

Sick Cycle Carousel

by Hannibal Tabu

Gray clouds hung low over Burbank as a Boeing 737 lazily drifted west towards the airport. Below, Liz -- a bespectacled Asian woman with round cheeks, a shy smile and the hint of her second child still haunting her midsection -- walked along with Lindsey, her co-worker. Lindsey was crowned with a plume of blondish brown hair, the circular frames of her glasses poking out from beneath her bangs. Both wore puffy dark 3/4 length jackets as they strolled the pathways of the corporate park that held their place of employment, and scarves knitted by Liz's sure hand clung close to their necks.

Lindsey took a long drag from the Natural American Spirit cigarette in her petite left hand, the tan line from where her wedding ring sat just six months before still showing, her other hand jammed deep into a jacket pocket, and blew the smoke straight up away from the two of them.

"Those things aren't any safer than regular cigarettes," Liz admonished sadly.

"I'm doing a half-pack of these a day instead of a pack and a half of Virginia Slims," Lindsey shrugged, a brush of wind pushing aside the unguarded end of her jacket and showing off the slim waist that three children and twenty years since leaving her mother's Alabama home hadn't managed to alter. "Isn't that progress?"

Liz shook her head sadly, the suede-shod footfalls of her boots falling into line next to Lindsey's New Balance sneakers on the gray twisting sidewalk. "You're gonna worry me to death one of these days," the younger woman said sadly.

"With all the layoffs in IT, let me have my little pleasures, willya?" Lindsey said tiredly. "We work in internet marketing, so it's way

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easier to let us go than people who run the machines." Looking forgivingly at Liz's downturned face, she softened her tone. "Look, honey, I'll quit as soon as the economy stops making me worry about my mortgage, okay?"

They walked a few more feet, approaching two men sitting on a stone bench, one positioned precariously on the back of the seat, while another man spoke to the one seated higher from a standing position. The man speaking -- a shaven headed Black man built like a football player but wearing a burnt orange shirt with a black tie -- gestured as he spoke, and the man seated lowest chuckled as the conversation went on. The third man -- spiky red hair and a natty Van Dyke underneath his rakish smile, a cigarette tucked behind his right ear -- seemed to be less interested in what was being said to him and more intent on following the curve of Lindsey's tights up her lithe leggings and towards the hem of her coat.

"... not *just* a jerk, you're like the *king* of the jerks!" the Black man said as they came into earshot. "When other jerks look for leadership, they just pick up their cell phone and you're *pre-programmed* in as the *first* entry on their speed dial! You can't just leave a girl at the mall because she wanted to share your fries, Dave! That's just not ..."

As they walked on, the Black man's voice fell away and Lindsey glanced back to see the redhead still checking her out.

"Can you believe that?" Liz asked, shocked. "Some guys just can't act right ..."

"Uh huh ..." Lindsey returned absently, considering for a moment. Throwing down her cigarette and grinding it with her toe, she said, "Listen, you go on ahead, I'm gonna go back and bum a fresh smoke from that Dave guy, be right back ..."

Without another word, she started walking back towards the stone bench. Liz slumped her shoulders slightly and sighed, twisting her wedding ring on her hand, and went after her friend to make sure she didn't do anything too stupid ...

