

Scaling a bluff.
Inspired by Lewis Carroll's Cheshire Cat.

THE LUCKY Strike that Codell bummed off his Bronx buddy deceived him, as Silvia had, in its own rich way. He took a long, calming drag, tattooing his throat and lungs, and wedged the cigarette in a notch on the ashtray. Wispy tendrils of smoke rose, buffeted in tiny cross-currents. The crisp tobacco glowed red, shriveled gray, and crumbled. Codell pulled a pen from a pocket and bled:

Ode to an Ashtray

*Lucky Strike relapse
After a lost chance
I bet a romance
On a phone dial.*

*Poor boy believing
Rich girl deceiving
Player got played by
Her Cheshire smile.*

It had all started two days ago. The juke box cranked out the Mills Brothers' "Cab Driver," and three tipsy guys next to the Space Invaders game sang along. It was another night at the Bronx.

At a table next to the sing-along trio sat Silvia Bellagatta's Wayne State girlfriends. They'd bopped over for some drinks after class. Silvia stood at the bar waiting to order her second drink, and Codell was sitting next to her. He was almost as tall sitting as she was standing. It made it easy to make eye contact. His eyes were ebony, a blackness that seemed to capture light rather than reflect it.

She smiled at him, but hers was not just any smile. It was dazzling, practically jumping out of a wide mouth that didn't seem big enough to contain it. Her teeth were straight and sparkling white. It was extraordinary.

"Do you smile like that for everyone?" asked Codell.

Impossibly, Silvia's smile got bigger. "What a nice thing to say! That's not a pick up line, is it?"

"No, I'm not that lucky, believe me."

"Another gin and grapefruit juice?" the bartender asked.

"Yes please," Silvia said. "'Grin and gapefruit,' that's what I call it. Is this stool taken?"

Not waiting for an answer, she took it. "I'm Silvia," she said to Codell. Her whole face smiled. She wore designer jeans and a billowy blouse that revealed a delicate gold necklace with a small red heart for the pendant. Medium length, jet-black hair framed her broad face.

"I'm Codell. Nice to meet you, Silvia."

"Codell?"

"Right, Codell. Good job on that."

"Nice to meet you too, Curdell. Thanks for letting me sit with you; I just had to get up. That sing along was starting to wear on me and my friends, all they want to talk about are school and their boyfriends."

"School - you go to Wayne?"

Silvia nodded. "I'm an accounting major. Do you go there too?"

"No, I live down the block."

"Really!" Her teeth blinded Codell. "You live here!"

"Native Detroiter. Where you from?"

"Grosse Pointe. Don't hold it against me."

"No, no, of course not. I'm sure it's a beautiful place."

"Some people there are super rich."

"If you don't live *here*," said Codell, "you're rich."

Silvia's grin and gapefruit arrived.

"You must drive in to Wayne, then," Codell said.

"Ten miles out I-94, just off the expressway, twenty, twenty-five minutes, depending on traffic."

"So, why accounting? You love numbers?"

"Not exactly. My papà wants me in the family business. He's paying for it." She sipped her drink. "What sort of people live around here? Detroit's got a reputation."

Codell raised his eyebrows in mock shock. "Crazy people live here!"

"Seriously?"

"No. Well, half serious."

"Are you calling yourself crazy?"

"Crazy to live here, maybe."

"Aren't there gangs around here?"

"Some whacked kids. Leave them alone and they leave you alone. Aren't there any drugs in Grosse Pointe? Just not on the street."

"Aren't there drug addicts and prostitutes?" asked Silvia. "Homeless people?"

"More harmless than homeless. You get to know your neighborhood. Y'know, watch out for them, give them something to eat."

Silvia's face clouded over. "I can't imagine."

"Codill - Curdell - this is nice talking with you, but I should get back to my friends. I'm sure they'll give me a hard time about talking to you!" She flashed her smile, and Codell melted.

"Listen," Codell said, "I liked talking with you, too. This may be kind of forward, but can I call you? Maybe we can get together some time."

"Um, I don't know. I don't date to speak of."

"It wouldn't have to be a date. We could meet after your class, talk some more. Go ahead, tell me your number."

"What do mean, 'tell me your number'? Aren't you going to write it down?"

"No, I don't need to write it. I'll remember it. Go ahead."

"No way!"

"Just tell me."

"You won't remember."

"Yes. I will. Try me." He focused on Silvia so intensely that everything seemed to evaporate except her eyes and her teeth.

“Okay,” Silvia said, “this rate’s pretty high on the scale of pick ups. I’m impressed. I’ll make you a bet. I’ll bet that you’ll forget my number and I’ll never hear from you. But if you remember it, I’ll not only go out with you, it’ll be on me. My treat. Within reason. But like my papà tells me, he plays poker, bluffing is like blowing up a balloon. There’s nothing but air in it. The more you blow it up, the thinner it gets. If you stretch it too far, it explodes in your face.”

She put out her hand to shake. “Bet?”

“I’m not bluffing. Simple as that. Bet.” They shook hands, long and warm. Codell grinned, but it was nothing to match Silvia’s stunning smile. She told him her number.

“Repeat it?” he asked. She did. He repeated it back. “That’s it.”

“I’ll call tomorrow night, early.” Codell finished his Stroh’s, headed for the door and pictured Silvia’s phone number. He repeated it, repeated it, repeated it, repeated it, and by then he was outside where he plucked a pencil stub and a matchbook from his pocket and wrote the seven digits. Only then did he picture Silvia’s face. As he walked to his tenement, she gradually dissolved until only her stunning smile remained.

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The next night he called her. He didn’t have a telephone, so he called from the closest pay phone at Prentis and Third.

“Hello, Bellagatta residence.”

“Hello, is this Silvia? This is Codell.”

"I can't believe it. You remembered!"

"Hate to say I told you so!"

"You did it - where are you calling from? Are you outside?"

"My window's open," Codell lied. "Thanks for the conversation last night. I never thanked you. When do you want to get together? Want to meet at the Bronx?"

"Well . . . I don't know how to tell you this, so I'll just say it. My papà only lets me date certain guys. Grosse Pointe guys. He'd never let me date a guy from Detroit. I just wanted to see if you'd remember my number. I'm really sorry."

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Codell lay in bed that night looking at the ceiling. Silvia's smile came in and out of focus, disappearing and reappearing, twinkling, dimming, fading until it winked out in the darkness along with her bluff and everything else.

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