

28 Plays Later – Challenge #27

Pick a previous challenge and do it again.

I picked #5 – the provided first line challenge.

UP IN SMOKE

By

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Scene 1:

A tobacco shop. It's dimly lit, feels like a gentlemen's study. Forest green, deep crimson, burnished gold for fabrics, dark wood for furniture and fixtures.

GERTL (V/O)

Saul's tobacco shop. A neighborhood staple. I'd seen my father shop there when I was a kid, and my grandfather before him. I've always had a soft spot for the place. The dark décor. The scent of smoke and figs. The hint of something sinister going down in the corner.

GERTL (classic femme fatale, dressed in a skirt that isn't quite scandalously short) enters with a small dog on a leash, and pauses in the doorway, breathing in the heady scent of pipe tobacco. After a beat she steps all the way into the store.

SAUL, an old man, dressed in dapper clothes, approaches her from behind, and rests his hands on her hips.

SAUL (seductive)

Take of the girdle, Gertl, and tell me everything about Onun's onions, or else little Dicklberg here will get it.

GERTL (flirting, teasing):

Even you wouldn't stoop so low as to kill an innocent creature, Saul. Of course, only one of us is innocent. Dickie's a good dog, but he isn't above taking a dump on your shoe. (beat) You've been watching old movies again, haven't you.

GERTL covers SAUL's hands with her own, removes them from her hips, and turns to hug him.

SAUL:

You're late, sweetcheeks.

GERTL (unfazed):

Motorcycle accident. Held up traffic. Got delayed. Who's the dish in the henley?

HENLEY (dressed to match his name in a henley, jeans, and leather lace-up shoes) steps out of the shadows. He's holding a box that likely holds a pipe.

SAUL (muttering):

Just like a woman. He's a client, hon. Gotta finish the sale. (louder) Did you find what you were looking for? I'll be right with you. (to GERTL) I guess onions'll have to wait, dollface.

HENLEY:

I think I have, yes. (to GERTL) Afternoon.

GERTL flashes HENLEY a tight smile.

GERTL (noncommittal):

Afternoon.

SAUL crosses the stage and meets HENLEY at the counter, upstage right.

GERTL moves to one of two club chairs set near a coffee table downstage center. She sits in one of the chairs, places her purse beside her in the seat, and crosses her legs at the ankle. While SAUL and HENLEY continue their transaction, she takes out a compact and glances in the mirror, making a show of checking her makeup, though it's obvious she's really checking out HENLEY. Just before he leaves, he stumbles, and GERTL starts at the sound. Their eyes meet, there's a second of connection, and then HENLEY exits. The dog settles on the floor at GERTL's feet.

SAUL goes to the door and flips the sign on it so that CLOSED is facing out and OPEN is facing in. He locks it, then comes to sit in the other chair, as GERTL pulls something else out of her purse.

SAUL (gesturing at the item):

Is that it?

GERTL:

What, this? It's just a lipstick, see?

GERTL makes a show of opening the tube of lipstick and applying some to her lips, using the compact mirror for guidance.

GERTL:

Do you like the color?

SAUL:

It's a little dark for a girl like you.

GERTL (laughing):

Right, because I'm still twelve to you.

SAUL:

No! Not twelve. Sixteen, maybe.

GERTL:

Got a thing for jailbait, Saul? I never would've thought...

SAUL (embarrassed):

Easy, sweet-knees, I'm just playing with ya. (beat) Shall we get to business?

SAUL pulls a cigar out of his pocket, and reaches for paraphernalia waiting on the table. He clips it, lights it, and takes a puff.

SAUL:

Ahhh, that's the stuff. (beat) How'm I doing?

GERTL reaches for her purse replacing the compact and lipstick, though the latter falls to the carpet. She pulls out a tablet, uncrosses her legs, recrossing them at the knee, and then leans forward to show SAUL what's on the screen. This also gives him the opportunity to look down her blouse, which he does.

The dog (DICKIE) plays with the lipstick during the rest of the scene.

GERTL (referring to tablet):

Revenue's better, but still not great. You're selling more cigars, fewer pipes, but pipes are more expensive... you might want to think about increasing your marketing budget a little. (beat) Or selling the place.

SAUL winks at her and puffs his cigar. After a long pause, he confesses:

SAUL:

Saldino upped their offer. Eight-hundred fifty.

GERTL:

Last month it was only six twenty-five. You should take it. (beat) No one will offer more.

SAUL:

'm not a quitter, sweetcheeks. 'm not done here yet.

GERTL:

Saul...

SAUL:

Save it, sweetheart. This shop – it's all I have anymore.

GERTL licks her lips, and then reaches out and puts her hand on SAUL's knee.

GERTL (flirting, gentle):

Maybe not *all*? Come out with me Saul. A little dinner, a little dancing... ?

SAUL lifts GERTL's hand from his knee kisses it, holding his cigar away from him with the other hand.

SAUL:

Easy princess. I ain't gonna say 'm not flattered...

GERTL:

Just not interested...

SAUL:

Just not *stupid*. We go out, dinner, dancing, then what? You bring me home for a pity fuck?

GERTL gasps.

GERTL:

Saul, please... ?

SAUL (sadly):

You should get going, Gertl. Leave an old man alone with his thoughts and his smoke.

GERTL nods. She stows the tablet back in her purse, and picks up the end of the dog's leash. The lipstick remains on the floor, under her chair, but there's a red LED glowing on the end of it. She rises slowly, straightens her skirt, then leans over and kisses SAUL on the mouth. He responds for a moment, then pushes her away.

SAUL goes back to his cigar, pointedly *not* watching as GERTL walks out with her dog.

Lights fade to black.

Scene 2:

GERTL (V/O):

The bomb went off an hour and a half later. Evening news suspected arson. Morning papers called it faulty wiring. Either way, I'd lost a friend and I'd lost my favorite lipstick for a few grand in cash. Saul Morgan didn't have any family, and I was the only mourner at his funeral who wasn't a client.

Lights come up on GERTL's apartment. There's a city-scape outside her window. A bottle of scotch is open on the coffee table in front of the couch. It – and everything in the place – are obviously expensive.

The doorbell rings.

GERTL answers it, wearing silk lounging pajamas and matching slippers. Her eyes are red, and it's obvious she's been crying.

The man who enters is HENLEY.

GERTL sniffs him, then steps back to let him inside her apartment.

GERTL:

Louisiana Perique. Nice choice. You were supposed to be here three days ago.

HENLEY:

The old man wanted to give you time to grieve. Here. (hands her an envelope full of cash)
He says to tell you, "Well done."

GERTL (counting the cash):

He bought the block?

HENLEY:

Construction starts first of the month.

GERTL:

You my new handler? Better be more careful. Saul could've made you the other day.

HENLEY:

I'll try to remember that.

GERTL:

Please do.

HENLEY:

Don't you want to know my name?

GERTL:

Better if I don't. Ill just call you Henley.

HENLEY seems to approve of his new moniker.

HENLEY:

So, I'll be in touch...

GERTL:

I'm sure you will.

HENLEY turns to go, then pauses, and turns back to GERTL.

HENLEY:

Listen, it's none of my business, but are you okay? You look like you've been crying.

GERTL:

Me? Crying? Perish the thought... I've just been chopping onions.

BLACKOUT.

THE END

