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Cigarette Ad

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Suzy Bertsche



Cigarette Ad



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Her toes are pointed. I was told the toes were important. Now her toes are callused and tan in her river ready sandals. She holds a cigarette erect. Now she drinks smoothies full of new age protein powders I can't pronounce. Her eyes are hidden behind thick cat-eye sunglasses. Now her eyes are rimmed with black eyeliner she got tattooed in Mexico. Her mouth is thick and pushed out. Her chin has a dimple, like a forgotten punctuation mark. Now her mouth is a light pink sagging line, her chin is a cobweb of fine wrinkles. The background could be the skyline of Hollywood or some suburb of New York City. Now she lives in Mexico or in her too-silver airstream at the Missoula KOA. I lay this picture over how I know her today. The effect is harsh and uncomfortable like silk over burlap.

Posed in a plastic woven lounge chair, hair styled, cigarette perched and ready, pedicured toes, plaid shorts melt into pale long legs, her white collared shirt wrinkled at the elbows, the buttons cast an S shaped shadow down her chest. "Is that the aunt that looks like your mom?" is the way she is identified among my friends. I know her from the others as the one who likes potatoes as much as I do. She is the aunt who never did art projects with me or sent crocheted bears. She is the aunt who takes me hiking and on driving trips to ponds during family reunions. Buddhism, literature, travel, and trees are the things we talk about. The aunt whose husband's ashes I freed into the Blackfoot and toasted with my first Canadian Crown Royal Whiskey on the rocks. Like my mother and me, when she laughs her cheeks rise and almost cover her squinted eyes. Her visits from Mexico are not few, but when I see her it seems like years have passed. Posed on the lawn chair she is exotic and familiar to me.

A necklace of power lines runs above her head. The front left corner of the lounge chair is cut off. Her white legs are over exposed. The depth of field is wrong. The mountains are both-

ersome and blurry. He should have changed his aperture. Years later he would have known how to technically make the picture perfect. My uncle wouldn't have relied on the subject to make it pop. He would have reached into his fishing vest turned photographers' vest and pulled out rabbits and bouquets to make the photograph sing. What would the picture be like if he had taken it ten years later? My aunt would have been holding my cousin's hand, with his brother in her belly. The background would be a forest of Oregon green instead of a city. The photographer would have a list of errands and appointments running through his head as he set the scene and not what the midterm would be in his next class.

The round thick metal ashtray balances on the edge of the armrest. Is it carved with an Indian Raja and Rani or old English roses and girls in bonnets? The ring she wears sparks in the black and white sun. Is it on her middle or ring finger? The wide wood planks of the porch are old and rough. Does she have a splinter in her arched foot? Her sunglasses make jagged dark shadows on her cheekbones. What is she seeing behind those glasses? Is she looking into an apartment window, watching a couple arguing over what to make for dinner? Or is she looking at my uncle's large frame bent over the camera, his lips and eyes saturated with a smile? Her face is calm, all her features flimsy, yet there is a purposefulness to her. She is rigid with relaxation. Is she thinking about a grocery list or her father's death?

I find the photo on the dining room table, it looks dirty against the laundered white table cloth. My cheeks bloat with blush. I pick it up, careful to hold it by its crimped edges. The photo is heavier and more solid than I thought it would be. I put the photo back and check for fingerprints.

I eavesdrop on their first date. He picks her up after one of my grandma's meals of fresh peas, mashed potatoes, a chicken from the yard and a pit-filled cherry pie made by the youngest sister. He is a public schoolboy, she goes to Sacred Heart Academy. He is well dressed, even if his shirt is too tight. She made the red cotton dress she wears. How would the grandpa I never met greet this burly boy who came to pick up one of his four daughters?

I stand as the fourth bridesmaid at their wedding. My mother is sixteen years old and stands taut as the maid of honor. The yellow daises in her hands are starting to wilt. Our floppy hats and Dotted Swiss dresses make us look like guests at the Mad Hatter's tea. The scene is drenched in yellow.

I sit across the street and watch my mother plead with my cousin who is parked in the middle of the street with his arms folded and face tight. My aunt dumped them on my mother the morning after they made the drive to Seattle. His older brother watches and holds my mother's hand. She reasons, begs and tries to bribe the boy with treats from the grocery bags she clutches. The boy re-crosses his arm and shuts his eyes. She leaves the two-year-old in the street and tramps down the hill.

I am next to his hospital bed, my aunt is in the parking lot doing her first drug deal at sixty-five. I can't see my uncle. I never saw him once he was diagnosed. I don't imagine him fragile and small for he never was when I knew him. My aunt comes up and gives him a cookie. I can see my aunt, I can see the cookie, I can see the bed, but I can't see him. I still can't see him. I see his photo in the cherry frame, I see his fine art photographs that litter my parent's house, I see his children, his grandchildren and I see his wife. She is carefully sprawled on a lawn chair. She sees her husband.

"This is not a photo of Mary, this is a photo of a sixties movie star," I say to my mother, and she laughs. She cuts up a nectarine and pours sugar over it, the fat crystals scrape over the white plate. "We all looked like that back then," she says. She asks if I want a slice, and I take the smallest one, and drench it with sugar. "But look at her hair, and those sunglasses." My mother keeps eating.

The photo is large, a loaf of bread long, two soda cans high. It has dents and wrinkles. The image is black and white, but the border is light cream. Unlike the others there is no mat or frame, no price tag or artist's signature. It's from his private collection, stored in a trailer in one of the stacks that reach the ceiling. One of millions. It was a class assignment at some fancy photography school. That's why her toes are pointed.