



Gene Ziegler

Octogenarian Time Capsule

## **Girl Under Glass** *Smoke Gets in My Eyes*

I am in Toronto's Pearson Airport. I am sitting in a concourse café having lunch. A very attractive woman is sitting at the next table and she is facing me. Our tables are only inches apart and it feels like we are dining together like old friends, except a floor-to-ceiling pane of glass separates us. She is a "looker" as they say, maybe forty years old; trim, with the chiseled features of a professional model. She is dressed expensively and wears just enough jewelry to accent her natural charm and not compete with her general appearance for my visual attention.

She smiles at me and I return her smile, then she lights a cigarette with that sophisticated sensual grace that Lauren Bacall used to use in the Bogart movies of the forties. She lets the smoke drift lazily from her slightly parted lips and into her nostrils never losing eye contact with me all the while. And in that moment, I am glad for the glass. I grew up thinking Lauren the embodiment of a sensual woman, but I was young. Now I am older and now I know.

I want to tell her that her smoking made her beauty run like watercolors caught in the rain. Suddenly, I am aware of the tired look in her eyes, the premature wrinkles in the skin of her face and her hands. She is not forty, I speculate, but much younger, perhaps early thirties, but I am fooled by the weathered look of her skin. I want to tell her that the particles of smoke she inhales carry dozens of harmful chemicals that will live in her body for the rest of her life waiting to do her mischief, biding their time to destroy her in a thousand painful ways, at very least to destroy her unusual beauty long before its time. But I say nothing.

Her glass wall is part of a room of glass made to isolate smokers from the general population. There are two-dozen smokers in the room besides her, each sending up mini clouds of smoke with each new puff. I am reminded of a painting I once saw in a museum of western art depicting an Indian village on a winter day, the campfire smoke from a hundred teepees caught in a temperature inversion, creating a cloud, blocking out the sun, poisoning the air.

As I disengage from her lovely face and winning smile, the haze of thick blue smoke behind her comes into focus. She now is a laboratory rat caught in a deadly Skinnerian experiment in the Toronto Airport, inhaling the poisonous gas conceived by a mad scientist to test her resilience and her resolve. "RUN AWAY", my mind screams, I imagine myself pounding on the glass with both fists yelling for her to save herself, but I say nothing. She is lost. She is the willing volunteer for lethal injection, a gambler in a game of chemical roulette. A smoker, my brave urbane Fumella, is dancing on her own grave. Her half-dead corpse smiles at me invitingly, sensually through parted, dying lips.

*Gene Ziegler, Chandler Arizona October 2002*