1. F. J. Bergmann - Creatures of Habit

“Mind if I smoke?” Without waiting for my nod, he pulls out a pack of Camels.

“Not at all,” I say politely, as he flicks his Bic. “Mind if I cut?”

His brow wrinkles behind the puff of smoke as I rummage through my purse. Reaching under a notebook, a spare t-shirt (*What’s the speed of dark?*), a harmonica, a light-up yo-yo, a tie-dyed handkerchief, the remains of a chocolate bar, and four science-fiction paperbacks, I grab a handful of pen-shaped objects, including my toothbrush, and an Exacto knife, which I place on the barstool-sized table. Ransacking the purse’s contents once more, I pull out a couple of packets of antiseptic wipes.

I think he was going to say “Do you come here often?” and gets as far as “Do you ...”

My city is one of the holdouts where smokers can still light up in bars with impunity. Make that near-impunity. That’s where I come in.

I roll up my left sleeve a few inches, open a wipe and scrub an area on the inside of my forearm, and uncap the Exacto’s blade. His eyes widen as his jaw drops enough for his cigarette to fall, unnoticed. Ignoring him, I carefully begin slicing a diagonal across my skin, trying to avoid the parts that are already crisscrossed with faint white scars.

“What are you *doing*?!” He grabs the edge of the tiny table with both hands and looks ready to bolt. I can smell a faint odor of burning wool, which he is oblivious to, for the moment. It looked like an expensive suit, but dry-cleaning never really gets out the smell of tobacco smoke anyway.

“I’m not hurting anybody but myself,” I say placidly, starting a new incision, while beads of blood slowly well up in the first cut. “If it makes me feel good, it’s not anybody else’s business.”

“But that’s horrible! And you *are* hurting yourself!”

“Actually, if you use a new blade, it’s practically painless. Kind of tickles. And there are no long-term or secondhand effects. Like lung cancer, for instance. Or yellow teeth.”

He had been poised to flee, or at least summon the bartender (good luck), but now his face reddens and he sinks back onto his barstool. “*That* is *nothing* like smoking! It’s disgusting. Besides, you could transmit diseases, or something. Like AIDS.”

“It depends on what you call disgusting. Even upwind, I don’t spatter. So it won’t leave any stains—or lingering odors on your clothes. Look, I’m even wiping up all the drips. I guess I’ll just put the used wipes in this ashtray, here.”

“You need help. I mean, that is *sick*! What you’re doing, it’s like an addiction ... I mean, I feel an obligation to keep you from damaging yourself ... It annoys other people ...” His voice trails off weakly. “It’s just so gross!”

# “Exactly,” I say.

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