye of a hurricane. Maintaining a calculated distance from my family was the only way to keep my sweet sanity.

I pulled up the driveway and made sure to scan my surroundings for any incriminating remnants before exiting the car. My parents had an annoying tendency of peeking through my car windows, only to hassle me about anything suspicious or out of place.

My father opened the giant double doors and gleamed as if I had just risen from the dead. I adored this face, though I was fully aware he knew how much I disliked coming home. Since graduation, I'd barely walked through those magnificent doors. My mother and sister soon appeared by his side and welcomed me with enthusiasm, but the bright smiles quickly faded.

I saw their faces begin to scrunch and I knew my cover was blown. I hadn't smoked a cigarette since earlier that morning, but in comparison to the smelling sensibility of a smoker, the nose of a non-smoker is

more similar to that of a dog. I took a seat at the kitchen table and mentally prepared for the shit storm that was about to erupt.

At first, there was silence. Then, the shouting commenced. First, from my mother: “You know what smoking has done to our family!” she shrieked, her voice echoing in the high ceilings throughout the house. “We spoke about this, Gabby. You said you had no interest in inhaling those toxins!” Mom likes to pretend she doesn’t know what happens behind closed doors.

Neither of my grandfathers was successful in kicking the disgusting habit, leading both to kick the can way before their perspective times. Mom and Dad assumed I knew better.

By days end, I had soaked in hours of frustrated outbursts and I would gladly do it again, if only avoid what inevitably came next...the devastating feeling of being a bone-crushing disappointment.

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Maybe I should have relished in these lackluster moments more because soon my cig habit was the least of the family’s worries. Actually, it was the last *normal* fight we had as the family we once were.

About two weeks later, my father was the one getting interrogated in the fire pit, but on a much grander stage, with far greater consequences. The media circus had arrived on our front lawn, and as it eventually came out, our father had led his family straight into the lion’s den. He pled guilty to a slew of charges, mostly insider trading and fraud, becoming the new face of white-collar crime.

Mom says he'll be gone for at least ten years and that we're better off, which is hard to believe, seeing as we lost everything, from our beautiful home and college savings to our respect in the community and lowly father. And here I was, blaming Mom for all my insignificant life problems.

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The life of a college student is envied by most, especially by grads who recently have turned the tassel, forcing them to say goodbye to the best four years of their lives. Why do they envy us? Because it's true, college is easy. The formula basically goes as so: go to class when necessary and study your ass off before an exam. Besides that, the newfound freedom of college translates into non-stop partying and an overall sensation of being young and having the ability to do whatever the fuck you want.

I met my best friend, Jess, freshman year. She lived on my floor, but it wasn't until second semester that the two of us really hit it off. She was quiet at first, but she was quietly hilarious and every second I was with her, I felt happy.

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It's hard to stop, once you start. It becomes an addiction. I don't know if it's the thrill or the easy money, or both. But once you start, the ecstasy and the extravagance of it all become a part of your being. For a short while, we reveled in the eccentric fun and made loads of cash while we were at it. By the end of sophomore year, we had reached the point of no return.

"Turn on the water," I tell Jess, as we stumble into the bathroom.

“These guys are clowns. This is way too easy. It’s not even fun anymore…” I quickly cup my hands over Jess’ lipstick-smearred mouth. Melon is definitely her color, but I’ll inform her of that when she’s better capable of remembering the compliment.

“Seriously Jess, you need to keep quiet. You’re going to get us caught.” Her hair is everywhere and all I can think about is how tomorrow morning she’s going to beg me to brush it for her.

Jess’ constant disregard for the rules is starting to weigh on me. If she wasn’t my best friend, I’d be tempted to leave her in this disgusting shack, with these dysfunctional fools and skip out with the goods myself. That would be a true test of my humanity. But she is my best friend and that would be cruel.

Jess leans heavy on my shoulder, pulling half of my dress down with her. I want to be angry with her, but I can’t. We can never stay mad at each other for too long. I have my nights and she has hers. But tonight is important and I made her promise to stay relatively sober. Apparently, I should have left *relatively* out of the equation. Jess’ ability to stand solo has gone out the window, along with our dignity - and not to mention the dignity of my darling, baby sister who’s along on the job.

We make the trek to the toilet with surprising ease. I slam down the seat, in hopes of saving Jess’ body from any further contamination. She sits and immediately falls against the filthy wall. I debate picking her up, but there’s no point, though the walls seem to be carrying some sort of deadly something. To put a timeframe on it, I’d say the vicinity hasn’t seen any disinfectant action in over six months.

My tired body slowly slides down the bathroom door, until my butt makes contact with the black- and grey-tiled floor. It’s obvious the grey tiles once sparkled white, but I’m too exhausted to move just yet. So

instead, I start formulating a new plan, now that Jess is fundamentally useless. Even at her worst, I can't help but watch her in hopeless admiration. There she sits...my beautiful best friend...my partner-in-crime...and she's shit drunk. I'm not too worried, but there's a lot at stake here.

"I only had two vodka-sodas, Gabby," she mumbles. I grab her cup from the soap-scum counter and look inside.

"You've got to be kidding me, Jess. Do you remember which Gatorade jug we put the drugs in?"

"Yes, I do actually. It was the green juice." I tilt the cup in her direction, so she can see what's left of the slime-colored substance that once filled it. "Fuck! How did that happen?" She looks up at me with those damn cute, Bambi eyes, seeming so genuinely horrified that I almost feel bad for the dazed and confused infant now under my watch. Then as quickly as she came to, she's gone again, playfully twisting her head into a sideways smirk, swaying to the music building up outside the bathroom.

"You know I can't keep a straight face when I'm flying high, Gabs!" She flails her arms and attempts to twirl. I know this face very well and usually welcome it with open arms and a warm heart. In her eyes, she's a graceful butterfly, but in all honesty, she's seconds away from face planting into the toilet.

Jess attempts to get up, and like a mother guiding her baby's first steps, I jump up beside her. I'm not sure where she's aiming, so I let her float on her own for a little, keeping my arms beneath hers in case of any sudden, involuntary movements. For a short while she's fine, holding her body up against the sink.

As I stand behind her, ensuring her stability, we lock eyes in the mirror. “I really like this lipstick color,” she smiles, before puking into the crusty sink. You have to give it to her. The girl can aim. She lets out a second heave with slightly less accuracy, drenching my right leg and miraculously missing her Needles & Thread mini dress. “It’s ok Gabs,” she says. “I’ll buy you...like... five new dresses.” At this point, all I can do is appreciate the thoughtful gesture.

Jess and I share a relationship very similar to the one I have with my sister. I never wanted Lacey to find out about the games I play, but she stumbled upon the evidence and has since manipulated herself into our late-night excursions.

Lacey is cozying up to one of the five guys sitting in the living room. The overly scruff faces, combined with the overall roundness of their abdomens are unforgiving indicators that college and all its splendor have prematurely caused them to age. I don’t know if my sister actually likes this loser or if she’s just playing with him. With painstakingly good looks and an alluring scent of innocence, Lacey is a professional illusionist. She fit the plan perfectly. As long as she kept her eyes on the boys, their eyes would be glued to her, giving Jess and me free range to scope out the house and find Parker’s stash.

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Last night was not a typical gig for us; though it wasn’t our first dabble in the retrieval of stolen property. Still, this riskier business is not nearly as simplistic as picking up a bag of cash or moving a few pounds of weed. Parker lived in our dorm freshman year and has since been our soul-saving supplier of all things fun. We help him move the main components of his operation and, in return, he pays us handsomely.

The escalated risk makes my insides churn, but the unregulated cash flow and a fairly consistent high keep the feeling numb. Mom thinks I'm waitressing at the Irish pub down the street. Just yesterday, Lacey had to make the same riches to rags call home, reiterating the same tall tale. Now, Mom's under the impression she has two daughters working hard to preserve their futures. But she doesn't have much room to judge, "working" back at Saks, which just happens to be her infamous grounds for sniffing out promising new money trails...my father was one of many.

But appearances are everything, if only to avoid another fight. When a powerful someone dangles a bone of solid gold in front of your face, who's not going to bite? Transporting for Parker is lucrative, but it was just the beginning. A few nights ago, I met with Parker for a delivery. After helping him sort through some earnings, he proposed a job I couldn't refuse.

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"What the fuck happened last night?" It's two in the afternoon and Jess is finally awake. "Shit! Did we find Parker's weed in that scumbag house?" I decide to spare Jess the details of how she accidentally picked up the wrong poison on the job. Due to her inability to remember the previous night's occurrences, she'd likely assume the worst if I told her she downed one of our infamous concoctions.

She paces crazily around the apartment, before landing at my feet. "I'm so sorry Gabs. I blacked out so hard last night. I don't even think I drank that much. Oh God! Did I mess everything up?" She hugs my legs.

"Please don't kiss them," I plead. "Jess, take a breath. You need to start doing this without needing to be reminded!" Jess gets anxious, but not in a scary way like she's about to have a panic attack or get rushed

to the ER. “Yes, you were a little tipsy... Yes, you were sort of a liability... And yes, we found the weed with Parker’s marked stamp.” I turn to the duffle bag sitting beside the couch and show her the tightly sealed pounds. “You see? Except there were only seven, so Parker’s going to have to deal with that.”

Jess plops down on the couch, takes another deep breath and swallows her pride. “I don’t deserve a cut. Split it with Lacey,” she says. The truth is, Jess didn’t hold up her end of the deal, but she did come out with every intention of getting the job done.

“Oh stop with the dramatics. You’re getting your share, but Lacey did have to pick up a lot of your slack, so we’re splitting it three ways even. Just do the dishes,” I say, tapping her glorious behind before walking across the open-floor plan to my bedroom. “I’m getting dressed and heading over to Parker’s to drop this off and collect. Come with, if you’re up for it.”

“I’m not sure, honestly. My head is pounding... like bad... like pulsating bad.” The severity of the hangover should be a dead giveaway of last night’s mistaken consumption. Her oblivion at this point surprises me.

“Just give me a few minutes. I’m coming,” she says.

While I wait, I text my sister the Jess-censored version of the night.

“Don’t tell Jess she drank the juice. She’ll freak. I’ll pay you when you come over... Getting paid now.”

Lacey replies within seconds and I’m not at all surprised by her amusement with the fiasco. She’s way too excited about breaking the law and stealing from bad boys.

“Haha! That secret recipe of yours really works, huh? Let me know next time you go out!”

“Sure, ok. Lacey.”

I don't like it, but at this point, I have no choice. She knows everything and saying no to her could spark a tantrum worse than a vicious storm ripping through Bridezilla's seamlessly planned outdoor ceremony. She's also a valuable asset to the operation as a whole. In any other situation, I would handle the tantrum, but I can't risk something of this caliber blowing up in all of our faces.

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Jimmy is your typical college drug dealer, hidden among his peers. Most coexist, but Jimmy thrives, with straight A's in courses like Energy Infrastructure Planning and Advanced Thermodynamics. It's nearly impossible to single out a dealer based solely on appearances, especially in the college demographic. In fact, the typical *college* dealer is most likely your average, or above-average student. They're competent in the business sense, though lacking in the actions-lead-to-consequence arena, but nonetheless they're smart. They've already made it into college and haven't dropped out yet. It's safe to say, most have promising futures.

Jimmy just graduated and told Tom that upon this mile marker, he'd stop dealing too, a smart decision for anyone who's been involved for as long as he has. As a mechanical engineering major, he's already received countless job offers from all corners of the country. And with a starting salary of over \$70,000, any fool who chooses to keep selling deserves to get caught.

It's 9 a.m. on a Saturday. It's only the end of May and already a scorcher. I don't know how people live without central air. The small A.C. unit blasting in my bedroom is far from efficient. Still, I toss and turn, trying to find any lingering cold spots on my bed. I finally land on patch of blissful, untouched territory, when I'm suddenly jumped. It's Lacey. She crawls next to me, gazing up at me with those majestic baby blues. She's nervous. "Can you come with me...just this once...please?" she asks.

Lacey's first solo run was supposed to be tonight, but Jimmy had called asking if she could make it a morning run instead. He's a busy man, he had said. It's the only run she has all weekend, so I'm happy to help with the transition, but not before making her beg one last time. "Gabs, please. I'll put my whole payout in our savings." Lacey and I had started a joint savings box. With our father wallowing worthlessly in prison and our mother, a born-again temptress...tuition...food...rent?

I roll out of bed and throw on the least amount of clothing possible. We hop into Lacey's car, stop for some coffee and head over to Jimmy's. He lives exactly one mile away, making our Starbucks stop a longer trek than the actual job. We turn onto Oregon Ave and park far down from his 3-bedroom, 6-tenant boy cave.

For a few moments, neither of us moves. We're blatantly hung-over...sunglasses, messy buns and scratchy voices in check. "Let's get this over with," Lacey says, getting out of the car. The street is quiet, as we walk up to Jimmy's house. I knock on the door, but no one answers. We look for the doorbell, but there isn't one. For some reason, the air outside Jimmy's house feels 20 degrees hotter than it did outside my place. I turn the knob and the door opens.

“Jimmy, are you home?” I lean around the door and peek inside. The room looks frozen in time. The T.V. is on and empty pizza boxes, plastic cups and puddles of spilt beer litter the living area. The only thing missing are the people.

“Maybe we should leave...No one’s here,” Lacey says. “I can’t believe he made me come out this early...and for what?” She has a right to be pissed. I’d be pissed too. I am pissed. We both got out of bed for this. We suddenly hear a creaking noise come from upstairs.

“Is that you, Lacey?” mumbles the voice. It sounds like Jimmy. “Come up! Just follow my voice.”

“Thank God,” I mutter to myself. “Let’s go, Lacey.” She gives me a confused look and follows up the stairs; careful to miss the gaging hole in step number four. How the house manages to host belligerent bashes without injury is beyond me. Besides the fratty living room and singular step, Jimmy’s roommates keep the house livable, especially for a group of college guys. There are more than a couple pictures hanging on the walls and they’re not wrinkled posters of scenes from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* or ultra-trippy nature shots that scream, *I do drugs*.

We approach Jimmy’s room to find him sitting at his desk texting. “Nice...it’s the sister-sister combo,” he smirks as we enter. He’s the only person in the house with his own bedroom, as he can afford it. Lacey and I force our tired face muscles to smile and place our sunglasses on our heads. “Wow, you guys really are twins. Twins are always trouble and always welcome,” he continues. Lacey takes this as a compliment and shoots him a genuine smile, complete with an orgasmic blush.

“Should I close the door?” I ask, ignoring his meaningless statement.

“Na...the housemates are out and they won’t be back until later tonight. I ran out of my head stash too last night, so we can’t smoke either. I’m sorry, girls. This’ll be a short visit.”

“Yea...we saw the mess,” Lacey adds. She’s annoyed with Jimmy’s shortage. Smoking sessions are usually a given on runs like this. “So, strictly business,” she says. “Where’s Parker’s money?”

“Easy there little one,” he says, reaching under his bed. He pulls out a stuffed duffle bag and hands it to Lacey. “It’s all there, twenty-five grand through the money counter. You trust me, right?” His eyes are locked on Lacey’s, as she purrs for more attention. I feel my eyes subconsciously roll back in my head. It’s hard to control “bitchface” when it’s so rightfully deserved. I’m beginning to wonder if Lacey’s plea for company was merely mental reassurance to keep from fucking Jimmy on the job.

“Alright. We need to get back to my place,” I say. “Thanks, Jimmy. Parker will hit you up if anything’s off. Lacey, let’s go.” I pull Lacey to my side and we walk downstairs, where she suddenly stops short.

“Hold on, Gabs. I need to go to the bathroom,” she says. “I’ll be right back.”

Growing rapidly impatient, I look out the foyer windows to the sight of two cars pulling into Jimmy’s driveway. I keep my eyes glued on the cars, waiting for movement. Figures fidget in the front seats, but no one gets out. Within seconds, a van and another car pull up on the side of the road, alongside Jimmy’s lawn. That’s when I knew what was about to go down. I had imagined this scenario everyday since my sister’s first involvement.

My body starts to shake and I want to yell to Jimmy for help, but my head catches up with me before my mouth has time to blurt out his name. What am I thinking? From the missing roommates, to the quickie pick-up, to today's sporadic no-smoking policy, Jimmy definitely knew this was going to happen. Dealers never run out of their head stash.

I run to the bathroom and open the door, holding my pointer finger over my perched, trembling lips. "What the fuck, Gabby?" Lacey whispers, still on the toilet. "The cops are here, four cars out front. Jimmy's in on it and you need to get out of here," I explain as quickly as my mouth can move.

"Wait...what? I'm not leaving you. There's no way in hell." Lacey's only making this harder and in sheer panic, tears start streaming down my face.

"You have to leave. I'll walk out the front and give them what they want. They're only expecting one person to walk out with the money. That person is not going to be my baby sister. Lacey, please, at any second they're going to bust in. They want Parker. Jimmy never sees Parker. I do."

"Fuck that, Gabs. We're both getting out of here. Jimmy knows nothing about us. He doesn't even know our last names." Despite the commotion, Lacey's spot on her A-game. "I'm sorry, but I'm not leaving unless you're coming with me. If they catch you, they're going to make you turn on Parker and that's too dangerous for any of us. I'm not losing you. Jimmy can find another way to save his ass."

I close my eyes. "Leave the money here and we'll come back for your car. We have to move now," I say. Lacey smirks, drops the duffelbag in the tub and we run like wildfire.

We flee for what seems like eternity. I'd like to take this time to thank Jimmy's neighbors for not fencing in their yards. I'm certain I would not have made it to the end of the block if fence hopping were part of the course. My sister, the high school track star, however, may have welcomed the challenge.

As we turn the corner of Oregon Ave., we catch a glimpse of Jimmy's front yard, where the cops are charging forward, draped in head-to-toe protective gear, looking more like warriors on the hunt for an escaped prisoner of war. Lacey pulls my arm, snapping me back into focus and giving me the momentum I need to proceed.

"Never again," I say to her, breathing heavily.

"Don't sound so scared, Gabs," she says, without skipping a breath. "We got away." She grabs my hand and lifts my arm with hers, as we soar down a freefalling runway towards an angelic abyss, until the sight of a trashcan redirects my focus.

"We need to stop. If we don't tell Parker the money's at Jimmy's, he's going to think we have it." I reach for the disposable phone in my pocket and send one final text. "*Jimmy's busted...Cops came...Couldn't pick up.*" Lacey grabs the phone from my grip and drops it onto the sidewalk. I smash it with a heartfelt stomp and toss our throwaway safety net into the trash for the last time.

"Does this mean we have to find real jobs?" Lacey asks, coming to grips with the real meaning of the end.

“Just like everyone else...” I say, falling to my knees as we reach the entranceway to my apartment. The soft grass so delicately gives in to my body, gently reassuring that everything is ok. Only a luscious wave of marijuana smoke could make the feeling any better.

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Lacey, Jess and I sit around the coffee table, staring blankly at one another. None of us have moved in the past hour. We had made the decision to leave, at least for a short while. The cops won't be after us, but if Parker suspects any foul play, we won't be safe.

As the clock strikes 9 p.m., we say our final goodbyes to the heavenly habitat that enlightened us to live like the wildlings we truly were. Jess hugs one of the huge foundation poles in the living area, unwilling to let go. “I don't want to leave. This is our home,” she says. A tear falls down her cheek. Jess never cries. A trip down memory lane could take hours. From the time Jess had a bad acid trip and I had to knock down the bathroom door to free her from her sinking mind, to the time we realized we could climb to the roof, sunbathe and soak in the playful paradise that surrounded us. Our fantasyland would be missed.

We pack the car and sit quietly until I finally break the silence. “These crushed faces have to stop. We're not miserable girls and even when we're dangling for dear life, we always find a way to make that hellhole spit us back out.” I look around to see if my motivational words are working any small wonders. Jess is still scowling beside me. “We can literally do whatever we want right now. Who gets to do that? And we'll be safe. It's going to be better than before. I promise.” Feeling defeated, my eyes make their way to the rear view mirror to find Lacey's staring back at me with that familiar, hopeful gaze. She looks ready for a few curveballs, which recent events have shown she can handle like a pro.

Lacey starts to chuckle, as she rummages through the mounds of bags in the backseat. “I already know it’s going to be better than before,” she adds, finally stumbling upon her snakeskin tote. She unzips the jagged zipper. Within seconds, hundred dollar bills are flying throughout the car. Jess and I look at one other, unsure of how to react.

“How did you...?” I start, but Lacey cuts me off. “I stuffed the money from Jimmy’s into my purse,” she says. “If we left it there, Parker would have never seen it, that’s for sure. What was I supposed to do? You’ve always said we’re the ones taking all the risk, right?”

The balls on this girl are unbelievable, but she’s right. We were the glue to this operation and now that it’s collapsing, a nice severance package is the least we can get. We turn onto Route 80, heading east. Dark clouds fill the sky in the rearview, gaining ground. I continue driving, accelerating accordingly, as to ensure we stay ahead of any impending storms. I roll down the windows and Jess puts on our favorite road tripping song. We sing like the lucky girls we are. I can’t remember the last time air tasted so pure.