

## ***'Smoke & Perfume'* by Liam Ferguson**

I had a quick cigarette as I approached home, trying to mask the stench of perfume on my body. I slowly, gently turned the key, walked inside and closed the door behind me. I then stumbled up the stairs and entered Sally's room; she was sleeping peacefully. Normally, I would kiss her goodnight at this point but I was overcome with a sense of guilt as I looked at her precious, innocent face. With a lump in my throat, I turned away to enter my own room. I took off my shirt and tie and slid into bed next to Olive, my wife, kissed her forehead and fell asleep with a sense of accomplishment.

The following morning, I was awoken by the smell of bacon originating from downstairs. I put on my dressing gown, stared at my handsome face in the mirror for a minute, and joined my family in the kitchen. The dog was barking impetuously at the sizzling pan as Sally tried her best to calm him down before noticing me.

*"Good morning Daddy!"* She exclaimed as she bolted over to hug me and I ruffled her hair.

*"Good morning, honey,"* I said to Olive, who was standing over the hob.

*"Morning,"* she replied with a gentle smile. *"How was your night?"*

*"Great!"* I answered back. *"The clients loved the idea."* I had told her I was at dinner with some clients from work. Oh, she was so clueless.

After devouring my breakfast, I had a shower and went off to work. When I arrived I was instantly bombarded by Jacob, my good friend; he was the only one who knew of my extramarital affairs.

*"So?"* He asked with a grin.

*"So, what? There's nothing to talk about, but the answer to any questions you may have is probably a yes,"* I replied. Jacob was clearly about to speak, but was then interrupted by my secretary.

*"Mr Summers, you have a call on line one,"* she informed me.

*"Okay, thank you,"* I responded, as I gave Jacob a nod and entered my office.

*"Hello?"* I said into the receiver.

*“Hey! It’s me, Linda, from a few weeks ago.”* The voice responded seductively. *“Are you free tonight?”*

I paused for a moment, processing my thoughts.

*“I thought I told you not to call me at work...Look, meet me at Dawson Street tonight, eight o’clock,”* I ordered, before hanging up. I buzzed in my secretary and told her to get my wife on line one.

*“Hey, is something wrong?”* Olive questioned after answering.

*“No, no honey...it’s just that something has come up so I won’t be able to make Sally’s recital tonight. Tell her...”* I reflected for a minute. *“Tell her I’m sorry.”*

*“Oh. Okay, will do, but this is the fourth one you’ve missed.”*

*“I know, I know. I’ll bring her to the store on Saturday and she can pick out anything she wants.”*

*“Alright... I love you.”*

*“I know you do.”* I responded bluntly before hanging up.

Immediately after the call, Jacob entered my office and asked if I wanted to have dinner with himself, his wife and Olive the following evening. I told him that was a wonderful suggestion and that was when he finally asked me.

*“Scott, how long can you keep this up for?”* A clear reference to my marriage.

*“Look Jacob, this has been going on from day one. Men simply are not built to be attached to one person and one person only for eternity. The only reason I told you about what I do is because I know I can trust you, so just drop it. Now, get back to work, I’m still your boss.”*

The following night I once again smoked to hide the aroma of perfume and gently entered my home as if it were somewhere I was not meant to be. I once again failed to kiss my daughter and moved into my room, only tonight Olive was awake.

*“Where were you? Jesus, Scott. It’s two in the morning and you stink. Was whatever chain-smoking party you attended really more important than our daughter’s achievements?”* She didn’t ask, she demanded.

*“Yes it was. Now go to sleep, as you said it’s two AM.”*

*“Do you think I really haven’t noticed? This isn’t the first time and I know that; it was the same last night only I didn’t speak up. Should I be worried?”*

*“No, honey, there’s no need to worry. Now, go to sleep, we have dinner with the Coopers tomorrow.”*

The next day went on like any other. I had a quick ‘lunch’ with either Bernie or Jasmine, (I don’t remember), and then went with Jacob to meet our wives after a few drinks. The dinner occurred in a haze, with drink after drink after drink. I asked the waitress for her number when Olive was using the bathroom, a plan I assumed was flawless. However, when Olive returned, Jacob blurted out this fact. I laughed it off, as Olive sat, motionless. We decided to leave.

The second I shut the door, Olive said it.

*“I know. I found your phonebook earlier when I was clearing the study. I believe what Jacob said... I’ve suspected it for a long time.”*

*“What?! No, you don’t understand.”*

*“Don’t try that Scott. Just admit it. For Sally’s sake, I’ll look the other way until she’s old enough to understand but please just own up.”*

*“Fine,”* I replied. I was then promptly slapped.

I knew I wouldn’t stop. I didn’t care about her at all.