



*"You fell asleep with a lit cigarette. It happens,
and this time it happens to us."*

SMOKE

It's simple, really. All he needs to do is have a smoke.

"Let's review it one more time," his brother Jerry says.

They're in the living room of Jerry's house, "the great room" Jerry calls it. It's twice the size of Kevin's studio apartment.

"It goes like this. We'll leave *The Wall Street Journal* on the floor by the couch. It'll take a few seconds to ignite but once it does it'll go quickly. That's all you need to do. Get the fire started and get out of the way. Don't forget to light the incense, too. If they ask, tell them you lit it so we wouldn't smell any smoke when we got home. It's important that you tell them that—you weren't supposed to smoke in the house."

Kevin imagines the smoldering newsprint, the scent of burning pulp.

"Tell them you looked for the fire extinguisher but you didn't know where it was."

"It's in the kitchen under the sink."

"Like I said, you didn't know where it was. Same with your cell phone; leave it by the pool table in the basement. Make sure you get Mozart out safely . . ." Mozart was a three-year old Husky. "By the time the fire trucks arrive, well, too bad about the house but at least no one was hurt." Jerry smiles, and sips from the bottle of Sam Adams he's been nursing all afternoon. "Hey, that's why I pay the insurance bill every month, right?"

Kevin nods, still unsure if he'll go through with it. He'd love to walk away but doesn't see many options. If the engine on the Honda hadn't gone, if painting jobs hadn't all but disappeared, if his credit cards hadn't maxed out, if the rent wasn't three months late; he could

keep going, follow the long miserable trail back to its genesis, the moment of original fuck-up. If he hadn't been busted for possession and lost his financial aid, he might have stayed in school, graduated, landed a decent job and built a life like his brother.

Jerry walks over to the sliding glass door that leads to the patio and the Olympic-sized pool that dominates the yard. Outside his wife Melissa is finishing her laps, cutting through the water in a perfect breast stroke. Jerry doesn't talk about money much, doesn't like to pin a number to how much more he has than his older brother. Kevin appreciates this, but he knows more than Jerry thinks. Five years earlier Jerry had bought the house for \$1.4 million. After the crash it's worth half that, maybe less, but the insured value hasn't changed, and with the cash out option, Jerry will clear a good half million over the mortgage amount. He and Melissa own a townhouse on the local golf course, an investment property that's been vacant for almost a year. They'll stay there for a while and wait for the market to change.

"It's this damn economy," Jerry says. "It all comes down to liquidity."

Jerry runs a real estate agency and a rental management company; he also has a piece of a car dealership and three Kentucky Fried Chicken franchises. There are other investments too, yet Kevin wonders if his brother could actually be struggling. Over the years Jerry has been quick with loans whenever Kevin is short, loans that are rarely paid back. But there's no talk of a loan this time, only an offer of a job at KFC, seven bucks an hour and a paper hat. Though he's had his share of crappy jobs, Kevin can't do it, or won't. Maybe it's the paper hat, but he still has some pride left, and working for his kid brother frying chicken wings for minimum wage would certainly kill the last of it.

"This is too good an opportunity to pass up," Jerry says, staring into the yard as his wife climbs out of the pool. "Things will improve. They always do. But this is a smart move. Only a fool doesn't leverage an asset as its highest present value."

Is that what you're doing with me? Kevin thinks. *Leveraging an asset?*

He joins his brother by the door, wondering how Jerry can appear so calm. Kevin knows what prison is like. Ninety days in County Jail for possession only sounds easy if you're not the one serving it. There's still a scar on the back of Kevin's tongue where an inmate had snuffed out a cigarette.

"Are you sure about this?" Kevin asks.

"I've thought it through a thousand different ways," Jerry says. "Hey, I have more to lose than you do."

As if to prove it, Melissa steps away from the pool, waving to them as she towels off and shakes dry her hair.

"It's fool proof because we're not lying," Jerry says. "We'll admit that you burned the house down—by accident. You fucked up. How could they ever prove intent? You fell asleep with a lit cigarette. It happens, and this time it happens to us."

"What about the sprinklers? A house like this—"

"There's a short in the system. I made the call on Friday. The service guy is coming out on Tuesday. Bad timing, right? Look, don't worry, I've thought of every contingency." Jerry slaps him on the back. "Seriously, don't worry, bro."

Kevin hates the expression "bro" and fights an urge to smack Jerry across the face. He wonders what Melissa would think: her master of the universe husband plotting a felony with his dropout housepainter brother.

I had her first, he thinks as he watches her stride across the patio in her swimsuit, her body taut and youthful from all those private Pilates classes and facial wraps and sessions with nutritional counselors. She stretches out in a chaise lounge and leans back into the sun, closing her eyes.

When Kevin first met her she was a sophomore in high school, his younger brother's platonic friend from the Yearbook Committee, easily impressed by the older Kevin, an Art major at the state university. He'd bring out his sketch pad and observe her from the corner

while she and Jerry played video games; he'd give her the drawing and she would beam at how beautiful he had made her. Eventually she started asking him for a ride home, and on one of those rides they'd stopped and parked. After two weeks of parking she wasn't a virgin anymore. Jerry had seethed, but so what? Younger brothers were supposed to lose.

When they'd asked Kevin if he could get them any pot he'd said "yes" automatically as if he really did have a connection, as if he were the type of guy who could get them anything, anytime, like he could give them the world. But the only guy he knew was an undercover cop, and though he laughed about it for a while, thinking no one ever went to jail for a little weed, he stopped laughing when the court date arrived. Certain judges liked to set an example, and it turned out that some people really *did* go to jail for a few ounces. Ninety days in an overcrowded county facility was an eternity for a twenty-year-old white kid from the suburbs. There were murderers and rapists in the county lock-up waiting for space to open up at the state prison, men who had done hard time, knew how to make time hard for others. After eighty-two days they let Kevin out. By then Melissa and Jerry had grown into a couple, giggling and humping in the basement while Kevin smoked alone in his room, the cigarettes a habit he'd picked up in jail. For hours he'd stare at the Marlboro's smoldering red tip, trying to push from his mind what had happened in the dark of his cell. Sometimes he thinks if he could just go back and keep walking instead of approaching that damn cop, his whole life would be different.

"Remember to grab something on your way out," Jerry says. "It doesn't matter what, but it'll seem more legit if it looks like you tried to save something. Are you remembering this?"

"We've gone over it twenty times."

Kevin looks around the room, entranced by so many objects, vases, paintings, floor lamps, porcelain bowls, a Persian rug stretched across the hardwood floor. He's seen them hundreds of times, but as he imagines them aflame, it seems so overwhelming, like torching a

museum.

"Hey, do we need to go over this again? You're not going to fuck this up, are you?" Jerry asks. He finishes his beer and sets it on the table. "You need to pay attention. It's always the little things that do you in."

When they were kids Kevin had forgotten to lock the back fence one day and their German Shepherd Roscoe had dashed into the road. They lived on a busy street; Kevin had watched from the front lawn, frozen, while the dog had chased a leaf across the double yellow line. When a black Ford pick-up rumbled down the asphalt, Kevin had turned his head. Had he chased after him Roscoe might have come back. As punishment his mother had made him wash Roscoe's blood from the side of their mailbox.

"When the fire department arrives, play it up good," Jerry says. "Tell them it's your fault, you fucked up and your brother is going to kill you. Give them a real mea culpa."

"I'll grab a knife and commit hara-kiri."

"That's the spirit," Jerry says. "Hey, you should be smiling. My insurance company is top notch. A week from now you'll have ten grand in your pocket."

"And you'll have half a million."

"To each his own," Jerry says.

On the patio Melissa turns on her side, hands folded beneath her head like a pillow. Kevin daydreams about curling next to her, slipping his hands inside the damp fabric of her swimsuit. He thinks about setting the fire, watching it all burn down.

"So we're good, right bro?" Jerry asks. "Tonight's the night. No turning back."

"I'll stop at the Quick-Check and pick up the cigarettes," Kevin says.

"What do you mean? You're out of smokes?"

"I quit six months ago. I guess you didn't notice. I haven't smoked since Christmas."

“Hey, good for you, man.” Jerry reaches for his wallet and pulls out a ten. “This pack’s on me. Make sure you smoke at least half of them before you do it. It’ll look better for the cops.” Jerry laughs. “Let’s hope you don’t get hooked.”

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His car hasn’t worked for almost a month, so he bikes the eight miles back toward his apartment, not even asking if he could borrow one of Jerry’s cars, the BMW or the Lexus or the Porsche that never leaves the garage. A few years back he’d borrowed Jerry’s Jaguar, his brother’s first really high-end car, and had doubled-parked on a busy street while he’d run in for cigarettes. Kevin was at the check-out line when he heard the ice cream truck smash into the back of the Jaguar. The insurance company had paid out, but Jerry had loved that car, had never really forgiven him.

At least the biking keeps his legs strong, and on the rare occasion when he’s called for a painting job, his boss Cliff picks him up in the van. Kevin loves the bike, craves the velocity and motion, the synchronicity of body, pedal, and wheel. He leans into the wind, propelling himself through curves and straight-aways, ignoring the cars as they zip past him. He imagines biking across the country, across the world. Screw the Honda and the back rent; with a backpack and a bike, ten grand could last for years. All he really wants is to be somewhere else.

To reach the Quick-Check he needs to cross three lanes of surging traffic. Horns blare, fingers flip, but he makes it across, swerving left at the last second to avoid smacking into an Escalade. In the parking lot he chains the bike to an old abandoned pay phone and enters the Quick-Check, grabbing a bottle of water and a Power Bar before getting in line. The guy in front of him, mid-forties, dressed in sweats and an Allman Brothers Band t-shirt, drops twenty bucks on lottery tickets, the scratch-off kind. A sucker born every minute, Kevin thinks, but when it’s his turn he buys a ticket too. He imagines winning ten

grand, riding back to Jerry's place and telling him to stick it; he's not a fucking felon, not a fucking torch.

"A pack of Marlboros," he tells the woman behind the counter. He's pretty sure her name is Nira. She's plump, dark-skinned, wrapped in a sari with a red dot on her forehead. Kevin likes Nira; she smiles at him on days when no one else does. He once went home and looked up the red dot on Wikipedia; it has a name and a purpose but it slips his mind.

"Oh, but I thought you quit," Nira says. "You've haven't bought the cigarettes for a way long time. We sell them to you, sure, everyone has their choice, but if you quit, why go back?"

Kevin can't believe she remembers this, that someone actually noticed that he'd quit.

"They're for a friend," he says.

"You're friend should quit, too."

"He's trying."

"Maybe you give him half the pack and throw away the rest. Show him how you quit. Be a good example."

Kevin smiles, but grabs the Marlboros along with his change and shoves them into his pocket. As the customer behind him steps up to the counter, Kevin rubs the scratch-off ticket with his thumb, the dark shavings pooling beneath his nail. A winner — two bucks.

"Your lucky day," Nira says. "I give you two bucks or another ticket. Maybe next one you win big."

He thanks her and picks another ticket, tries again, his thumb turning black from the shavings. He scans the prizes, looking for matches, but it's a loser, and he flicks it into the trash, the pack of Marlboros coiled in his pocket as he fights an urge he hasn't felt in months, the urge to slide out a cigarette and light up right there at the counter, the urge to fill his lungs with a long sweet trail of smoke.

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Back at his apartment there's a note threatening eviction taped to his front door. He leaves it hanging, goes inside, and finds a message from his mother blinking on the machine.

On the eighty-second day of his sentence, when they finally released him, his father came alone to pick him up from the jail. It took four days before his mother even acknowledged he was back. Had his father lived things might have been different, but within six months his dad was dead, a massive coronary that his mother blamed on the stress of Kevin's incarceration. Never mind that his Dad was overweight and a chain smoker, his diet loaded with sugars and grease.

His mother's message is brief, the usual complaints about her varicose veins. He hits "delete" and tries not to think about her.

He kills time, takes a shower, watches TV, still not sure if he'll go through with it. In his head he tallies how much he owes, realizes that ten grand will only make a dent, buy him some time. It would get the landlord off his back, but what about the next month's rent, and the month after that? If he could find a job, sure, things might work out, but he's been saying that for almost two years, and the jobs that do come are sporadic, the hourly wage lower each time. Cliff had once paid him twenty-five an hour, but the last few jobs had paid fifteen, and after the most recent one Cliff had mentioned another contractor who had started hiring Mexicans for less than ten.

I should have asked Jerry for at least half the money, he thinks. A quarter of a million bucks would give him a chance to start over, do something useful with his life. But Jerry had offered ten grand and he'd said yes, hadn't even considered asking for more.

As he counts down the hours he keeps hoping for a sign, for the universe to slap him upside the head and tell him what to do. He doesn't believe in God much but wouldn't mind some divine intervention. After Jerry had first mentioned the plan, Kevin had biked to the nearest church, St. Thomas the Apostle, and waited on the sidewalk hoping he might feel something. But all he felt was hunger so he rode over to Taco Bell, trading God for a chimichanga, and it was

in that booth that he first decided to do it, he would burn down his brother's house. He was not a bad man, not a criminal; but if you're eating alone in a Taco Bell, shoveling refried beans into your mouth and sucking on the free ice cubes because you don't have enough cash in your pocket to buy a drink, what the hell did you have to lose? No one would get hurt. That was the important thing. Who cared if an insurance company, a giant corporation, had to pay out a little cash?

It's not like I'm hurting anyone, he thinks.

He pulls out a cigarette, remembers that sense of relief that always comes with the morning's first smoke. The sweet scent of menthol lingers as he sniffs at the tip. What could it hurt to light one up? But he's proud of having quit, doesn't want to fall back like everyone expects, and he jams the cigarette back into the pack and swears that he's done with them.

He's not due at Jerry's until five, but the apartment feels hot and cramped, the air conditioner wheezing as it coughs out air almost as hot as the air outside. Kevin grabs his helmet and his keys, hustles down the three flights and pops out the door, where his bike is chained to an old rose bush that hasn't bloomed once in the four years that Kevin's lived there. He tries to focus on the future, the possibilities that might open once he has a little cash, but as he mounts the bike his stomach boils and his head begins to pound.

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He circles the neighborhood, hoping something might distract him, send him back to his apartment, kill the whole sorry idea. He even takes a few turns with his eyes closed, thinking a crash might scuffle the plan, but traffic is light, the roads clear, and as he reaches Jerry's block he coasts into the driveway, jumping off the bike and leaning it against a green shrub shaped like a double helix, an unmoored strand of DNA sprouting from the lawn. The landscape features all kinds of funky topiary; Kevin remembers feeling sick when he heard how

much it had cost, but it got his brother and sister-in-law on the cover of New Jersey Monthly, Jerry and Melissa posed seductively beside a pink hydrangea bush resembling a human eye.

Kevin lingers in the driveway, checks his cell phone and finds a text from Cliff.

Got a job. Tues-Thurs. 400 bucks. You in?

An honest day's work, he thinks. He could cycle back home and wait for Tuesday, maybe it's a sign that the jobs are coming back. Yet four hundred bucks won't even pay a month's back rent. Kevin looks up at his brother's house, towering and majestic. He sees himself at the KFC dunking chicken breasts in grease, the paper hat clipped to his hair.

An honest day's work.

He rings the bell and Melissa answers in a light yellow sundress, the thin straps hanging loosely at the edge of her sleek shoulders.

"Kevin, you're early but come on in," she says. "We really appreciate this. It would just kill us to bring Mozart to a kennel, even for one night."

"No problem," he mutters, stepping into the perfected cool of the foyer. The scent of her perfume wraps him in its pleasures and he leans toward her for a familial peck, wondering, as he always does, if they'd still be together had that damn guy not been an undercover cop.

"You look nice," he tells her. She has to squeeze by him to shut the front door, her bare upper arm brushing his bicep. The pearls around her neck could pay his rent for a year.

"We'll be out of your way in a few minutes," Melissa says. "Make yourself comfortable. There's plenty in the fridge."

Mozart rumbles into the hall and sniffs Kevin's shoes, wagging his tail as he looks up with bright blue eyes. When things were better Kevin had volunteered at an animal shelter, walking dogs and cleaning out kennels every other Saturday afternoon. At first the dog runs had freaked him out, they were too much like jail cells, and on his

second visit he accidentally locked himself in one of the runs. He was trapped for a good twenty minutes before another volunteer finally found him pushing against the chain-link door, his face dotted with sweat. Yet with time he came to love the shelter, loved the moment he could unlock the door and guide a dog's head into the slip leash, lead him out into the sun and the fresh air.

Melissa heads upstairs to finish getting ready and Mozart follows, swinging his tail as he trots down the hall. Kevin wanders into the living room, sees *The Wall Street Journal* on the floor, the porcelain incense bowl set up on the table by the lamp. *The crime scene*, he thinks, and the term freaks him out, confronts him with its honesty. He tries to focus on the ten grand and the eviction notice tacked on his apartment door. He's sick of being broke and humiliated.

I already paid my dues, he thinks. *Eighty-two days' worth.*

All he needs to do is light a match and he'll be back on his feet; if it's a crime so be it — they aren't hurting anyone. But the argument feels hollow, like all that BS he'd heard during his time in County, every damn inmate an innocent man. He doesn't want to be that person.

Text Cliff back, he thinks. *Take the job. Don't do this.*

Jerry enters the room, dressed in jeans and a sports coat, ready for his night on the town. "Almost show time," he says, checking the tickets in his jacket pocket. "Is everything good?"

"I don't know," Kevin says. "I'm not sure I can do this."

Jerry checks the stairs, making sure Melissa is out of range. "I don't want to hear that. Goddamn it, don't you fuck this up."

"It's a *crime*, Jerry. We could —"

"We won't. I told you —"

"I know, you're too fucking smart to get caught. So what? It's still wrong."

"The whole world is wrong," Jerry says. "This won't amount to a single speck on the mountain of wrong we live in. Look, tell me now, Kevin — are you going to do this or not? Whatever you decide is fine but don't come to me when they evict your ass. I'm giving you

a chance to catch up, to do a *job* to earn money. Either you take the job or you don't."

They hear footsteps, Melissa's heels tapping their way down the stairs.

"I should have known you'd fuck me over," Jerry whispers. "Maybe it's too damn complicated for you, a little too much for a man who earns his living pushing a paint brush against a wall, a man who couldn't even buy some pot without fucking it up."

Kevin sees the contempt in Jerry's eyes, not just anger but what his brother really feels, and for a moment Kevin could strike a thousand matches, burn the whole world down and not feel a fucking thing.

Melissa sweeps into the room, a white sweater over her sundress, her purse dangling from her hand. Jerry turns his back on Kevin, as if he isn't even there.

"Ready, sweetie?" Melissa asks.

Jerry slides his arm around her waist, kisses the side of her neck, his lips lingering in the crook beneath her earlobe. *Fuck you*, Kevin thinks. *I had her first*. He reaches into his pocket and grabs the Marlboros. He rips open the pack, pulls out a smoke.

"I thought you quit," Jerry says.

"I did," Kevin says, "but I'm back in."

"If you don't mind, can you please smoke outside?" Melissa asks. "It's just too difficult to get that scent out of the house."

"So true," Kevin says, glaring at his brother. "But don't worry, I won't leave any evidence."

He breaks the cigarette in two, crushing the halves between his thumb and forefinger, grinding the tobacco to dust.

#

Even as he strikes the match he wonders if there's still time to back out.

He's done everything as planned: lit the incense and moved the bowl closer to the drapes, taken the photograph of his parents off the

foyer wall and placed it face down on a deck chair on the patio. The last step: *The Wall Street Journal*, inches from the couch. Kevin imagines the flames spreading like dominoes falling — the paper, the couch, the incense, the drapes, the sheetrock, the wires and beams. He expects it to be beautiful, hypnotic. He'll wait nine minutes, watching the burn, and then walk to a neighbor's house to call for help.

"Don't fuck it up," Jerry had told him. "If you call before nine minutes, they could get here in time to save the house. That would be bad. We need a total loss for the cash-out option. Understand? Nine minutes!"

Kevin crouches near the floor, holding the match, staring at the tiny blue-orange flame. *I am not a bad man*, he thinks. If nothing else, he'll prove his competency to Jerry and maybe to himself and walk away with ten thousand bucks. Moral absolutes are the privilege of the comfortable. He says this aloud as he strikes the match, his voice ringing beneath the room's vaulted ceiling.

He brings the match to the edge of the paper but the movement extinguishes the flame. Since he quit smoking he's lost the knack. The next two matches snap and wilt; he tosses them aside, hands shaking, his fingers stiff.

I should have brought a lighter, he thinks, but the next match holds its spark and the flame catches the edge of the paper, devouring it, trails of black smoke twisting off the page. The trim of the couch is next, the flames jumping toward the cushions. Kevin knocks over the incense and the fire leaps and forms a web, a network of jagged flames and dancing orange heat. When the drapes ignite, the fabric curling like a seared onion skin, Kevin steps back, shielding his face with his hands, and when the drywall finally crackles and spits, he slides open the glass door and walks onto the patio, stepping backward toward the pool, his eyes transfixed by the blaze.

Already he is thinking of how he might shake Jerry down, squeeze another ten or twenty grand for his services, a bonus for a job well done. With thirty grand, or better yet, fifty, he could drive down to

Mexico, live on the beach, screw the landlord and the back rent, he would start over completely. He knows a little Spanish from working with so many immigrants over the years. He checks his watch—another three minutes and he'll run to the neighbor's house, shout for help and bang on the door like a madman. Through the second floor window he sees the flames swirling in the master bedroom, smoke billowing through the screen, and he crosses to the other side of the pool to escape the growing heat, his eyes gazing at the flame. The fire is everything he expected, hypnotic, beautiful, and pure.

A dozen fire trucks wouldn't be enough now, he thinks. Jerry was wrong. I didn't fuck it up.

He's almost ready to run next door when he hears Mozart barking, sees the dog pushing against the upstairs window.

The heat cuts into his skin. Kevin closes his eyes, feels his body weaken, as if his bones and muscles have started to melt. Smoke twists across the patio, hovers over the pool. He remembers the bite of handcuffs snapping shut against his wrists and begins to slip back and forth, his thoughts unmoored. Suddenly he's watching Jerry as he pulls Melissa away from him. He's scraping Roscoe's blood from the white metal mailbox, his mother peering at him through a slit in her bedroom blinds.

He's back in his jail cell, surrounded by faces, cowering on his knees in the dark. He sees himself growing older, gray hair tucked beneath a paper hat as he scoops another order of chicken wings up from the grease.

It surprises him when he doesn't hesitate, when suddenly he is running, dashing across the patio into the house, the acrid stench of burning synthetics digging into his eyes. *I'm not a felon*, he thinks as he cuts through the smoke, *I'm not a fucking torch*, and as he charges up the stairs toward the barking dog he feels the pack of Marlboros jammed inside his back pocket, still untouched but already starting to burn. ■