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Smoke Lingers

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"The brass handle curved invitingly into the approach of his hand, transferring the warmth of the summer sun to his palm. He pushed the thumblatch down with a click and walked through the heavy glass-paneled door, waiting for and then hearing the small yellow bell softly signaling his presence as the door swung back into its frame. Four long layered rows of magazines detoured him off to the side to stop at the far end. He bent down to look at the familiar faces of Superman, Batman, Flash, Green Lantern, and the rest, in trouble again, and grimacing forth at him while a vile assortment of villainous thugs, foes, and arch-enemies laughed cruelly at their collective plight. Superman's face contorted in green pain from glowing Kryptonite chains. Batman was soon to be rendered in two by yet another of Joker's malevolent machines. He barely paid attention as he flipped quickly through them, as if looking for one that he hadn't already read. It was Saturday, and the new issues wouldn't be out until Tuesday. He picked up one and opened the cover, pretending to look inside. He was oblivious to the densely colored pages; he was working through his plan.

Go straight to the counter and just ask for them? Or maybe not. Too risky. Better to circle around the middle aisle and then sneak in through the candy. It'll probably be Betty behind the counter. It was
always Betty on Saturdays. Chunky and wrinkled and white with powdered pink cheeks, wearing dresses like his grandmother. She looked like a grandmother, and probably was one. She smelled like it. Kieran thought how easy this would be with old Betty. She wasn't exactly the sharpest tack in the box. She'll hand them right over.

Kieran swung past the prescription counter and waved at Mr. Simon, who briefly looked up and smiled, waving back. He sailed through cosmetics and perfumes, excited and only slightly nervous at what he was about to do. He spoke silently to himself, devising deft dialogue for Betty while stepping selectively on the black checkerboard tile.

He stopped at the candy display, choosing a Payday and a Hershey bar from the sloping wooden tiers, and depositing them on the thick glass counter over the cigars, accompanied by a crumpled dollar bill. Studying the cigar boxes intently, he waited for Betty to come out from the back.

A man came out instead, a different man. Not old Mr. Simon. Someone new. Kieran gulped. The man was tall and thin, with shiny black hair, combed straight back along the sides of his head and thrown forward in the front, like Elvis. Except for the fact that he was older, he looked like one of the greasers from his brother's high school, right down to the black panther crawling up his forearm. Wow. It even had scratches from his claws. "See something you like" the man inquired. Startled, Kieran put his hands on the candy bar.

"These are for me," he said. "And I need some cigarettes for my Dad."
The man behind the counter waited impatiently. He wore a tan cotton smock left open in the front, exposing a worn white t-shirt. His nameplate revealed him as 'Al'. He tapped his fingers, shifted his head, and looked closer, as if he had a question to ask. Kieran felt a warm flush roll over his face as he dropped his eyes to the white rubber tops of his Keds. *Why is he looking at me?*

"Kind."

The tips of Kieran's ears burned hot as he looked up at the man's gaze, not knowing what to say. "Huh?" He shrank inside, terror climbing inside his chest.

"Kind," the man repeated, slightly louder than before. "What kind of cigarettes does he smoke?" He enunciated the words slowly, as if speaking to a lip-reader.

"Oh, right, kind. Ummm. Kind. I think he smokes...."

Kieran's eyes searched frantically over the man's shoulder at the rows of cigarettes. He had no idea what they really were, other than the Kents that his mother smoked or the Winstons that his father really smoked. But these weren't for his parents. They were for him. They were his first pack of his own cigarettes. Not filched from one of the packs laying around the house, but paid for with his own money.

The even rows of cellophaned cigarette packages blended together, their names and colors offering no clues to what the most undetectable choice
would be. Something that he'd never think a kid would smoke. Something that obviously only a man would smoke. Something like....

"Bull Durhams," Kieran said, pointing to the red and white packages at the top of the cigarette display. He felt proud of himself, confident that he had made a good choice.

"Bull Durhams?" Al asked. "Bull Durhams?" He repeated the name of the cigarettes in questioning awe, like nobody had ever asked for them before. "Are you sure that's what he smokes?"

Kieran quickly nodded in silent affirmation, stunned by the clerk's reaction. "I guess," the man said, briefly shaking his head. He turned around and pulled one of the packages from their place at the top of the display. He turned the cigarette pack over in his hands, examining it. Squeezing the sides gently, he blew on the pack. A small puff of dust formed in the air over the cellophane wrapper.

"Never saw anybody that smoked these before," he said in earnest declaration. He wiped the cigarettes on the sleeve of his smock and put them on the counter next to the candy bars. "They're kind of stale." He looked at Kieran briefly, seeming to wait for some unspoken confirmation, before picking up the dollar bill and punching the buttons on the cash register.

"Forty cents for the cigarettes...." The register buttons clicked in mechanical counterpoint.

"And ten cents for the two candy bars."
The buttons clicked again. He struck the large flat Total button with the edge of his hand and the register rolled over loudly within itself, finally coming to rest as the cash drawer shot open.

"That's fifty cents altogether."

He put the dollar in the drawer as he simultaneously scooped out two quarters and handed them to Kieran.

"Need a bag for those?"

Under ordinary circumstances, if Kieran were buying cigarettes on an errand for his parents, he wouldn't think twice about walking down the street carrying the pack in his hands. Now however, it was a different story. People would know they were his. He wasn't quite sure how, but they would. Better take the bag.

"Yes, please...but I'll take the candy," he said, pocketing the two candy bars in his shirt. Al handed him the cigarettes in a small white bag with a jagged edge. The bag had a golden mortar and pestle printed on it, and underneath the picture was the name of the drugstore, Simon's. As Kieran took the bag, Al extended his hands to the front edge of the counter and leaned over, regarding Kieran.

"How old are you?" he asked.

"Twelve," replied Kieran.

"Hmm. Twelve, huh? You don't look twelve. What grade are you in?"
Kieran stopped momentarily. *This guy asks too many questions. Maybe I should just take off.* The problem was that this was Kieran's corner store. He got his comics here, he got his candy here, he got his ice cream here, he was always here. Can't back down now.

"I'm in sixth grade," Kieran replied

"Sixth grade last year, or sixth grade next year?"

"Sixth grade this year, like in two months. Why do you want to know?" Kieran stood holding the bag, nervously feeling the cigarette pack lying loosely within.

"Nothing special," Al replied. "Just checking on who's cool in the neighborhood." His lips twisted into a crooked smile as he twisted his head to one side, narrowing his eyes and regarding Kieran inquisitively.

"I'm Al," he said. "In case you couldn't read." He pointed to the nametag on his smock, then unexpectedly extended his hand over the counter. Kieran thought at first that Al was going to grab him and bust him for the cigarettes, then quickly realized that he was offering a handshake instead. He held his hand up to Al's, where it was squeezed tightly and shaken once.

“I'm Kieran," he said. "I live down the block."

Al nodded his head in acknowledgement. "Okay.

Kieran felt an oddly instant affinity for Al, who seemed different
from the other gown-ups that he knew. He wasn't like his teachers, or his Scout leader, or his neighbors or relatives, but more like one of his friends. Like he thought the same way. Weird. Kieran turned to go, not knowing quite what else to say.

He was only a few feet away from the counter when Al called out to him.

"Hey...."

Kieran turned back around.

"Don't you want any matches for those?"