

Snow White

Written by Smoke Signals

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by Freida Theant

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Iliana adjusts her crisply-laundered lab coat, gleaming in the always-summer fluorescence of the ceiling lights, as she re-seats herself upon the tall stool before the laminar flow Biohazard hood. Her hairnet, face mask, blouse, hosiery, and walking shoes are similarly a vision of shimmering whiteness, although not quite as bright as the lab coat, which fluoresces from the embedded whiteners. Iliana's short-length hair nestles beneath the porous tea-bag paper of her head coverlet, and her hair coordinates in platinum. Only her skirt contrasts with that arctic look, but Iliana's lab coat leaves but a narrow strip of her tweedy grey visible.

She sees her hands and forearms in outline beneath the plastic long-gloves now where bacterial cultures await her highly skilled manipulations. But the petri dishes and glass culture flasks before her aren't what dominate her mind.

She's focusing on her nico-cravings, "I haven't smoked since parking my LeSabre at six this morning. It's been eight hours; how am I supposta get through another ten?"

"I could be lighting up one of my Parliaments inside this hazardous vapors protective hood and no one would have a clue," she fantasizes, remembering that only other person in the building is the security guard, and he pokes his head in hourly during rounds.

But the sign posted on her laboratory door announces what every employee already knows by heart: "Within the laboratory spaces, due to the dangerous and infectious hazards of the materials handled here, there shall be no ingestion of food nor beverages by anyone. There shall be no smoking or transfer of any object within the mouth."

Here at 'The Institute for Transmissible Diseases', our caffeine/nicotine-withdrawal victim is Dr. Iliana Snauwitt, the head of the Genetics of Infectious Diseases department. In-house, they have renamed her 'Snow White.'

But rarely to her face, of course.

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So it follows that the scientists and technicians under her supervision are collectively called 'the seven dwarves.'

At six this morning Iliana launched a procedure that requires a scientist present for every minute of the whole 18 hour 'genome transfer'. There are 90 minute sampling intervals, each of which she packages and freezes for analysis. The crucial nature of this test run convinced her to do it herself alone over the weekend so as to have all samples ready for analysis by Monday morning. She prepped a bacterial culture with genes for antibiotic resistance at the zero hour and combined them with a culture that lacks those genes, knowing that, over time, the donor-cells will mate to transfer the extra chromosomes to the recipients.

This bio-makeover fits them with a new resistance to methicillin.

Last year, the Institute invented Di-Ethyl Tannicin, an antibiotic that promises to delay or prevent such transfers. Based on today's trial test, a successful outcome should lead to a drug offering doctors a powerful new weapon in the arsenal against fatal antibiotic-resistant diseases like MRSA.

So if 'Snow White' gets this preliminary Di-Ethyl Tannicin test to prevent the genome transfer, the sales of this drug would eventually gain the 'Institute' royalties worth millions of dollars over its commercial lifetime, assuring research funding for decades, maybe longer! There could even be a Nobel nomination for the scientist(s) in charge. But right now, Iliana in her eighth hour in the lab feels ragged-out. She overestimated her endurance and prodded by her feenings for a steaming cup of coffee and her Parliaments, thinks of capitulating. With ten grueling hours still ahead, she despairs and calls one of the dwarves for back-up.

"Liz? It's me. I'm her in the Institute.... Listen, I know its short notice, but I really, really need a favor." She licks her lips before continuing, "I need relief backup in this genome transfer protocol even if it's for just for a few hours. Would you be an absolute dear and get over here and sit in for me?"

She glances at the wall clock while taking in Liz's reply, "You can be here in an hour? Is that the

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best you can do? You're at your son's soccer match?...Yeah, Okay, I guess that's better than nothing.... I'll just hafta wait."

She swallows hard before continuing, "Look, I haven't had coffee, or even a cigarette this whole time, so if you can get here sooner, I will sooo owe you," and hangs up. How to outlast the cravings until Liz gets here? An idea hits her so bizarre it just might work.

"I'll smoke a fantasy cigarette in my mind, with an imaginary fresh-brewed coffee to see if this vision relieves my tension." The concept of the fantasy alone makes her salivate; she thinks she's feeling and smelling the raw burn of the smoke pulsing through her nostrils.

Iliana's imaginary vision continues; her mind's eye brings up a bench in the city park where she sits many times. She sees herself opening her handbag as her fingers blindly fumble for the Parliament box and silvery-chrome Colibri Sceptor lighter that form the two essentials for her sublime moment. Her imagination flips open the cardboard hardpack and she inspects the array of recessed filters that invite her to select one.

Gracefully slipping one cigarette away from its packed companions, Iliana sees herself as the dream figure parting her glossed lips and with the tip of her tongue simultaneously moistening both their surfaces. Then she slides the filter firmly between them while rotating the filter a half turn to the left. This movement stains the filter a pale shade of Plum Luster by Maybelline.

In her daydream, she commands her lips to incline the naked Parliament steeply downward, freeing her left hand to cup around the cigarette's edge, and the right hand to click the Colibri's ignition. The usually calm head of the Genetics of Infectious Diseases is nearly trembling with anticipation as she paints the face of her cigarette with brush-like strokes of the yellow-blue flame.

Instantly the ignition burns in; magically a plumed jet of white squirts from where her newly-quickened parliament is sandwiched within her smile. Iliana's desperation pulls her cheeks especially hard, drawing a full and lengthy mass of smoke to be plunged into her impatient lungs. But before she sends the opaque package down, she opens her mouth in a full oval to let the belly of this compact cloud bulge out momentarily. Just as the plastic puff of smoke looks starts escaping, she snaps the cloud back inside her with a diaphragm-centered

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tug which fills her bronchia with the frosted flowing balm she's so anxiously inhaled.

In this vision, Iliana holds the initial dose from her fresh Parliament inside her chest for five, six, seven delicious moments before routing the spent vapors back out her nostrils in a slow exhale sidling out of her. She wants the full passage of her smoke to absorb on all of her surfaces so as to get the maximum impact of this experience. This nostril exhale streams out modestly in twin ribbons, so thin the opacity appears blue in this dream sequence.

In her dream sequence, she returns the fully-engaged cigarette to her lips, dangling it slightly downward while she picks up the sealed coffee container. When she draws in on the recessed filter on this next hit, her lips raise her cigarette like an erection, accompanied by the yellowish brilliance of the cherry, briefly fanned to a new intensity. The Parliament almost crackles as the ring of fire gnaws its way toward the mouthpiece, incinerating the next few millimeters in this hungry pull of hers.

Peeling the coffee lid back and in the same breath laden with her cigarette fumes, Iliana cools the steaming coffee by blowing across the surface. Magically smoke mixes with the steam of the coffee and a fog develops many times denser than either mist alone. Her white garments, hairnet and pale complexion, now partially embraced by a cloud more-brilliant-even-than-white cascading lazily from her pursed lips creates an icon of rolling, soft edged cloudiness in gentle motion. If angels smoke, it would look something like this.

Returning to her dangling Parliament, our dream smoker draws long on the recessed filter once more, this time short-channeling the smoke up through her sinuses and back out to flood her lap with the continuous cascade of her nostril exhale, now tumbling down and over her breasts and blanketing, nearly obscuring, the coffee. Playfully Iliana caps the mixing area of smoke and steam placing her hand just above the coffee rim. Fascinated she watches the vapors rise by slipping ribbon-like between the spaces of her extended fingers on their heavenward drift.

The ringtone of her cell yanks our dreamer back to the here-and-now. She answers the call, "Liz, where are you?" Liz's answer forces a grimace as Iliana replies, "Well how bad is the traffic jam? How much longer are you going to take?"

"Forty-five minutes? Okay, there's not much you can do, so I'll just soldier on. " She gropes for a

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straw of hope to diminish her growing panic.

As she closes the call, unexpectedly the security guard pops open the laboratory door.

“Everything alright in here, Dr. Snauwitt?” he says, detecting some gnawing urgency but unable to make out what might be wrong.

“Yes, thanks, I was on the phone with Liz. She’s on her way here except she’s held up in traffic. Just letting you know.”

He smiles politely, “Thanks for the heads up. I’ll wait for her at the reception desk and check back with you in an hour.” He disappears as silently as he arrived.

Iliana knows re-imaging her fantasy role-play is no longer effective. Her recent anger at learning that her rescue is delayed, and the temptation fostered by her fantasy smoking scenario created a overpowering dynamic within her. Nearing madness, she snatches up an old glass petri dish that resembles an ashtray, and seizes her Parliaments and Colibri lighter. Positioning herself before the hazardous fumes hood, she thrusts open the glass window and inserts her upper body, turning on the suction fan to full evacuation capacity. Then with the window lowered halfway down behind her back, she is certain no smell of any kind could escape this chamber.

To get caught lighting up inside the lab for a person of her stature could easily mean dismissal. But the frenzy of this moment overrides anything else.

For the next twelve minutes, Iliana ravages her lungs, throat, sinuses and nostrils in an almost non-stop river of real, not imagined smoke. The experience reminds her of smoking in the LeSabre while driving with the windows down. The smoke accumulates in the confined spaces until the wind shear whisks it away, making for a self-cleaning environment.

She pulls lusty double draws, smoke exiting and entering all at once, spouting exhaled nasal smoke while simultaneously sucking flavor in from the parliament’s staining filter. The cherry was equally fierce, burning its way toward her lips at a savage pace, in the jagged pattern of an overheating ‘hotbox’. She held her gulps of smoke in for as long as she could, wresting every last wisp of nicotinic salve until the tobacco had been consumed. Crushing out the butt, she

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knew that she would never dare breach this rule again. Raising the window of the hazardous materials hood, she cleans up any signs of her forbidden episode, and spends time in the women's restroom washing and de-scenting herself. Returning to the lab, Iliana is already deep into the next round of sampling when Liz pops through the door.

"Hi babe. Sorry I'm late."

"Yeah, but everything's okay now," the section head responded cheerfully. "Now I can get something to eat and get out of this place for an hour."

"You sound a whole lot better than you did when I talked to you on the phone," Liz observed. "I thought you were going to morph into a dragon or something."

"No, Snow White doesn't do dragon," she quipped lightly. "That's the evil queen."