

Three Cigarette Stories.

by Pia Ehrhardt

One:

Smoking In The House

My mother is private with her grief. Since my father's death last year there has been almost no talk of him. When she got back from the funeral, she put his clothes in boxes for Goodwill, and rearranged the furniture in the den. She won't discuss what she will do now. She's 55.

I want her to do something. I think I know what is best for her. I always did. I remember watching her get ready to go out with my father, dressed in a green silk shirt, her hair up, red lipstick, frowning in the mirror because, she said, "The light was bad," and thinking: *She should look happier than that. The light is fine.* I can see her, plain as day, with her life back, those thirty years to do over. Anything she wants. I would be all over this. I'd quit my job and travel for a year if I weren't so afraid of planes, of deep water, of spending money.

We live in Mississippi. I should have moved to Atlanta when I had a chance. If I left now it would seem personal. I live a mile from my mother's, in an apartment with a ceiling fan in every room. There's constant wind in my house. I need ventilation. Still air makes me nervous.

My mother smokes in her house; when my father was alive she would go out on the patio. When it was cold or rainy, she would stand in the half bath and open the window, blow the smoke through the screen. Now, she lights up in every room. She keeps the blinds pulled so neighbors won't look in, spreads the slats and stares out. She blows smoke hard at the glass as if it could push through.

My boyfriend, Martin, is a general contractor. I met him at Ruby's Roadhouse shooting pool. I love pool. We had a table in the den and my father and I would play, chalk our cues, walk around, think four moves ahead, get eyelevel with the ball and call our shots. The table has also gone to Goodwill. The table, and the detective novels my father read, and the stack of warped Nina Simone and Paul Desmond LPs.

I tell my mother she needs to strip the grass cloth off her dining room walls. It's stained. When she rehung some family photographs the color underneath was twenty shades darker. I think fresh paint will look great. Light green. I tell her about Martin. Not that I'm dating him, but that he is professional, dependable. I say I can have him come by and give an estimate. She smiles. She likes when I step in. She would like me to keep her tank filled with gas, manage her money, answer the phone, but I can't. It would feel like employment. She is happy when I stop by, and she's ready for me to go when I leave. I'm not really welcome in her house.

I set up a time for Martin to go over there. He is fifty and heavy set, with curly gray hair and perfect straight teeth. I could envy other people's teeth all day.

I used to think I took my father away from my mother, because that seemed so easy. Like taking candy from a baby. Now I think my mother gave him to me.

In high school, I was his daily dinner companion. My mother went in and out of the room, bringing us food, answering the phone when my friends called at the wrong time. She lit candles. She hardly sat down. I didn't want him. I wanted to feel good watching them together, but that didn't happen, so I looked good with him instead. I knew that to put myself in front of him was also how to stay out of trouble. I asked questions that made him talk. I listened. She didn't. She told long stories without points, talked about her day. He looked at me to see if I was as bored as he was, but I didn't look back, just pushed around the food on my plate. He corrected her sentences

and jumped on her opinions, challenged every one, and she'd get quiet, pissed off, push her chair away from the table, get the bread from the oven. She'd found a way to leave him without breaking up the family.

I went along with it; I didn't notice there was an unyielding argument going on that was brutal and erotic and theirs. By my senior year, I was staying over at friends' houses.

Martin calls me back and says she's open to pulling off the grass cloth. And while he was there he suggested the heavy brick all over the den would look nice painted. She thinks that's a good idea. "I like your mom," he says. "She's funny." I don't think my mother is funny. She is beautiful. She is twenty years older than I am. My father was so critical, I wasn't sure why she stayed. I wanted her to be with someone besides him. I imagined other lovers for her who would be other fathers for me, and they seemed okay. We could adjust.

"Why don't you take her to dinner?" I say. He laughs. "I am dead serious," I say.

"I thought about it," he says.

And he does. He doesn't tell me much, and I try not to ask. After two weeks, I do ask. "Are you sleeping with her?" I say.

"This is a no win deal," he says.

"Could you stop?" I say.

He's sitting in his red truck. I'm blocking his driveway, because I stopped by to see him on my way to work and caught him as he was leaving. He looks away, at a neighbor picking up the newspaper from the curb. "It wouldn't be because I wanted to."

My mother and I are drinking decaf on the patio. She is smoking, French inhaling, enjoying every bit of her cigarette.

"What's new?" I ask her. "The house is looking nice."

"Yes," she says. "Except one good room makes the other rooms shabby."

"So you'll keep renovating?" I say.

"I think so." She sighs in a comfortable way.

I tap one of the cigarettes out of her pack and ask her for a light. She looks at me, pleased. "I haven't seen you smoke since high school," she says.

"It gives me a headache," I say, "but sometimes I miss it."

Smoking is something besides my father we could have had in common. Sneaking away for a cigarette would have given us a chance for those easy, squeezed-in talks. There was too much dead time in the house. She was always home, and I was always bored and urgent, hoping, soon, to be on my way somewhere.

I miss her more than my father.

Two:

Margaret's Bucket Is Full

On the drive home from her daughter's house, Margaret stops at the pecan orchard in Picayune. She pays the owner two dollars for an empty metal bucket. He points at the field and says, fill it up, high as you want. Rain clouds gather in the west. Margaret hopes the weather holds. She walks under the trees, picking nuts off the ground. Gusts blow more down from the branches. She isn't ready to go home. There are still four good hours before dark.

Margaret had left her granddaughter's birthday party early. Taken the slice of cake home on a paper plate covered in foil, and when she stopped at the Exxon station, she threw it away. Why did everything involving children have to be so done up? Her granddaughter Amelie was one year old. Margaret had driven two hours for what? To see her daughters' dull marriages. To get her photograph taken. To watch thirty neighborhood toddlers run around. To sit bored. Her children were boring. She loved them younger when she knew them better. Now they talked and talked about exercise, about their husbands at work, their husbands on the golf course, so much talk about husbands like they weren't there. Why didn't they just bring them in from the back yard, let the husbands speak?

“You need to try things, Mother.” The sisters (they were on a team that would never pick her) wanted her to kayak on the lake in their subdivision before she went home. Margaret didn't want to kayak. She said no. The sisters looked at each other, disgusted. Try something new, Jane said. There's a rubber shirt you put on to keep your clothes dry, Mother. She hadn't called her Mom in ten years. Mother: two ugly syllables.

Then Margaret upset Jane by smoking a cigarette in the garage. The weather was windy and turning cold. It was *one* cigarette. With a fresh cup of coffee. She didn't open the door first. She couldn't find the remote, and besides, it looked like rain. Her daughter was furious and talked to her about second-hand smoke in a voice that wasn't budging. A voice Margaret had taught them, that worked until her children started looking through her, not caring, not hearing, because nothing could happen to them when they were out late with shady friends, drunk, in cars, past curfew. Except to their brother. He'd run into a tree, drag racing down Wisner Boulevard at 2 a.m. He had swerved to avoid running over a big corrugated box. It was empty. He died in the ambulance.

When did she lose the voice they trusted? The one that said *I know how to care for you*.

Before she left, Margaret had stood in front of the house and smoked some more. She loved her cigarettes. They kept her company seven easy minutes at a time. She smoked two and pushed her butts into Jane's planters, two crosses without the part that crosses. People said you should have more than one child in case something happened. This was a fallacy. She had two girls left, but not her son, and they didn't make up for him, and they weren't much like him. They were like her. She wanted her son.

Neighbors were walking in and out of Jane's. The subdivision was a commune. Every house a two-story ranch with concealed garage, just barely different, like a Highlights quiz where you find what's not alike in these two pictures, and it may only be that one has a chimney made of bigger bricks.

A young man — Robert -- from around the block had pulled into Jane's driveway on a new Harley Davidson. Jane came out when she heard the noise. He lifted his leg high to show how he'd burned his Nike on the exhaust pipe, and Jane made a fuss over him and his bike, flirted and joked. She got on the back, straddled a seat that almost reclined. It was an odd angle. Too relaxed for a moving vehicle. She headed off with Robert to take a test drive. Margaret could hear the sound of them blocks away. Every gear shift. He put the bike in fourth. They were going up on the Interstate too fast. He was showing off for her. They weren't wearing helmets because her daughter loved wind in her face. Jane's husband was in the back drinking beer with his brother-in-law. He couldn't worry about what he didn't know, but Margaret could. Sweat rolled down her back. She was sure they were going 80. That they were racing like fools on two skinny tires. And that Jane was laughing, her arms around his waist, her mind clear of her life and this birthday party, no one's mother, no one's child. Margaret smoked another cigarette. She walked down the middle of the street. People in yards waved.

Robert and Jane came around the corner zigzagging for the neighbors, and Margaret told Jane she was going. Jane jumped off the bike. She looked happy, so grateful Margaret had come, and asked why she had to leave early, why not stay for dinner. Margaret had almost changed her mind. Her daughters were so eager and dear when they were hugging her hello or kissing her goodbye. She loved them in these moments, too, with a heart that was full, but torn, running too fast. It felt right then like they were hers and she was theirs.

Margaret's bucket is so full that the pecans make a mound. She holds it steady in her arms to keep any from falling out. The man gives her some giant Zip-loc bags to store the nuts. He says they freeze well. She accepts the free cup of coffee he offers and drives home, smokes her cigarettes, the window cracked just enough so rain won't get in.

Three:

How Would We Help If We Could?

Melanie is looking for something to do in the kitchen. It's Saturday morning and raining. Steam is coming off the roof of the house. Her step-dad is on a business trip. He usually comes into her room at 7 a.m. sharp and invites her to have coffee with him on the screened in porch. She does. She likes coffee. She's sixteen. Her best friend, Donna, thinks he's after her now that her mother's gone. Melanie wishes she had a camera in her bedroom, or one out there on the porch, so she could prove to Melanie that he's not.

There's a twenty-five year old woman she watches on the Internet named Liza who has a camera in her room that's on all day. Melanie checks every few hours to see how she's doing. There's Liza at her desk smoking cigarettes and paying bills. Liza napping on the bed. Liza dressing with her back to the camera. She doesn't wear panties and her bras fasten in the front. She's skinny and tall, with straight blonde hair she trims herself into intentionally uneven layers.

One pink grapefruit is in the bowl on the kitchen counter. Melanie peels it over the sink. The outer skin is thin. She gets that off. She picks at the thick white that's covering the fruit and throws it away, then pulls the membrane off each section and eats just the pulp.

When he's home in the morning, Melanie sits with her step-dad and they listen to the birds. Different feeders draw different species. Melanie keeps the Audubon Society Field Guide in her lap on top of the fleece blanket she uses to cover her legs. There are a dozen hairlike scars on both of her thighs. She wanted them as perfect as ruler markings.

Melanie checks on Liza, but she's still sleeping. Sunlight is coming through her window. She'll be up at eight to leave for work at 9:30. Liza has a job in the shoe department at a store called Maison Blanche. There are boxes of shoes on the end of her bed, and one gray strappy sandal is on her night table next to a stack of magazines.

The rain is sheeting now. Melanie will make stew for dinner. Her step-dad will be home by six. There's a cut up chicken in the fridge. There are German knives on the counter in a butcher block. One for every job. She flays the extra skin with a boning knife and throws the clean pieces into a crockpot. She lays out four ribs of celery and slices them into even pieces. The serrated knife makes a cool sound against the celery. The carrots are hard, but she peels them and quarters them lengthwise with a French knife, and chops them, too.

She needs a tiny bit of magic. She carefully cuts her finger with the paring knife. There's no pain. Then there is pain. The pause between these two things amazes her. What happens in that time when we don't feel anything? Before our nerve endings catch up to the brain? Maybe it's the mind making pain up because it thinks it's supposed to. Well, maybe the mind shouldn't be so in charge? Maybe we don't trust the mind today.

Her mom was killed in a car accident eight months ago. She was broadsided in the parking lot of Lakeside Shopping Center by a girl who was cutting diagonally across the empty spaces. Her mom was going twenty and the girl was going forty. Her mom was forty and the girl is twenty-two. Now the girl keeps calling to get forgiveness from Melanie and her step-dad, but they don't want to. They talk about it. They agree they could say the words, but they wouldn't mean them, and what's the good of that? Who would that help?

There's a glossary of birdcalls in the back of the Audubon book, so you can identify birds by how they sound.

Do you know any of these?

a. poor-wet-wetter-chee-zee

b. hello, hello, yes, yes, who is this, I should say, I should say

c. who cooks for you? Who cooks for you all?

Match up the song with the bird and for a few seconds you are happy. You hear it so plain and clear you promise yourself you'll never forget.

(Answers: a. white crowned sparrow b. brown thrasher c. barred owl)

They eat dinner on trays in front of the television. The dining room table is too big. The wind has shifted and it's getting colder. Her stepfather asks if she's cold. He says he has a chill and turns the heat up.

He is handsome and speaks softly, just wants to add something, not take up your time. She's afraid to ask him about his day like her mother would because he might tell her.

Her friend Donna says she'd sleep with him if it wouldn't ruin their friendship.

The phone rings and the girl asks Melanie to let her do something for them, anything: run errands, cook them food, be their maid, cut the grass, but Melanie says no, nothing, and, tells her, again, to please stop calling.

The help everyone wants to give isn't the help they need. Her step-dad says traveling makes him less sad. He's in motels and different cities that don't remind him of anything. He worries she's by herself. Melanie says she's okay.

Sometimes Liza walks up to the camera and looks right at Melanie like she's concerned, like if she could walk out of her room and into Melanie's she would. Tonight she's putting on makeup, brushing on mascara. She has a date. She can't decide which shirt. Melanie likes the little green one, but Liza decides on a yellow halter. She looks beautiful. The camera is her mirror. Melanie waves at her and stares for a while at Liza's stuff. Her radio is always on.

There's a storm cell over the house. Thunder on top of lightning. The wind is blowing hard and a branch falls on the roof above Melanie's room.

She can't sleep and turns on her computer to find Liza, but she's not home from her date yet. The shoeboxes have been put up. Liza made her bed.

The door opens and Liza comes in with a guy, and they stand awhile and kiss, and he undoes her halter, but Liza says, not so fast,

and grabs the loose ends to keep it up. He tries again, but she's holding on tight, and he looks like he's going to leave mad, and then he says, please, come on, and grabs her with both arms and tries to kiss her. She lets him, but she's still holding the halter and doesn't want to do this. He's not giving up. Liza laughs in a nervous way. He takes off her halter and hangs it over the camera.

Melanie sleeps. At 2 a.m. she wakes up to check on Liza. The camera lens is unblocked, and Liza is alone and lying on her side. She's in a T-shirt and boxer shorts. Melanie knows her eyes are open; there's a cigarette burning in the ashtray on her bedside table, the smoke thin as string. She's staring at the wall. Maybe she knows how to think about nothing, how to imagine her brain is bare and clean. Or maybe she can't, and she's going over her date, letting in every tiny detail, her mind working non-stop on stuff without answers.

It's dawn. Melanie goes into her stepfather's bedroom and sits on her mother's side. They talk. They have done this before. She wishes he were comfortable in the house, that she could help him and he could help her. He nods. He knows. He lies on his back and looks at the ceiling and cries. There's nothing new to say. It's the same grief, until she takes his hand. He is startled, looks at her fingers, smells her fingers, sees the band-aid and pulls it off. He kisses the cut and she opens her palm, which he presses against his mouth.

How would we help if we could? They need time. They need privacy. There is too much already here.

