BLOWING SMOKE

An early anti-smoking activist peers through the haze to see both the ugliness and the allure of a toxic habit.

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If the black-and-white photograph of the cherubic infant—eyes wide, brows raised—with an unlit cigarette awkwardly hanging from her lip was any indication, my simultaneous disgust and fascination with cigarettes began early.

I came across the image in grade school while flipping through a family album in search of a baby photo for a class project. My parents—both smokers since their teenage years—had set up the shot for comedic effect. It was the 1970s after all, when it was perfectly normal to smoke while a baby was in utero let alone in one's vicinity so why not use an unlit fag as a photographic prop? For the record, my parents assured me they always lit up as far from me as possible or, at least an arm's length away as other childhood photos showed. In her defense, my mother has repeatedly said she never smoked while pregnant with me. In fact, she says she knew she was with child the day the thought of her beloved cigarettes made her nauseous. Just a zygote, I was already planning my crusade to get her to quit—a battle that continues to this day.

Growing up in Saskatoon in the 1980s, most of the adults I knew smoked. My parents' Polish friends smoked openly—in their houses, in public places, around the kids, everywhere really—while my Canadian friends' parents did it more discreetly when they assumed no one was looking. I didn't give any of this much thought until one fateful day in Grade 2 when my teacher disapprovingly asked if I had been experimenting with cigarettes. Unbeknownst to me, the smell of cigarette smoke clinging to my clothes was so potent that my teacher assumed I was the one smoking. I was devastated. The goody two-shoes who wouldn't miss a day of class because my perfect attendance record would be ruined, the girl who went above and beyond class projects to earn extra points, I was being accused of doing something I knew was a really bad thing for kids to do. I felt branded with the scarlet letter "S," a badge of shame I had to wear for the rest of the school year, even though I was innocent. I explained myself to the teacher, threw a fit when I got home and told my parents that my bedroom door was to remain closed at all times if they were going to smoke in the house.

Everything changed after that. Before, my parents' habit was just a part of everyday life but from that day on, an uncontrollable rage came over me every time I saw my mother light up. It's the first memory I have of feeling impassioned about cigarettes. It was also the day my life-long fixation with smoking—first in the form of repulsion, then, later, seduction—began.

AS THE CHILD OF SMOKERS, the odds were not in my favour; it is well documented that kids whose parents smoke are more likely to start smoking themselves. But instead of accepting my genetic fate, I became the household anti-smoking activist. I would lecture my father every morning after hearing his post-shower coughing fit (so loud and phlegmy that coughing up a lung seemed a real possibility). I started hiding my mother's Benson & Hedges around the house, prompting her to yell at me to give them back. The hiding escalated to stealing when I got older. I'd give the cigarettes to homeless men after they'd squeegeed my windshield at a stoplight. "I don't have any change but do you want a couple of cigarettes?" I'd ask. They always accepted.

My closest friends growing up were non-smokers and since, according to the Canadian Lung Association one of the biggest reasons teens start to smoke is peer influence, I dodged another bullet. Although I was safe from peer pressure in Saskatoon, there were plenty of opportunities to take up the habit when we'd visit family in Poland. During one vacation we went to see my parents' Polish-Italian friends and their two kids just outside of Krakow. I was around 11, the girl was a couple of years older than me, the boy, a couple years younger. The three of us went exploring one afternoon; when we were out of parental sight, the girl took out a pack of smokes, first passing it to her nine-year-old brother before turning to me, "Sigaretta?" I shook my head nervously.

A couple of summers later, I was visiting with my 23-year-old cousin and a handful of her friends at a cafe in the centre of Krakow. One of the young men took out his pack and offered everyone, including me, a "papieros." I would like to think it was the staunch anti-smoking advocate in me who didn't take the cigarette that day but, truthfully, it was the 13-year-old afraid of inhaling and launching into a coughing frenzy in front of these sophisticated young Europeans who declined.

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In university, I dated a boy who was a heavy smoker—both cigarettes and joints—and although I was initially blinded by infatuation and lust, it soon became clear that not even young romance could mask the sickening smell of his breath or the repulsive sight of his grimy, nicotine-stained fingers. He tried to quit the cigarettes—for me, he said—but in the end, replaced nicotine with pot. There are only so many episodes of National Geographic you can watch with a stoner, so we eventually broke up.

I knew my next boyfriend would never take up smoking. His father, a raging alcoholic and a lifelong smoker had had a laryngectomy and used an artificial larynx device (a little microphone that he pressed into his neck) to speak. It was devastating to see what smoking and alcohol had done to this man and what it had done to the relationship he had (barely) with his son. Eventually, we too broke up but for reasons that had nothing to do with smoking.

By then, I was living away from home but when I'd call or visit, I continued my pleas for my mother to stop smoking throughout my 20s (except for the odd cigar, my father had kicked the habit by this time), but something strange began to happen. I became inexplicably drawn to images of women smoking. I spent hours looking at magazines with editorial spreads of '90s supermodels—Cindy, Kate, Naomi, Linda and Christy—ciggy in hand, clouds of smoke enveloping their perfect faces. I fixated on images of a smoking Jane Birkin, Jean Seberg, Charlotte Rampling and Patti Smith, and began to draw or paint portraits of female subjects smoking.

I wanted to smoke like Joan Didion in front of a Corvette or like Sex and the City's Carrie Bradshaw in her West Village apartment while she plugged away on her laptop, writing one insufferable sentence after another. Although the thought of kissing another smoker still repulsed me, the idea of meeting a mysterious stranger on a street corner while we both escaped a crowded room to clear our heads and share a cigarette was enchanting. Having been a witness to the bodily harm it can inflict, I knew the risks associated with smoking, but I started to see a beauty in the habit. In fact, I was awestruck. Instead of being disgusted, I was, suddenly charmed by the utter devotion smokers had to their habit and how they possessed a certain kind of freedom in their disregard for mortality. Cigarettes were a symbol of rebellion, defiance of societal norms and a careless self-destructiveness that I wanted to be a part of.

Despite my fascination with smoking, I can count the number of times I've put a cigarette to my lips on one hand and have never cared (or perhaps cared too much about my health) to take up the habit. But to this day, I love smoking scenes in movies (of which there are not enough anymore in my opinion). I have a Pinterest board dedicated to photographs of beautiful people smoking, I love Paris Vogue for not being afraid to publish images of today's models puffing away (there were no less than seven smoking images in the August issue) and my mother recently pointed out that I now only paint women smoking—mostly Joni Mitchell lookalikes, my friend's mother added.

It's not a coincidence really since one of my favourite smoking images is Mitchell's self-portrait on the cover of Both Sides Now. Wearing a green coat, a pensive Mitchell slouches against a bar, a glass of red wine in front of her, her angular face rests in a hand that also holds a lit cigarette. In life, or in her art, Mitchell never shied away from her lifelong habit.

"It's one of life's great pleasures," she said of smoking in a 2007 interview with The Telegraph. Mitchell has also, on more than one

occasion, told the story of how she started smoking at the age of nine and is often photographed with a cigarette in hand. The writer of a 1995 Vogue article makes mention of two packs of cigarettes on the table and how Mitchell "makes her way through [them] with Bette Davis speed." In a piece in The Independent a year earlier, the reporter notes that "when Mitchell's left hand stubbed out one cigarette, her right hand was lighting the next one." More recently Mitchell, now nearly 70, smoked her way through a large part of the cringe-worthy CBC Radio interview with Jian Ghomeshi in June.

Mitchell, cigarette in hand naturally, is also the campaign image for next year's Alberta Ballet collaboration with the artist—an ironic choice for a dance company (or, perhaps not if you consider the prevalence of smoking among dancers to keep weight off). Inspired by Mitchell's love songs, the ballet is "a profound meditation on the theme of Love," according to its promotional material that features the image of Mitchell from her 1976 album, Hejira. But instead of an open road, an image of a couple embracing rests on Joni's bosom, the songstress hovers over them as if protectively patting them on the head with a lit cigarette in hand.

The cigarette is "an elaborate metaphor for love and relationships, for addiction and release," k.d. lang once said in a USA Today interview, shortly after the release of her 1997 album Drag. "I like the cigarette as a visual stimulant, as a prop initiating all this imagery and commentary, both social and personal commentary." It's not really even about smoking, lang explained to another interviewer. "That's just a cipher for the real theme of the record: how love is an elusive thing that all of us crave. We 'smoke' it and then it's over and then we crave it again, even though it kills us."

I recently conducted an informal poll with friends and colleagues who smoke (not surprisingly there are many more of them here in London, where I'm currently living, than there ever were in Calgary). My Parisian colleague started when she was 13 (she is in her late 20s now) and told me that's just what you did when you lived in Paris. "A certain attitude," "freedom," "pleasure" and "mystery" were other descriptors that came up when I'd ask the women what the allure of smoking was for each of them. Male friends and colleagues on the other hand, said they did it because they were addicted, or, liked the taste.

In his 1993 book, Cigarettes Are Sublime, author Richard Klein explores the literary, philosophical and cultural history of smoking, focusing on this idea of the pleasure taken from the habit, especially by women. Drawing on 19th-century literary and critical texts, including Charles Baudelaire's Les Salons de 1848 and Prosper Mérimée's Carmen, Klein offers examples of women who were defiant, rebellious and, most importantly, sexually free. These ladies took the most pleasure from smoking. Klein writes, "such a woman—the actress, the gypsy, the whore—violates traditional roles by defiantly, actively giving herself pleasure instead of passively receiving it…she may in fact be more desirable because she appears to be more free."

By the third quarter of the 19th century, more women, including suffragettes, began to smoke as a "highly visible way to challenge stereotypes about 'natural' human behaviour," writes Dolores Mitchell in Smoke: A Global History of Smoking. Smoking carried associations of a wider knowledge of life from which women were excluded, continues Mitchell. "By smoking, a woman might claim publicly…her right to do just whatsoever pleased her."

KATE MOSS WAS 15 when she was photographed for the magazine editorial that launched her career. Shooting for The Face magazine, photographer Corinne Day took a number of black-and-white photos of Moss frolicking on the beach, topless, squinting at the camera as the sun reflected off of her freckled face. The shoot also included a few photographs of the then-unknown model smoking. As is the case with most images of Moss, they are captivating and romantic, and she is ethereal and uninhibited in all of them. But as always, reality is never as grand as illusion, and things always look better on paper—especially in fashion.

The fact that these images are explicitly meant to romanticize a deadly habit is not lost on me and although I still don't condone it when the people I love smoke (yes, it's okay if a model does it but not my mother), when I see a high-fashion editorial with the model smoking, I am enchanted. (I work in London as a social media editor for a fashion company and, ironically, we can't show any images of smoking in any campaigns or on social media such as Pinterest or Instagram, and yet so many fashion models, designers, fashion people in general, smoke.)

I recently saw Moss in the flesh when we were heading back to London from Paris on the same Eurostar train. I watched as the 39-year-old stopped on the platform to smoke one last cigarette, presumably the one that would get her through the three-hour train ride until she could light up again in London. She appeared haggard, and it was unclear if she was sucking on the cigarette or if the cigarette was sucking the life right out of her. The sight of the real Moss smoking didn't make me love The Face editorial any less, or any of the hundreds of Photoshopped images of her smoking since, but it did made me realize she was the opposite of free.

One of my favorite smoking images is that of Polish poet and Nobel laureate Wislawa Szymborska on the cover of Here, her collection of poems published in 2009. The octogenarian writer's eyes are closed, and she smiles blissfully. On the table in front of her is a cup of coffee. In her right hand she holds a freshly lit cigarette. (There's another brilliant, if less eloquent, photo of her puffing out a cloud of smoke while sitting at the banquet held in her honour after receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1996.) Perhaps the cover photo reminds me of the women in my life—my mother, my aunts and my grandmother—all of whom smoke. Or maybe I love it because it radiates a sense of serenity and freedom from everything else in life at that very moment. (Szymborska died last year of lung cancer.)

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I also have dozens of beautiful photos of my mother smoking: at a party in university, on her wedding day, as a young mother with me in tow, looking happy, carefree and serene, and I love them all. I still hate the fact that she smokes and worry about her health all the time, but like the Kate Moss images, seeing her smoke today, her hand trembling to light the cigarette, her jittery nerves before she has the first smoke of the day, doesn't make me love those photos any less. She says smoking gives her pleasure and I say it's also about a sense of control—over her body, her life, her choices. Life was never meant to imitate art but it always tries and like with everything, when you come too close, you see the pores, the wrinkles and the truth. Smoking is seductive when someone else is doing it, far away, captured in a photograph, in an idea, or on a screen without the coughing, the stench, the nasty teeth and breath, the cancer. Perhaps the only way I can cope with the ugliness of smoking and the risks it poses to someone I love is to find beauty in the habit. And that's my own false sense of control.

THE BIG SMOKE

- Worldwide, there are about **1.1 billion smokers**, or about **22 per cent** of the adult population. (About 80 per cent live in low- or middle-income countries.) Although smoking rates have been falling for the last quarter-century, since 2009, the rate of decline has levelled off.
- According to data compiled by the World Lung Foundation and American Cancer Society from 71 countries, **Eastern Europeans light up the most** (the average annual consumption exceeds **2,000 cigarettes per person**). The highest rate is in **Serbia** (**2,861 cigarettes per person per year**).
- Outside of Europe, the biggest smokers are **South Koreans**, **Kazakhs** and the **Japanese** (in that order). Although China is still behind Korea and Japan when it comes to smoking rate, (**1,711** cigarettes per person in China versus **1,958** in Korea and **1,841** in Japan), **China is the world's largest overall consumer of cigarettes**.
- In **Canada**, smoking rates vary from **15.8 per cent in B.C.** to **23.8 per cent in Saskatchewan**, according to Statistics Canada's Canadian Community Health Survey for 2011. In 2011, **5.8 million Canadians 12 years and older smoked**.
- The smoking rate in Canada is highest in the **20** to **24 year age group**, for both men and women. Worldwide, the number of male smokers is about **four times** the number of female smokers.
- Tobacco smoking remains the **leading cause** of **preventable disease and death in Canada**.