

## SMOKE

I've been smoking for almost forty years, maybe a little longer. My mother smoked most of her life and in her seventies was hypnotized and quit. Others I've known have succeeded through various forms of therapy. Once I went with my wife Mona to some guy who stuck staples into our ear lobes. People we met would look to the sides of our heads, leading us to explain why we were wearing these odd earring devices. We've quit smoking, Mona might say, and these have helped us. She was successful, but I was caught by a colleague with a cigarette dangling from my lips, and had to think of another explanation for the staple, which was hard to do. After a while, it was either this thing or a cigarette. I chose the latter.

Smoking is no longer a pleasure. It's an addiction, but the addiction itself is a pleasure, and I don't seem able to let it go. I did quit once, cold-turkey, but that feels so far in the past that when I light up I can hardly remember it or the satisfaction it might have brought with it.

Once Mona got on my case quite aggressively, and I said, okay, I'll quit. Then, of course, I started to sneak around. I hid a pack high up on a shelf in the utility room, and when it was time to leave for a swanky affair, I groped around in the dark and grabbed the pack, tucked it into my jacket pocket, and headed out. There was a side door leading to a garden at the elegant house, and when I stepped out and retrieved my smokes, I saw that what I held was a small container of rat poison.

One other time, sneaking again, I attempted the one hand striking. I was in the garage, and the whole book caught fire, flames scorching the cuff of my new dress shirt. Thankfully there was no one around, but Mona found the shirt in the garbage and gave me that dangerous stare of hers. After that, I revealed the fact

that I had continued with the “filthy habit.” Mona was not pleased.

I tried cigars, but they stunk up the house, and my wife insisted that when I smoked them I must stay at least one hundred yards from our property. I tried a pipe, and while I thought I looked quite distinguished smoking it, the required paraphernalia -the tamper, the reamer, the lighter, the bulky package- quickly became a bother, and I went back to the cancer sticks, though they too can be a pain in the behind. In the summer, in a short sleeved shirt without a pocket and tight pants, how carry the darn things and the matches or lighter as well? I longed for those high-school days when I had been a pretend hood, rolling the pack up in my T-shirt sleeve.

There was a time when everyone smoked. I remember it well. In cars, in restaurants and bars, in airplanes, on the street, in meditation on the toilet, before love making and after it, which reminds me of an old joke. The sex was so good that after it everyone in the neighborhood lit up.

People don't mooch anymore, you're the only one on the terrace at a party with a lit butt cupped in your palm, or you're out in the yard, tucked in among the trees, or you're sneaking a few puffs in the bathroom with the fan on high.

Smoking is no longer conventional or fun. No more gesturing with your sig to make a point. No more being cool as you light up. No more sticking a pair into your mouth, lighting both, looking like a fool, and handing one of them to the girl and later the grown women you have eyes for. Smoking was communal, seductive, was smoke rising up to form a protective blanket, while those under it reveled in good fellowship. Smoking was the glue that held society together. Well, something like that.

There is of course the coughing, the dizziness, the upturned noses of friends, the smelly clothing, the film of crud on the glass covering the pictures on the wall,

the burnt holes in the best shirts and jackets, cancer, the avoidance and the shunning, emphysema, the nervousness on long drives where the wife won't allow it, chest burns, problems with sex, the lingering possibility of death.

We decided to dress for dinner. We knew that Mona's parents would dress formally as well. It was Friday night at the lake, and though the Ronson Queen Anne cigarette lighter sat on the coffee table, there were no cigarettes there to be had, but rather a crystal dish holding Jordan almonds and beside it a bouquet of various blooms. The ancient maid had gathered them from the flower gardens that edged the property's broad lawn, which itself fronted the placid blue lake. A boat was docked there at the pier, a powerful vessel that often took us out on the water for skiing and fishing.

Mona was an only child, born into a wealthy family. Her father, a business man, was the owner of a small pharmaceutical company, and he had gathered a crew of the very best scientist and through them had managed to produce drugs that became very successful. His most recent score was a drug that treated Irritable Nostril Itch Syndrome, or INIS, a condition that he had invented. It was named Nostrodrome, and once on the market thousands of people bought it, even though most were unaware of their syndromes until the drug was available. I didn't care much for her father, was unsure about her mother, but then they had brought their daughter considerable wealth, and I shared in it and couldn't really complain. They seldom used this lake house, and to all practical purposes it was ours.

I met Mona at the airport, when she climbed up on the high seat to get a shine. I was smoking a pipe then, and I set it aside immediately as her dress hiked up to reveal her lovely thighs above the boots. They, the boots, were made of the finest leather, Marc Jacobs I thought, and they needed little shining. Still I found a way to linger over them, applying wax and a transparent coating that would deliver

deepness to the leather, very much like the spit shine applied by those in the military gives a glow to their shoes.

We spoke of books we had both read, of desired foods, and the music that might set us to dancing. In a while, we'd made a date for dinner, sushi at one of the best places in town. The rest is our brief history. Married for twelve years, childless by choice, very much in love. Her parents objected, of course, but over time I'd become at least somewhat successful, having open up twenty-five shoe shine parlors manned by the best shiners that I could find. The money was not great, but it was sufficient. I didn't need to come begging from my wife or her parents, though I thoroughly enjoyed the gifts that were forthcoming, most having to do with money provided.

Once we were married, Mona tried working for a while. She had a master's degree in art history, which was close to useless in the working world, and so she found a job as a sales-girl at some designer clothing shop. Quickly, she became bored there and quit. Back home again, she took up the task she was born for, the creation of small sculptures made from various pieces of junk that she altered to fit her needs. Tin cans, bottle caps, bits of child toys that had washed up at the lake's edge beside the dock, twigs and fallen branches from the yard, and much more.

She sawed and sanded, soldered and welded, hammered and bended, all this in her workshop shed in our back yard. Her products were beautiful. Materials that had once been life's rubble and detritus were now melded together, and in each small abstract structure they had become a romantic club, a sisterhood, maybe even a family. Continually smiling, full of energy and wit, Mona seemed centered and satisfied in our life together. Yet, she was alert, always on the look out for adventure, even here in these peaceful days at the lake house, anticipating the arrival of her parents. One of her elegant sculptures rested prominently on the

mantle, and I gazed at it as I adjusted my clothing

My tuxedo jacket was a light wool burgundy number set off with black lapels. The chest was wide open and filled by a white shirt, its ruffles hiding the buttons. My bow tie was traditional in shape, though yellow, as was the cummerbund that peaking out where my jacket was joined at the waist. I had gathered my long blond hair tight against my head and tied it off with a red ribbon so that my ponytail fanned out to cover my shoulders. I went to the small bar at the end of the room and fixed myself a single malt with a splash of water from the carafe that stood nearby. Then I watched Mona as she made her entrance through the double doors that led into the living room, where we would sup.

Her dress was on-trend, long, light blue, and gossamer, studded with numerous beads and sequins that created an ombre effect, one color hue melding into another, as if clouds had filtered the sun, then returning to a brightness that mimicked the lake's sparkle seen beyond the floor to ceiling windows as the day began to give in to dusk. She spun, smiling, to face me, her long cathedral train brushing the floor. Our Golden Retriever, Bart, was attacking it. Mona looked back and shook a finger at him, and he desisted. Then the bell rang.

"How are you doing, Melvin? Shining the boots of foot-soldiers at the door? At least it's not frivolous women's work." He glanced toward the mantel where his daughter's sculpture rested. Mona stiffened beside me, and "*Pendejo*" slipped quietly from his wife's mouth.

This was Fred Hackberry's greeting. I was used to his opening ploys. He was a short, fat man, and Mona told me he often wore a kind of mens girdle to provide a little slimness. He'd chosen a powder blue tuxedo of a kind and color favored by disco dancers of old. I wondered if the cuffs were bell. He always put on a look of sternness, figuring, I guess, that this was the way of all big business

owners. A slight twitch of his thin mustache suggested the phoniness of his scowl.

“How many women scientists in your lab, Fred? Or was it only men working on your crooked nostril scam?” I smiled at him.

“*Buenas tardes!*” was Gloria’s defusing gambit. It kept her husband from responding.

Her serape was Eileen Fisher. She had taken up the study of Spanish, though French would have been more appropriate to her assumed station in society. But that was Gloria, always pushing slightly against the grain. Fred glanced at her, his eyes a little steely. She was short and plump, her hair laced with flowers piled high on her head, which she kept steady, lest the whole complex structure collapse like an imploded building. I thought of Carmen Miranda, *chica chica book chic*, even though she was no Mexican or Spaniard. Gloria wore a loose designer dress, pink, that looked like pajamas. Her nails were red as the sun.

The ancient maid brought in the dinner. She had been with the family for many years, and Mona had conferred with her, asking for what her father liked best, but was seldom aloud given society dinners and the Mexican fair that Gloria had recently insisted upon. It was fish and chips, to be followed by hot fudge sundaes, then coffee and a taste of sweet kahlua.

“*Delicioso!*” Gloria exclaimed as she gobbled down cod. “*Muy! Muy!*”

“Right,” Fred said, as he waved a french fry half-heartedly. He didn’t want to talk about the meal. He wanted to figure ways to hassle me, and he started in earnest after desert with his pipe. I’d anticipated this. I’d been clean for close to six months, and I’d positioned a small fan on a table behind my chair to blow the dark heavy smoke away as he puffed and coughed.

“Six months, hu. Don’t you miss it?”

“Come on now, Dad. Take it easy,” Mona said.

*“No vuelvas a fumar nunca mas!”* said Gloria, jerking her head toward her husband in his veil of smoke. *“Fumar te matara!”* Just look at him!

“What did she say?” I asked Mona.

“Something about smoking.”

Fred was choking and sputtering as the smoke he aimed in my direction was blown back into his face by the fan.

“Yeah, six months,” I said, smiling as he convulsed. “Got any new drug for that?”

Mona’s parents left early. Gloria had said *vamonos* and kissed Mona on the cheek as they took their leave. She tilted her head toward her husband and whispered something into Mona’s ear, then patted her on the air. It was only eight o’clock, and once the dishes were cleared away and we were alone, I suggested dancing.

The music was Guy Lombardo, his big band, and Mona held her long train up near my shoulder as we waltzed between couches and easy chairs, our arms extended, pointing the way, not quite cheek to cheek. We could see lights across the water, the city in the distance alive and aglow, the lake like a vast window holding the city’s sparkles. The full moon was high in the sky.

“I hate the way your father treats you,” I said.

“I know who I am,” she laughed.

“Should me make love?” I whispered into her ear as we spun past the dining table, Mona’s train, loose now, whisking across the surface.

“Yes. Of course,” she said. “But I have to bathe, then dress up properly.”

That warmed me. “I’ll take Bart out. Then I’ll come back and get ready.”

“Take your time,” she said.

It was a warm night, a very light breeze, and I inhaled the sweet clean air,

my lungs unobstructed by gunk. After Bart had done his business and I'd bagged and disposed of his offering, I settled into a lawn chair under the big sycamore, Bart in the grass beside me, and gazed out across the water to the illuminated city in the distance. Dark birds chirped and sang softly in the branches above my head, their voices both pleased and somber.

It was a beautiful and peaceful time, a time for conviviality, though I was the only one there. A time for nostalgia, good fellowship and community, a time when the past comes back and old habits are indulged in once again. And I thought of Mona, watching her at work, that concentration in thought and action that I could only imagine. Then I thought of a time when I was a shoe shine man, a time between customers, at night, when the airport was almost empty. My hand was in my jacket pocket, as it had been then. It took a moment. Then the match was struck, its light illuminated my face and that section of the lawn surrounding us, Bart and I, and I drew in the smoke, the graceful cigarette an old friend between my fingers. Mona was getting ready. I was happy.



