

Smoke Signals

SIOBHAN H.

TEEN SHORT STORY WRITING CONTEST: OVERALL WINNER

I used to love the smell of gunpowder.

Something about that fiery, metallic scent shook me to my core. I loved the way tendrils of wispy smoke oozed from the barrel. Loved that cool, black metal and the weight of the gun in my hands. I had taken many shots in my career – some had missed, but most landed right where I wanted them to. Each shot filled my veins with coursing adrenaline and the rest of the world faded away with the pull of a trigger. It was a sign of new beginnings and timely ends. In the alleyways and underground bars of New York, it was my world.

Until October 3rd, 1954, the day I could no longer stand that exquisite smell.

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She quivered in front of me, feet frozen in place.

I mustered all of my strength to keep from shaking, and I knew it wasn't the gun who was afraid of killing her. That smooth, black firearm had seen a million men cripple at her feet. One little girl was nothing of significance.

Anna-Louise Titlington stood in her night gown before me. The white lacey dress had faint forest creatures delicately embroidered around the hem. Her curious eyes travelled from my five o'clock shadow to the revolver in my hand. Suddenly her rosy complexion drained from her cheeks. She was like a rabbit that had come face-to-face with a blood-thirsty fox.

I looked upon her pale face, the face of a girl no older than fourteen – the same age as my niece Caroline.

The chandelier above twinkled in pale moonlight. It was so quiet that you could hear a pin drop. The only two people awake at this hour were Anna-Louise and me. I knew her father, Sir Benjamin Titlington, was away on business in Britain and her mother was at a gala in Boston.

I wondered if her being here was a coincidence or a cruel trick done by none other than my partner in crime: Jimmy Salerno.

Prepping for our heist that night, the air was extra thick. All day, smoke from the factory had been pumping out clouds of black, choking the city. Our footsteps echoed down cobblestone alleys as we scurried like rats behind dumpsters and cars. In our line of work, it was best not to be seen or heard. How successful you were depended on light-fingers and smooth-talking.

On October 3rd, Jimmy finally seemed to think I was ready for a solo mission. It was my chance to impress him and prove that I wasn't just some underling sidekick.

"Alright, buddy." He said to me outside the Titlington's mansion. "There's something I've got to take care of, you good to swipe the jewels on your own tonight?"

"Umm... I don't know about this Jimmy." I hesitated.

“C’mon, they’re not even home. It’s a piece of cake!” he exclaimed.

“...Fine. But be quick with your business. We’ll meet back here in 15 minutes.” I answered skeptically.

“Great! Now don’t mess this up. Don’t be sloppy. You hear me?” I nodded in defeat and watch as Jimmy turned a corner and out of sight.

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Now here I was, holding the girl at gunpoint. A door burst open from behind me and Jimmy barged in furiously.

“What the hell Carter! You should have been outside 10 min-” he cut himself off when he spotted Anna-Louise.

He contemplated for a moment, a puzzled expression on his face. Then that moment ended and the stone set in his eyes once more.

“Kill her.” He stated coldly.

“Jimmy...” I squirmed.

“Do it or I will.” He challenged, his eyes narrowing.

I turned back to Anna-Louise with a pounding in my chest. She hadn’t moved an inch. A single silent tear trickled down her cheek.

I raised my gun, and it felt like lifting the weight of a thousand elephants. I lined up my barrel with the embroidered woodland fox, right over where her heart should be.

As my finger settled on the trigger, my vision went blurry and I found myself in a dark cobblestone alley. Jimmy and Anna-Louise were nowhere to be seen.

I frantically looked around, but to no avail. A brick wall blocked my path in either direction. It was eerie and most of the corners were masked by darkness.

“Hello? Uncle? Is that you?” a curious voice echoed from the shadows. It sounded familiar, somehow.

“...Caroline?” I asked cautiously.

Caroline emerged from the corner with her sweet smile and round blue eyes.

“Uncle, why do you have that gun?” her cheery voice ricocheted across the walls.

Only when she was fully immersed in light, did I notice the dark red hole in her forehead. A thin trickle of blood streamed down her cheek and stained her white dressing gown. It looked just like the one Anna-Louise had been wearing just moments ago.

“Why did you kill her uncle?” she asked, cocking her head to one side. “I didn’t kill anyone sweetheart.” I faltered.

Caroline’s face twisted up in anger.

“LIES! LIES! LIES!” she shrieked. “You killed me!”

I cowered back into a corner and shielded my eyes from the terrible sight. When I glanced back at Caroline, I was shocked to find that it wasn’t her that stood before me, but young Anna-Louise. She whimpered in a pool of blood on the ground.

“Ple-ple-please don’t hurt me.” She sobbed.

I was sure I hadn’t pulled the trigger, *what was this nightmare?*

Before I had time to comprehend this hellish reality, my vision fogged up and there I was once again, standing in the Titlington’s front hall.

“SHOOT HER!” Jimmy ordered from over my shoulder.

Anna-Louise was still standing on the staircase, stuffed rabbit in hand and white gown unstained by blood. I knew what I had to do.

I swiveled from the girl to the door where Jimmy stood. His eyes widened as he raised his hands in the air, dumbfounded.

“No.”

Bang.