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Tobacco and Lace

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Introduction

Before there was a room, there was a rumor: smoke drifting from a window that should have been dark, laughter stitched with clinking glass, and the faint, fragrant trace of clove on a street that pretended to sleep early. In a city that catalogued women by their silences, the rumor moved like contraband. It carried a promise that meant different things to different hearers—a promise that some called scandal, others sanctuary, and a few, with a smile they didn't yet know how to wear, called freedom.

The room took shape above a tobacconist who also sold lace. It was an unsteady marriage to some eyes—nicotine and needlework, scent and thread—but fitting to those who understood that adornment and appetite were not opposites. Lantern light warmed the gilt of a tarnished mirror. The wallpaper, once tacky with respectability, wore its age like a velvet bruise. Chairs scrounged from the attics of better houses gathered in a ragged circle, and on the mantel, a clock that had long ceased telling time presided like an old aunt who'd seen everything and agreed to nothing. Here, women learned the art of inhalation and exhalation without apology, and the city below learned, late and unwillingly, that it had daughters it did not own.

We called it a salon because the word suggested the safety of culture, the protection of talk; but the truth is, it was also a school and a chapel and a barracks. Not for cigarettes alone, though smoke was our first grammar. We practiced the language of permission. We learned to accept a lit match as an invitation to breathe the world on our own terms. We rehearsed refusal—refusal of the narrowed glass the town held up to us, refusal of the grim arithmetic that weighed virtue against desire and always found women in debt. We cultivated rituals that were both tender and ridiculous, as all beginnings are: three taps of an ash to signal a story, two to ask for silence; a shared tin of matches that made a ceremony of first flame.

The city did not have words for us, so it supplied accusations. It said that a woman with smoke between her fingers must be spending a man's money, borrowing a man's vices, stealing a man's time. It did not consider the possibility that we were spending our own, that we understood vice as a door rather than a chain, or that our time, once gathered, could become a powerful currency. In answer, we built a subculture whose spine was not scarcity but sharing. A lighter passed hand to hand could be a small republic. The curve of a chaise could shelter a confession with more mercy than any pew. The ashtray in the center of the circle was not merely a graveyard for the burnt and finished; it was a small, common hearth.

The women who came were not saints and did not pretend to be. A seamstress whose

hands were quick as sparrows, a librarian who shelved contraband pamphlets under pastoral poetry, a widow who discovered that grief and pleasure were not enemies, a factory girl who smelled of oil and oranges when she laughed, an actress who could slip into a dowager's voice and make even God sound tired, a schoolteacher who would not correct your grammar if you corrected your fear. A suffragist who had grown weary of speeches discovered that a circle of chairs could be a better podium. A girl from the port arrived with a sailor's swagger and a box of clove cigarettes that tasted like the past refusing to stay buried. None of them agreed on everything. All of them agreed that what they did there mattered.

What begins in secrecy draws both kin and danger. The rumor that birthed the room also birthed its hunters. Priests and policemen, aldermen and wives who had become warden and witness to their own cages, all listened for the clink and the low thunder of a chorus that did not ask permission to exist. There would be letters confiscated and returned, mistakes made and forgiven, pockets picked and hearts, too. There would be betrayals that felt like smoke in the eyes and loyalties that felt like oxygen. There would be a night when boots climbed the stairs two at a time. There would be a morning when the door stood open to anyone who dared walk through, because secrecy is a clever tutor but a poor home.

This book is not a museum of transgressions. It is a map of a hidden city that built itself inside the visible one, a city assembled out of glances and gestures, out of matches struck and passed, out of the scandalous insistence that pleasure is not a sin but a study, that desire is not a private vice but a public argument about how we live together. It follows a chorus rather than a single hero, because the bravest act a woman can perform in a world like ours is to say we and mean it. It is a book of rooms within rooms—salon, back stair, balcony, alley—and of the skies above them, which always made room for smoke.

If you come to these pages expecting shame, you will find instead a wardrobe of courage cut on the bias, trimming that makes a blade of every edge. If you come expecting a sermon against indulgence, you will meet its politics: the redistributed wealth of time and breath; the governance of a circle rather than a throne; the referendum of laughter; the bill of rights that begins with the right to exhale. If you come to judge, sit down anyway. The matchbox is in the middle. The first ritual is simple: we light for one another, so that no one has to strike a spark alone.

CHAPTER ONE: Smoke at the Threshold

The tobacconist's shop, situated on the damp, cobblestoned margin where the respectable avenues gave way to the working docks, was named 'The Gilded Humbug.' It was a name that pleased the proprietor, Mr. Silas Finch, who understood that all commerce, particularly the kind dealing in mild vice, required a veneer of polite irony. Finch sold pipes carved from dark, unyielding briar, sheaves of imported tobacco smelling richly of earth and distant sun, and, somewhat less conspicuously, fine Irish lace, usually displayed behind the counter where it could be admired mostly by him. He was a man whose eyebrows seemed permanently set to the expression of mild disapproval, which, in that neighborhood, passed for integrity.

What no one in the immediate vicinity seemed to realize was that the second floor, accessed by a narrow, protesting staircase tucked behind a curtain advertising imported cigars, was no longer merely storage for moth-eaten inventory. The lace—the delicate, intricate work that symbolized domestic patience—was being used not to hide the body, but to veil a secret. The tobacco, pungent and intoxicating, was the incense of a quiet insurrection. This second floor, a space once reserved for the dusty inventory of Finch's failed ambitions, had become the crucible of the Amber Room.

Elara Vance was the first to arrive most evenings. She was a creature of precise habit, a librarian by profession, whose days were spent ensuring that the public archive remained a fortress against chaos. Her own life, however, felt increasingly like an unbound manuscript—pages scattered, no central theme emerging. She carried a small, worn satchel that smelled faintly of binding glue and dried lavender. Tonight, the satchel contained three things: a slender volume of banned French verse, a silver match safe she had inherited from an aunt who had once traveled to Constantinople, and a determination to not feel the chill of her boarding house room when she returned.

She knocked twice on the stained oak door upstairs, paused, and then tapped the wood once, sharply—the agreed-upon signal that meant, *I am myself, and I am alone*. The door, usually bolted with a satisfying, heavy thud, opened a crack, revealing not Silas Finch's disapproving face, but the severe, intelligent profile of Mrs. Albright, a widow whose wealth was mostly derived from owning several strategically located tenements. Mrs. Albright, usually encased in the expected sable and black crepe of mourning, wore a startling shade of forest green velvet tonight, a colour that seemed to absorb the dim hall light rather than reflect it.

"Elara," Mrs. Albright murmured, her voice low, almost a physical pressure against the

silence. "You are prompt. Good. We need the quiet before the storm, or at least, before the rush of breath." She stepped aside, allowing Elara passage into the main room. The air inside was already thick, not suffocatingly so, but possessing a texture—a blend of warmed velvet, old wood polish, the sharp, almost metallic tang of high-quality Turkish tobacco, and something sweeter, perhaps vanilla bean or dried fruit.

The room itself was a contradiction. It was opulent in its disrepair. Heavy damask curtains, undoubtedly pilfered from a theatre's discard pile, hung unevenly, admitting only slivers of the gaslight from the street below. The seating arrangements were deliberately casual: a fainting couch here, three mismatched dining chairs there, and in the center, an ottoman that served as a makeshift table, currently holding a chipped porcelain bowl of water for extinguishing butts and a silver tray stacked with pale, unfiltered cigarettes wrapped in rice paper.

"No sermons tonight, I trust?" Elara asked, shedding her sensible wool shawl and draping it over the back of a high-backed armchair that seemed to watch her with its carved wooden arms. She reached into her satchel, withdrawing the match safe. The silver was tarnished, but the strike plate still held its grit. She flipped it open with a practiced snap.

Mrs. Albright sighed, a sound of complex relief. "I had tea with Bishop Hemlock this afternoon. He spoke at length about the moral failings of the lower orders concerning their consumption of spirits. I found myself wishing I could offer him a genuine Turkish blend, just to see the conflict play across his features. Imagine trying to condemn sin while savoring the finest smoke of the decade." She moved toward a small, inlaid wooden box on a side table. "Clara has brought the new tins. They smell like a promise."

Clara arrived ten minutes later, not via the main door, but from a secondary entrance Finch had reluctantly installed, leading down to the alley behind the shop. Clara worked as a ledger clerk for a shipping firm, her days spent in the high, echoing warehouse where the wind seemed to carry the scent of every port city. She was young, restless, and carried an energy that often felt too large for her small frame. She wore boots that showed clear signs of puddles, and her coat was slightly too wide in the shoulders, suggesting a borrowed garment worn for disguise.

"Apologies," Clara whispered, brushing stray strands of dark hair from her face. She smelled faintly of coal dust and brine, a bracing counterpoint to the room's established warmth. "Had to wait for the overseer to finish his ledger review. He checks the inkwells, you know. As if a clerk might try to drink the profits." She set down a heavy, oiled canvas bag with a decisive thump. "The goods are here. And I brought something unusual. A specific request from the south side."

Elara opened the bag and peered inside. The contents were not the standard, domestically rolled cigarettes, nor the expensive, store-bought Virginias. These were smaller, darker, wrapped tightly, with a distinctive, aromatic spice emanating from the tips. "Clove?" Elara queried, recognizing the scent instantly—sharp, exotic, almost medicinal. "That's a powerful statement, Clara. Most of the women here prefer the subtlety of Virginia leaf."

"Subtlety," Clara said, taking the silver match safe from Elara and striking a match without asking, using the flame immediately on one of the clove cigarettes. She inhaled deeply, her shoulders visibly relaxing as the smoke filled her lungs. "Subtlety is for women who have nothing to hide. We are hiding in plain sight, Elara. Sometimes you need a scent that announces itself, something that announces, 'I have arrived, and I taste expensive.'"

Mrs. Albright watched Clara with an expression that was half amusement, half warning. "The south side women prefer the bolder path, yes, but they also understand discretion. Clove draws attention, child. We are building sanctuary, not a spectacle." She accepted a rice paper cigarette from Elara's hand, nodding her thanks for the light. Her movements were slow, measured, the kind of deliberate grace only attained by those who have learned the precise physics of holding oneself together after significant loss.

"Discretion is the luxury of the secure," Clara retorted, exhaling a thin, fragrant stream toward the ceiling. "We aren't secure. We are defiant. If we are to be whispered about, let us at least taste interesting while the gossip circulates. Besides, the clove masks the smell of the factories better than plain tobacco. It's camouflage."

The truth of Clara's pragmatism settled heavily in the room. Their sanctuary was precarious, built on the goodwill of a cynical shop owner and the assumed ignorance of the neighbors. Every evening was a careful negotiation with the outside world. They existed in the gap between what society demanded of women—fragility, silence, domestic sweetness—and what they experienced internally—complex needs, frustrated ambition, and a very human craving for unstructured, unmonitored pleasure.

The arrival of their third member, Miss Helena Shaw, shifted the atmosphere again. Helena was a schoolteacher, outwardly the very model of rigid propriety. She arrived precisely on the half-hour, her tweed skirt and high-collared blouse immaculate, her hair pinned so tightly that it seemed she had been molded from porcelain. She never entered through the alley; Helena always used the main staircase, accepting the fleeting scrutiny of Finch below, trusting her own performance to neutralize suspicion.

Helena carried a small, leather-bound book, not for poetry, but for arithmetic. She was

the unofficial keeper of the club's operational needs—the careful budget for better quality rolling papers, the discreet payments to Finch for 'storage rental,' the tally of who needed assistance with train fare for a clandestine meeting outside the city limits. She was the anchor of practical reality in their growing sea of indulgence.

"Good evening," Helena said, her voice perfectly modulated, the sound of a precisely tuned metronome. She paused at the threshold, taking in the atmosphere—the lingering coal dust from Clara, the faint, lingering scent of lavender from Elara's journey, the aristocratic perfume clinging to Mrs. Albright. "The air is... active tonight. Good. I see we have cleared the inventory of the mundane."

She did not smoke immediately. Helena believed in observation, in mapping the emotional terrain before drawing her own breath. She noted the slight flush on Clara's cheeks, the way Elara was holding her cigarette—between the index and middle finger, a gesture of easy familiarity that suggested she had moved past the awkward stiffness of a first-timer. She saw Mrs. Albright studying the ceiling fixture, a decorative but unlit gas lamp, as if contemplating its potential for illumination or, perhaps, destruction.

"The south side brings clove tonight," Helena noted, walking over to the ottoman and selecting a cigarette without fuss. "A bold choice, Clara. We must ensure we have enough water on hand for the lingering aftertaste, as some of the more delicate palates find it overwhelming." She struck a match, holding the flame steady, allowing the tip of her cigarette to catch. She inhaled, and for the briefest moment, the schoolteacher's severe expression softened, the tautness around her jaw easing as the heat hit.

It was in these initial moments—the lighting, the first draw, the communal exhale—that the real work of the Amber Room was accomplished. It was a process of shedding layers, not of clothing, but of performance. The smoke acted as a membrane, separating the regulated exterior world from the permissive interior space. Here, the body was not a vessel to be guarded, but a source of sensation to be explored. The women exchanged glances that were not transactional—no appraisal of suitability, no assessment of reputation—but connective.

Elara watched Mrs. Albright, who had been silent since Helena's entrance. "Bishop Hemlock, you said?" Elara prompted gently, knowing Mrs. Albright was capable of holding a slight personal grievance captive for days before releasing it into the circle for analysis.

Mrs. Albright took a thoughtful pull from her cigarette, the cherry glowing bright orange in the dimness. "He spoke of stewardship, Elara. How a woman's virtue is her finest estate, and how any expenditure on the self beyond the necessities is a form of bankruptcy. I looked at his cuff links—heavy, ugly things, solid gold. And I thought, *My*

virtue is not made of gold, Bishop. It is made of smoke, and it is entirely portable."

Clara laughed, a genuine, startling sound that made the curtain tassels tremble. "Portable virtue," she echoed, tapping her ash with undue vigor. "I like that. I'll paint that on my door. Right next to the sign that says, 'Beware of Dog'—even though I have a canary."

Helena, however, was already moving to the perimeter of the room, checking the latch on the window that overlooked the alley. "We must be careful about slogans, Clara. Slogans invite inspection. Our strength is in our mundane repetition, our quiet refusal to conform when we are alone, not in our public declarations. The moment we start sounding like the suffragists, we invite the same heavy-handed scrutiny, only we won't have the political shield they hide behind."

This was the constant tension of the Amber Room: the push toward open expression versus the imperative of continued survival. They were pioneers, yes, but pioneers navigating a hostile landscape. Their resistance was internal, enacted through shared breath and subtle acts of sensory pleasure. They weren't staging street protests; they were creating an alternative reality, one delicate spiral of smoke at a time.

"Helena speaks with the clarity of the ledger," Mrs. Albright conceded, nodding toward the teacher. "But Clara speaks with the fire of necessity. Both are needed. I am weary of clarity, myself. I spent thirty years ensuring my late husband's ledgers balanced. Now, I wish only for things to be beautifully askew."

She gestured around the room, at the mismatched chairs and the tarnished mirror. "This is not about improving our standing in society. It is about creating a pocket of society that acknowledges we already possess standing, independent of husbands or incomes or reputation. It is about recognizing that the pleasure of a shared, illicit moment has greater substance than the most celebrated public success."

Elara leaned forward, placing her hands on her knees. She felt the tension in her shoulders, accumulated from hours spent cataloging the world's facts, beginning to dissolve. She took a deliberate draw from her own cigarette, holding the smoke deep in her chest until the burn was familiar, almost comforting. "I was thinking today, in the silent reference room," she began, her voice steadier than usual, "about the rules of silence. When a researcher asks for a book that is restricted, we have protocols. We record the request, the date, the reason given. The system demands justification for access."

She paused, letting the quiet inhalation of the others prompt her forward. "But here," Elara continued, gesturing toward the circle, "there is no justification required. If a woman arrives with a desire—for a smoke, for a story, for a moment of absolute quiet where she does not have to be useful—the only protocol is acceptance. We don't ask

why she needs the space. We simply ensure the smoke is lit."

Clara exhaled slowly, considering this. "It's the difference between a transaction and a sacrament, isn't it? At the office, every minute is accounted for, every word is evidence. Here, the time vanishes. It's spent, not accounted for. And the smoke... the smoke is the only evidence that matters, and it dissipates before anyone can collect it."

Mrs. Albright smiled, a rare, genuine unfurling of her features. "Precisely. We are investing in invisibility. The city wants us to be legible—readable texts, neat accounts. We are choosing to become atmosphere. Atmosphere cannot be subpoenaed." She stood, moving with the fluid grace of someone accustomed to commanding attention, even when trying to blend in. She walked over to a small side table where Finch kept a few select items—a decanter of amber liquid, perhaps brandy or an obscure fortified wine, and a small, highly decorated lacquered box.

"This evening," Mrs. Albright announced, picking up the decanter, "we are moving beyond mere tobacco. Silas, in his usual gesture of mercenary goodwill, has secured a small quantity of something he insists is a restorative tonic, though I suspect it's simply very good, slightly questionable Portuguese brandy. It is far too fine for the docks, and far too strong for the parlor."

She poured a minuscule amount into four delicate, stemmed cordial glasses she had brought herself, carefully placing them near the ottoman. "This is not for drowning sorrows," she warned, distributing the glasses. "Sorrows are the price of admission, we leave them at the door. This is for heightening perception. Drink it slowly. Let it remind you that your throat is capable of swallowing something bold, something that demands respect upon entry."

Elara accepted her glass, the liquid catching the faint light, looking almost like liquid topaz. It smelled sweet, alcoholic, and faintly of unfamiliar spices—perhaps cinnamon or dried orange peel, spices utterly foreign to her usual tea or weak sherry. The act of taking the glass felt like accepting a physical manifestation of the evening's agreement.

Helena, ever the pragmatist, examined the liquid skeptically before sipping. Her eyes widened almost imperceptibly. "That," she said, her voice losing a fraction of its teacherly control, "is astonishingly potent. It burns clean."

Clara didn't hesitate; she downed the small measure in one swift motion, coughing slightly before beaming. "That," she declared, chasing it with a lungful of clove smoke, "is the taste of signing my own ledger at last."

The brandy settled in their bellies, warming them from the inside out, acting as a

further insulator against the outside world. It sharpened the edges of their senses. The pattern in the rug seemed more intricate, the scent of the tobacco more layered, the silence between their words richer with unspoken understanding. It was in this state—fueled by forbidden smoke and spirit—that the true rituals of the Amber Room began to take shape, moving beyond simple smoking and into the realm of shared, subcultural affirmation.

Elara looked at her companions: the wealthy widow reclaiming her agency through elegant defiance; the restless clerk using spice and fire to mask the grit of her labor; the meticulous teacher allowing a single, potent drink to loosen the knots of public restraint. She felt the shift within herself, the librarian's compulsion to categorize yielding to the simple, urgent need to *experience*.

"I was thinking about the lace," Elara said suddenly, tapping her cigarette ash carefully into the communal bowl, an action that felt less like discarding waste and more like depositing a small offering to the hearth. "Finch sells it downstairs. All those meticulous threads, designed to cover and adorn, to suggest fragility and refinement. We only use the smoke here, the ephemeral. But what if we integrated both?"

"Integrated how?" Mrs. Albright prompted, swirling the remaining brandy in her glass, observing the way the light broke against the crystal.

"The lace is structure, constraint," Elara explained, feeling a sudden surge of creative energy, the kind usually reserved for organizing vast historical records. "The smoke is release. Perhaps the true defiance isn't in choosing one over the other, but in using the structure to hold the release. We are, after all, surrounded by delicate coverings—our clothing, our manners, the very walls of this room."

Clara leaned forward, fascinated. "Are you suggesting we wear the lace while we smoke? That sounds like an invitation to embroidery-induced fire hazards."

"Not exactly," Elara countered, waving her cigarette dismissively. "I mean, we should use the *idea* of the lace. The complexity, the patterns that only emerge when you look closely, when you trace the negative space. We need a language of solidarity that is as intricate as that work, something that only initiates can decipher."

Helena, who had been quietly examining the small, square snuff box she kept in her purse—a box she usually filled with mint pastilles—looked up, her gaze sharp. "A cipher? You suggest we create a system of non-verbal cues, built on objects or actions already present here?"

"Yes," Elara confirmed, feeling the warmth of the brandy spread to her fingertips. "Something to pass the time that isn't just gossip or theory. Something that allows us to communicate caution, approval, or even shared memory, without altering our

expressions. A secret grammar enacted through the rituals we are already practicing."

Mrs. Albright considered this proposal, her brow furrowed. She reached for a discarded piece of fine, white tissue paper she had used to wrap one of the premium cigars Finch had sold her months ago. She folded it precisely into a small, stiff triangle. "If we are to use objects, they must be common enough to be overlooked, yet specific enough to carry weight. A folded piece of paper—a deliberate, crisp fold. Too precise for an accident."

Clara immediately rummaged in her coat pocket and produced a small, perfectly round metal button, the kind used to fasten a man's waistcoat. It was brass, slightly dull, and utterly unremarkable. "A button. If I place this on the floor near my chair, it means I am waiting for a specific kind of answer—one that requires leverage, a point of pressure. It means, *push here*."

The discussion continued in that vein, fueled by the lingering brandy and the rising tide of shared audacity. They were taking the materials of their constrained lives—a piece of discarded tissue, a common button, the very act of lighting a flame—and re-tasking them, imbuing them with revolutionary significance. They were not just stealing time; they were forging tools for the next encounter.

It was Helena who brought them back to the practical necessity of their continued secrecy. She had finished her cigarette and stubbed it out with methodical pressure in the water bowl. "The time is approaching when the streets below become quieter, which is precisely when the wrong sort of man decides to take an unscheduled walk. We must finalize the night's schedule. Elara, you were to retrieve the notes from the tailor's apprentice regarding the altered hemline for the Alderman's wife? We need to know if she suspects anything unusual about the garment's weight."

Elara nodded, reaching for her satchel again. "It is here. He mentioned she insisted on a specific type of French silk lining, which she claimed was for 'fragile underthings.' I suspect the silk is for discreet padding, not modesty. The true weight is in the tailoring itself. He gave me a scrap of the excess thread." She produced a tiny, almost invisible filament of deep crimson thread.

Mrs. Albright took the thread between her thumb and forefinger, examining it against the faint light. "Crimson. The color of high visibility and deep passion. An interesting choice for a secret lining. We will need to discuss the implications of this color choice during the next gathering. For now, we archive it." She placed the crimson thread carefully inside the lacquered box, next to the silver match safe.

As the evening deepened, the smoke in the room grew dense, weaving itself into the velvet shadows, catching the light in slow, deliberate swirls. They spoke of small victories and large anxieties. Clara detailed the frustration of seeing her work credited

to a male superior, an event that had sparked her initial decision to seek out such a place. Helena spoke of the sheer, exhausting effort required to maintain the façade of enthusiasm for teaching rote history to children who would forget it all by noon.

They were beginning to settle into the rhythm of true communion, where the silence between statements was as meaningful as the statements themselves. The air was thick with the unspoken understanding that they were, for this span of hours, entirely responsible for each other's comfort, and accountable to no one else for their desires. The city outside continued its measured, judgmental breathing, unaware that just above the smell of stale tobacco and damp cobblestones, a new language of pleasure was being codified, one breath, one spark, one shared, defiant taste at a time. The threshold had been crossed, not with a dramatic leap, but with the quiet, steady ceremony of lighting a shared fire in the dark.

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