

*...and L.A. is Burning*

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by Y York

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Draft: December 28 2006

Characters:

HADDIE. White American, female, 45.

SYLVIA. White American, female, 47.

ALVIN. African American, male, 35.

Place and Time:

Seattle. April, 1992. A grocery store, an office, a department store, two apartments.

(Scene 1. Haddie introduces herself to a writer in a grocery store aisle.)

HADDIE  
Those are over-priced.

SYLVIA  
Pardon me.

HADDIE  
Over priced. Get the ones in the plain bag.

SYLVIA  
I don't like the ones in the plain bag.

HADDIE  
They taste the same.

SYLVIA  
I don't think so.

HADDIE  
You get more and they're exactly the same.

SYLVIA  
Excuse me, but they're not the same. If you were to read the label you'd find out that they are not the same.

HADDIE  
What label?

SYLVIA  
The ingredients. The label. They are not the same. Sorbitol. I don't want to eat sorbitol. I don't want my kids eating sorbitol.

HADDIE  
You don't have kids.

SYLVIA  
...I beg your pardon?

HADDIE  
No kids.

SYLVIA  
...How do you know?

HADDIE  
You're the writer, right? Sylvia Vanderlip.

Who are you?  
SYLVIA

I'm in 3D.  
HADDIE

I'm sorry- you're what?  
SYLVIA

3D. Apartment 3D. Our balconies share a railing.  
HADDIE

Are you the smoker?  
SYLVIA

...There's more than one smoker.  
HADDIE

The one who sends the smoke into my apartment.  
SYLVIA

I smoke on the balcony so it doesn't bother people.  
HADDIE

It bothers me.  
SYLVIA

You know what bothers me? The kids in 4D. At least I don't have kids--that would really bother you. I guess if you had kids it would bother me, too.  
HADDIE

I was making a point. I was talking in shorthand. Trying to make a point about ingredients and how the cookies aren't the same. That's the only reason I mentioned the kids. That I don't have.  
SYLVIA

A lie is shorthand?  
HADDIE

When you're trying to make a point, it isn't a lie. It's a point.  
SYLVIA

I'm trying to quit. That's why I'm here so late. Looking for crummy snacks to take my mind off smoking. Cheap ones with "sorbitol."  
HADDIE

Well...I hope the snacks work.  
SYLVIA.

HADDIE

Yeah, then my smoking won't bother you.

SYLVIA

No, that's not what I— it's healthier if you quit. For you, I mean.

HADDIE

For you, too.

SYLVIA

I...I know it's hard. That's all. ...I used to smoke, it was hard to quit, but don't give up. They have support groups. People you can call. I could find them for you on the World Wide Web.

HADDIE

I can find them myself. Did you use a support group?

SYLVIA

No, I... it's a silly technique.

HADDIE

Hypnosis? Forget it. The patch? is useless, except for how your heart races when you cheat, which feels very good.

SYLVIA

You mustn't cheat with the patch--you can die!

HADDIE

They don't know. They're guessing about half the stuff they say.

SYLVIA

They're not guessing about the patch. They're right about that.

HADDIE'

Like they were right about eggs? First it's no eggs, and then eggs are okay, but no red meat. Like I'm going to give up steaks and hamburgers. I never did stop eating eggs, and now I'm glad. Next thing you know chocolate's going to be good for you. "Sorbitol" will cure cancer.

SYLVIA

Sorbitol is not food. It's a chemical.

HADDIE

So's aspirin, and I'm supposed to take half a one every day. How is anybody supposed to make any sense out of what they tell you?

SYLVIA

Talk to your doctor.

HADDIE

Yeah, who's that? I never see the same one twice. The last time I went and it was three years ago because of bronchitis and they made me go at my work, he wanted to do all these tests and procedures and pokes. He wants to stick a movie camera up inside me. You and what army? He wants to know if I drink. I'm not there for drinking, I'm not there to talk about drinking, why does he need to know if I'm drinking? Do I look like I'm drinking, is my hand shaking, are my eyes bloodshot? "One to two drinks a day is good for your heart. However, if there is a tendency to breast cancer in the family, any amount of drinking any time can exacerbate it." So drinking is good except when it's bad. Soon as he knows something about me, he types it into the system where any kid with a computer and a telephone can get at it. I'm not going back for tests. They can keep their tests.

(Pause)

SYLVIA

Exacerbate.

HADDIE

What?

SYLVIA

You said something else. It's exacerbate--I'm sorry. It's a writer thing.

HADDIE

I'll write it down. Put it on a postit by my desk so I don't forget. That's how I remember words. The postits.

SYLVIA

That's a...good system. I really should-

HADDIE

How did you quit if you didn't use the patch?

SYLVIA

Oh...really, it was silly.

HADDIE

Who cares if it works?

SYLVIA

Kissing! They said kissing was the one sure-fire technique. Kissing--and, of course, I was a lot younger.

HADDIE

I don't think I can do that.

SYLVIA

I'm sorry- I really have to-

HADDIE  
They make you go outside.

SYLVIA  
...To smoke?

HADDIE  
Twenty feet away from the building. It's the only time some of those people talk. Otherwise they hate each other. Except when they're smoking. Then they hate everybody else. It's hostile. I work in a hostile environment. On account of job evaluations.

SYLVIA  
I really should get going-

HADDIE  
I have it figured out what's going to happen. If my unit partner gets a promotion over me, it's on account of affirmative action.

(Pause. Haddie has finally captured Sylvia's attention.)

SYLVIA  
...Your unit partner? Your black unit partner?

HADDIE  
Yeah.

SYLVIA  
Affirmative action is for women, too—.

HADDIE  
And if he doesn't get a promotion over me, he's going to say it's racist. No matter what happens my work place is staying hostile.

SYLVIA  
...He calls you racist?

HADDIE  
Yeah. People sling that around the way they used to say "communist." Now you're a racist, you can lose your job, lose your promotion. That's what I think.

SYLVIA.  
...Do other people at the office think that way?

HADDIE  
Yeah, I'm not the only one. A lot of people think that.

SYLVIA  
Um...(pause) ...What was your name again?

HADDIE  
I didn't say my name. My name is Haddie.

SYLVIA  
Do you want to get together for coffee?

(Brief pause)

HADDIE  
(Exaltation) What? You mean, like, get together? Have coffee?

SYLVIA  
Yes.

HADDIE  
Like to talk and all?

SYLVIA  
Uh huh.

HADDIE  
Get to know each other?

SYLVIA  
Sure, why not?

HADDIE  
They have coffee right here in the deli section-- Let's go--

SYLVIA  
Tomorrow. Same time, same place.

HADDIE  
Same time, same station. We'll have a nighttime coffee together.

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(Scene 2. Haddie at work confronts an anonymous note.)

HADDIE  
(growls)

ALVIN  
I'm going to get a coffee. Can I get you one?

HADDIE  
(growls)

ALVIN

Was that a “yes?”

HADDIE

No, it was not a yes.

ALVIN

You want a drink of water or something?

HADDIE

Am I looking thirsty--? Do I want coffee? Do I want water?

ALVIN

You look like you’re in shock. They give glasses of water for that.

HADDIE

Are you a doctor?

ALVIN

I watch St Elsewhere. Glasses of water for shock.

(Haddie reveals a small pile of discarded postits.)

HADDIE

This was in the middle of my desk.

ALVIN

Oh, yeah. That would give anybody a shock. You’ll get a fine for sure.

HADDIE

A fine for what?

ALVIN

Littering.

HADDIE

Is this something new?

ALVIN

No...um...no. I was kidding.

HADDIE

I never have strays on my desk. I would never get a fine.

ALVIN

Right. What are they?

HADDIE

Garbage, they’re garbage.

ALVIN

Maybe they blew there in the wind.

HADDIE

I'm in a cubicle.

ALVIN

Some sneaky draft wafting under the cubicle wall.

HADDIE

The windows don't open.

ALVIN

Okay, you win, it wasn't the wind. Maybe it was an accident. Somebody was dumping the trash and some of it spilled onto your desk.

HADDIE

There's a note.

ALVIN

Oh yeah. It's not an accident when there's a note. What's it say?

(She tosses it to him.)

ALVIN

"Do not put gummed paper in the recycle bin. Gummed material does not recycle."

HADDIE

What? Am I a goat or something? Sucking on paper?

ALVIN

...It's the glued edge. It's gummed. It's called gummed. What's on the postits?

HADDIE

Are you accusing me?

ALVIN

No. (A forced smile.) I'm not accusing you. I thought we could find out whose they are by what they say. That's all.

HADDIE

What if they are mine? And they aren't mine, but what if they are? You still shouldn't put them on my desk with a note.

ALVIN

I didn't.

HADDIE

I didn't mean you. I meant you somebody. Somebody shouldn't. I don't even use the recycle, I just throw my old paper away.

ALVIN

You're not supposed to-

HADDIE

I know I'm not supposed to. I know about recycle. But it's ridiculous.

ALVIN

The landfill-

HADDIE

No! It's a hoax. They don't send it some place. They want us to separate it out so it's easier for them to throw it in the fire. They're not making toilet paper out of it. The city is burning it for fuel at the power plant.

ALVIN

The city doesn't burn it.

HADDIE

I was told they burn it...I read it. It's part of the electrical ...electricity. They throw it in the electricity to make the power. I have my sources. I'm going on break.

(She gets her coat and cigarettes.)

ALVIN

I think I still have the memo about the recycle--.

HADDIE

I don't read memos.

ALVIN

I see.

HADDIE

You don't see, what do you see? I don't need a memo. I take notes at the meetings- Memos are for the people who don't pay attention at the meetings. I pay attention. I don't slough off.

ALVIN

You may be the only person in the room paying attention, Haddie.

(Pause. She is stopped in her tracks; stares at him.)

ALVIN

..What?

HADDIE

You said my name.

...I'm sorry...what?

ALVIN

Nobody ever says my name.

HADDIE

...How do they get your attention?

ALVIN

HADDIE  
They don't have to get my attention. I pay attention. At home the only time they ever said my name was when I was in trouble. Harriett, is this your mess? Harriett, did you eat the rest of the cake? Harriett, did you get in past curfew? Harriett was a big fat cake-stealing mess-making late person. I changed my name so the new one didn't have nasty associations. They shoulda said it nice. I like to hear it nice. (Brief pause) You should pay attention at the meetings.

...I'll try.

ALVIN

So you know what's going on.

HADDIE

I read the memos. Then I recycle them.

ALVIN

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