

Cigarette Pt. 2

by Ben SD

The paint is laid out by color, a carefully cultivated rainbow of sixteen hues with white and black at either end. A church bell in the distance tolls out twelve long and monotonous times; it's taken him this long just to get started. Fred slops some black paint onto his naked pallet and flips on the projector. His canvas is blanketed by a slide of the Washington Monument; it's from a picture he took years ago, probably when Clinton was president, when he was young and full of life. It's old and irrelevant now, less landmark than hobby. He had never been back since snapping that photo.

Time, he thinks, is fickle. It's never just one thing or the other. That picture wasn't so long ago, after all. Neither was this morning. He slaps a long slash of black down the canvas, five-hundred feet from the tip of the monument to its base, a color he can feel. Headlights race by the window, lines of light crawl over the floor, over Fred's face, and he reflects on the day.

It's snowing hard this morning, and there's a thin layer of ice over everything. Fred spent the better half of an hour digging out and scraping off his old coupe, but with no particular hurry. So

what if he was late? What were they going to do, fire him? He steps in, and there's Gary Waldrow, a columnist who's the son of some former big-name reporter for the *Indianapolis Star*. Gary is talking to Nicole, the intern who is nervously holding two cups of coffee and waiting for her moment to use that burden as an excuse to excuse herself, and neither of them says anything to Fred.

Fred drifts back to his office like a shadow, or at least he hopes he does. "Morning, Mr. Jones," calls a familiar voice, pulling him from his umbral stealth. It's Martin Ebberman, the managing editor who happens to be a sly young man with a smarmy haircut and a voice that reminds Fred a little bit of Homer Simpson. "Gotta watch that weather; you're almost an hour late.

Fred looks down at his watch. It's 8:37. He says, "Is that so? Well, I can promise it won't happen again."

The younger man looks embarrassed – a small win for Fred – and offers his empty condolence, "I'm sorry."

Fred traces the clouds, the ground, the water, and the monument itself. He goes over every line slowly, methodically, filling in color after color. He matches the shades of light as closely as possible. He works with the hand of a surgeon, if that surgeon were tired and arthritic and maybe in a bit of a hurry. It's arduous and time consuming.

There wasn't a party when he left. It wasn't like on TV; nobody sang any songs. It was just a day like any other day, the day he started or any day since. After twenty-five years working for that paper, nobody there even called him by his first name, probably because they didn't know it.

Fred sits leaned back in his chair with the lights off and lets the darkness massage out his tensions. He's almost finished out one more day at the office, his last one more day at the office. His desk holds all the organizational tools it always has, plus more. Everything of his is now packed in boxes, waiting on that desk for somebody to put them someplace else, anyplace else, anywhere but here. There's a photo poking out of one box. The snow-capped face of Mt. Rainier dominates the frame, but the focus is on Fred and his wife, both quite a bit younger and smiling. It's a memento from before she was sick.

Fred looks down at his watch. He's been slaving away on this painting of a stone phallus for an hour and a half; he thinks it might be pretty good, but the paint bleeds into the light until neither set of colors is true without the other. For a moment, he forgets himself. He lets himself drown in the lights and the colors.

He lets himself fall back through a year of his life to the same date,
only half an hour later than now.

The house is completely ablaze already. Fred thinks, how long was I out? He knows it doesn't matter. It's too late to matter. The fireman who helped him climb out of that window is beside him still. Other fire fighters combat the inferno. The one next to him says, "I'm sorry, Mr. Jones," and Fred can't even cry. Maybe this was better.

A blade of light explodes into the room as somebody flicks on the light switch. Fred can see the shadow of an awkward young man who has come to collect him and send him on his way. "I'm sorry, Mr. Jones," he says, "It's time."

Fred does his best to pretend he was awake and lifts a box under each arm. They're a little heavy for him to carry like that, but he's proud. A third box sits on the desk. "A hand?" Fred asks.

"Uh, sure." When the man comes in, Fred recognizes him as Jeremy or maybe Jerry Westsmith, a marketing assistant who shouldn't be the one to escort Fred out after all this time. Jeremy or Jerry or actually maybe John, come to think of it, walks over and hefts the final box with a grunt. Together, the two of them exit the building. Outside, Fred sets a box in the snow to fumble for his

keys. The other man puts his box down too and silently wanders back inside.

Fred sits leaned back in his chair with the lights off and lets the darkness massage out his tensions. He has so many of them, even here in his own living room. Helen might not make the year, but they say they've seen these things turn around; it's not over 'til it's over, they say. It's not very comforting.

He's thinking all of this and doesn't even realize he's fallen asleep downstairs. He was watching a movie, but the movie is over now. He usually has trouble falling asleep. He wants the sleep, needs it; he's worn out from taking care of his wife and her indefatigable illness, but apprehension keeps him up. What if, stupefied by the drugs that stopped easing the pain weeks ago, she burns down the house with a cigarette?

A blade of light explodes into the room as Fred flicks on the light switch. He's been letting his mind wander. His first impression of the painting is that the colors are all wrong. Somehow, even while tracing, none of the angles are right. It's displaced, not a real painting, just paint on canvas. It isn't the Washington Monument or even a picture of it, only the sum of its parts.

Fred isn't disappointed or sad, but he does feel something. It's an aching oneness with the experience, maybe, or else he just feels displaced himself, forgotten before he was gone. He lingers on that thought as he turns the light back off, as he sits in his chair, as he lights a cigarette.

Fin.