

## *A twinge of perverse nostalgia:*

*The remembrance of things past—not by the agency of Madeleine cake—but by the taste of American cigarettes (1999):*

In seeing the driver stopped ahead flick ashes out his open window into the intersection of Lougheed and Willington—there came twinges of perverse nostalgia:

Upwards of 25 years as a nonsmoker, I still cannot deny that some of the sweeter moments of youth were wafted in cigarette smoke:

After midnight at kitchen tables when synapses were jangling from caffeine-nicotine and manic chatter, a pack of cigs was always within reach. On Saturday nights in the back of cars listening to top-40 radio with a can of American beer and glowing cigarette in hand—every drag sent coursing through the blood pulses of unbounded possibility...

Even if it were noxious additives that gave the Winstons, Camels, Marlboros and Lucky Strikes their distinctive flavours—American cigarettes tasted best. Particularly satisfying were Parliament, with its sweetish taste and plastic filters you could curl your tongue into and Tareyton, with the charcoal hint of alum. Most delightful, though, was Raleigh—also the favourite of a certain ash blonde beauty from the hamlet across the American border. Even the scent of one, unlit, would probably still evoke the sultriness of mid-summer, 1967.

The Canadian brands were not nearly as exotic, but each had a distinct character. In a palette from Du Maurier red, Belvedere blue, Matinee yellow or Export A green—each pack invited an adolescent experiment in style and attitude (e.g. Player's filter tucked neatly in the front pocket proclaimed a different tribal allegiance than Export Plain rolled up in a tee-shirt sleeve).

Of course, in the '60s, nearly everyone smoked—non-smokers without gas masks included. Ashtrays brimmed, public and domestic—while butts scattered along sidewalks bore every shade of lipstick.

Powerful reinforcement came from film, TV and print: Pop musicians performed with cigarettes stuck upright in guitar pegs and comedians timed their *shtick* to smoldering cigarettes. In every medium and genre of fiction, characters were forever lighting up—particularly after love making. One could not fantasize being interviewed without imagining how one would hold one's cigarette...

In the sudden turn to the sentimental—I reminded myself of the smack of sulfur on the first drag and the bitterness of tobacco grains stuck between teeth. Then there was the sting of hot ash on the inside of the fingers or the blood on the lip when pulling away the fingers too quickly. Can I also fail to recall the hangovers intensified by the combination of nicotine and alcohol poisoning? How about those first nauseous drags on an empty stomach on mornings after vowing to quit?

I have no doubt that that public health has been greatly served in the decades-long war on big tobacco and its corporate sponsors. Still, I can never be a self-righteous ex-smoker. I can never look with pity—let alone contempt—at today's pariahs huddled at the side of buildings. Even in a citizen's approval of the dire warnings and horrific images of disease on today's pack—a soft spot will always remain for those ole cancer sticks...

Just then, the line of traffic jerked forward. At the same moment the driver ahead deftly flicked his butt out the window. However tempted, I did *not* thrust up a middle finger...

-1999, September



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