

Old Flame

A Play by Patrick M Brennan
FINAL
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OLD FLAME

(*The Scene*: A single woman on the stage. She is contemplating an unlit cigarette.)

WANDA

Got a light?

I can never find a lighter when I need one. I used to collect them. Or actually, they used to collect on me. Like lint? Well not really. You see, I never actually *bought* a lighter. Sometimes, but not as a regular habit. It just so happened that whenever there was a group of people who would share a lighter -- you know, at a party, whatever -- the lighter would always mysteriously end up in my purse. It would just end up in my purse. On Monday I just would not be able to find a lighter. By Saturday night, I would have four or five.

I do not steal. I consider it a point of pride that I do not steal. I have never stolen anything in my life. Well, not since I was sixteen. None of your business! If I remembered, of course I returned the lighter without taking it! But who remembers? You lose track, you aren't thinking, you've had a few little drinks and you are trying to be a social creature, and before you know it, you've just *slipped* that lighter into your purse. Now, I was always good about nice lighters. Only once did a really nice lighter find its way into my purse, and I returned that the very next day to its rightful owner. But the little disposable lighters, they are so hard to keep track of! You know, I once watched a woman bitch for an hour at a party because she couldn't find her disposable lighter and she wanted a cigarette. Nobody else seemed to have a lighter. I offered to run down the street to the twenty four hour store and buy her one. I needed a light too, I was just dying for a cigarette. I think she just got pleasure out of bitching about it, though, because she refused. We ended up lighting our cigarettes on the stove in the kitchen. It's really hard lighting your cigarette on an electric stove. I didn't even think of looking in my purse until the next morning. You're thinking that I'm going to tell you that the woman's lighter was in there, well it wasn't. Everybody else's was, but not hers. Evidently, hers had found another purse to go home in.

Anyway, I would have four or five lighters in my purse by Saturday night, and not be able to find a single one by Monday morning. What happened to them? What happened to them? I'll tell you: Sunday is my cleaning day, and that is the day when I clean out my purse, and store away all my non-essential items. Which means, among other cleaning details which are boring, I would take out all the lighters in my purse except for one, and I would place them all in a single place. A stockpile of lighters. My own little strategic reserve. My shoebox.

Why did I choose the shoebox? I don't know. Perhaps I was sick of placing those lighters in my top desk drawer at work. Perhaps I simply had no well-defined place to put them -- everything in its place, they say -- and the shoebox was handy and available. Perhaps there is a subliminal connection between Matthew and my lighters. I think most likely I was just looking through his letters when I thought to clean out my purse, and there it was, an open shoebox, filled with nothing except Matthew's old letters!

I still look through Matthew's letters every now and then. He sent me a total of seventy-nine letters, cards, and notes, including the notes that came with the flowers he sent me from time to time. Matthew was the sweetest, most thoughtful, caring, loving man I have ever known. Actually, he was an asshole. But he did write lovely letters. One day he left me for a woman who was better looking than me.

And who was thinner than I was.

And smarter.

And who didn't smoke.

I look through Matthew's letters whenever I need to cheer myself up. He kept sending me those letters and cards even after he had left, but before he had bothered to tell me that we were through as "a couple". Even those letters were nice. Even then, even while he was sleeping in another woman's bed, where among other things he didn't have to worry whether she would fall asleep with a cigarette and burn the both of them up into cinders, even while he was doing this with another woman he was writing me. He was writing me and calling me and still saying that he loved me and he wanted me and he cared for me. He had such a nice, cheerful way of writing, he never failed to make me smile whenever I read one of his notes. Even those last ones. Even his little lies. Oh, I loved him so much, you know? *Matthew! You suck!* I hate you, you slimy bastard!

Sometimes I wish I could be like my best friend Anne. She just seems to be able to cruise through life and men without ever seeming to care about any of it, you know? She collects them the way I used to collect my lighters. She meets them on Monday, and flick ... flick ... flick ... and by next Monday, they're gone again. I wish I could be like that sometimes.

I quit smoking several weeks after Matthew left me. I still have not lost any weight, gotten any smarter, or God knows any prettier. But I did quit smoking. I just, I just got so mad at him one day, I threw out all my cigarettes, and all my lighters. All of them except the ones in Matthew's shoebox. For three weeks, whenever I needed a cigarette, I went to that shoebox and I read his letters, and I turned one of those lighters around in my hands.

There are still three lighters left in that shoebox. I haven't taken any out for a long time. I haven't looked at Matthew's shoebox in a long time. I'm waiting, you know? I'm waiting for the right time, when I don't need to go to that shoebox to cheer myself up, when I'm sure that I haven't needed it for a long time. That's when I'm finally going to use those lighters again.

One letter at a time.

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

Old Flame had its first public performance in April 1987, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute's New Voices 5 Theatre Festival in Worcester, MA.

Director: Susan Vick

Wanda: Nancy Teasdale