

Smoking steady for seven years

By Christine Kokic
c_marie_k@hotmail.com

On my 19th birthday, which fell during my last semester of high school because I was one of the Ontario students for whom “grade 13” was available, I walked the two blocks between my school and the corner store, and ordered a pack of Du Maurier lights from the man behind the counter. What I actually said, though, was “Maurier lights,” because I thought that sounded cooler.

He asked for I.D., and I happily gave him my G1 license, soaking in the autonomy of this landmark birthday. “Happy birthday,” he said, retrieving my smokes. I thanked him and smoked two cigarettes behind his store before returning to school.

See, when they say young people need to learn financial responsibility, this is professional-adult jargon for “young people would be wise to use their money as toilet paper before flushing it down the toilet, because at least then they would be saving on something.”

Personally, the money I made during my early twenties was not flushed down the toilet so much as sucked into my lungs: it blackened them until they resembled the dark, dirty master for whom I played slave for too long. Born in the mid ‘80’s, I was part of the generation that was discouraged more than ever from smoking yet rebelled against everyone from my parents to Health Canada.

The \$7.50 I spent on cigarettes on my 19th birthday, increased through the years to the \$11 it is now, is money I have pined for, on days when all I could afford to feed myself with was a single bagel, and on days when I gazed out the cloudy window of whatever crappy apartment I happened to be living in, feeling very poor. Amazingly, it took countless days of this pining for me to realize that my cigarette cravings should be ignored, that the sense of happiness smoking gave me was artificial. Even

more shocking (to my mother, at least) was the fact that my pattern did not follow that of most young smokers. Sure, I thought that asking for “Maurier lights” was cool, but I had no role model, no smoker before me from whom I grabbed a light.

Alex Hosselet, the coordinator of Leave the Pack Behind, a campaign to help college students quit smoking, says “it’s a lifestyle choice for most people, a certain image, certain style, a lot of their friends do it, they grew up with their parents doing it,” on the topic of why college students buy cigarettes.

This justification probably proves true for many young smokers, but gives me no insight into the elusive motivator that kept me smoking for so many impoverished years. I did not grow up with smoking parents, and when I bought that first pack of ‘Maurier’s, my non-smoking friends far outweighed my smoking ones.

Nor was image a concern weighing on my mind when I bought my last pack of cigarettes, at 26.

“Athletic ability is a big thing, people wanna be able to run and go to the gym and things like that,” Hosselet says, describing why college-age people quit smoking. “Attractiveness is a huge factor, they wanna be able to go out on dates with people and not get shot down because they’re a smoker; they don’t want disgusting yellow teeth.”

While I don’t doubt this is true, I personally find no enlightenment in these accounts; I identify not with the desire to run marathons, or blind my love interests with a brilliant flash of my pearly whites. I regret my seven steady years of smoking solely for the money it drained from my wallet. Yet, this sentiment seems to have me on the fringe of even smoker’s society.

“It’s so incremental, buying a pack of cigarettes, that it doesn’t seem like an overwhelming cost. When we present them with how much they’re spending, on a monthly or yearly basis, then they say, ‘woah, I could be spending this

money somewhere else,’” Hosselet describes the typical college student’s attitude regarding their cigarette budget. “But, day-to-day, a pack of cigarettes they don’t feel is really hurting them. It’s a case of just not seeing the forest through the trees.”

Granted, the non-smoker I am today is not a typical college-age student. During my early twenties, though, I was well aware that I could have been spending my cigarette money not just somewhere else, and not just anywhere else, but everywhere else.

At 23, I moved into a \$500 per month apartment that was a barely-superior living space when compared with a horse’s stall. I was a part-time bartender/barista, “taking time off” from university, and dating a guy who could not have been more emotionally unavailable, because the last thing that anybody wants is a needy girl.

And I needed everything. New shoes, more clothes, some groceries, a car. Even a bus pass would have been helpful. I needed some Drain-O and a toilet plunger. A real bed, because many people warned me that sleeping on a futon for too long can wreck your back.

Actually, I didn’t need everything, and the one thing I needed the least was the one thing I was stubbornly devoted to supplying myself with. Podiums, or whatever ridiculous name they were giving to the \$4 twenty-pack at the time. What I needed most of all was for the cigarette companies to give back the thousands I had spent on cigarettes up to that point, and get back on track.

Was it a physiological addiction to the chemical components of a cigarette, or was it a psychological addiction to the habit, that had me believing I could only continue down the road I was on? Now that I have finally kicked the habit and show promise of completing college and moving up in life, I still don’t know.

Persistently curious of the answer, as Leave the Pack Behind proved no help, I turned to college students who are nearer my age for their insights.

“When I first quit, or at least slowed down, I absolutely recognized a change in how much money I had in my wallet at the end of the week,” says Michael Reid, 28, Algonquin College student. “And health reasons, because I also felt ten times better. But, you always go back to it, for one reason or another,” he says this last part with eye-contact that dares me to disagree.

Reid’s smoking sentiments mirror my own; he has reminded me that if the price of my beloved Belmonts was cheap (or ideally, non-existent) I’d probably keep buying them. But, if I have truly grown out of my frivolous spending habits, aren’t there other reasons I should be regarding?

“Honestly, most smokers are considered gross these days,” says James Deterville, 32, Algonquin College student. “Just the social condition that’s taken place in the last ten years. I would say, for a college student to stop smoking, the primary reason would probably be social. Because realistically, there’s a pricing pressure, right? There’s a health pressure. But, you’re 21. You’re gonna make more money, and you’re not gonna feel the effects of smoking for another four years.” Deterville also speaks the truth, I think. After four years, I did feel the effects of smoking: an empty wallet.

My plight over cigarette prices will probably echo through to future generations of rebellious college students who might pay double what I did for ‘Mauriers on their 19th birthday. Whether the primary reason is social, financial, or physiological, smoking is becoming more of an antisocial habit all the time.

In what intricate ways the expensive smoking habit affected my social life, I’ll never know, exactly. I’ll always wonder, though — they say that suffering builds character. Why can’t it build a multi-million dollar character, like Hannah Montana or Harry Potter? Probably because today’s role models don’t smoke.

The Invitation

By Alex Binkley

“May I sit here?”

The tall, dark-haired woman pointed at the other side of the small table I had my laptop on.

I glanced about to confirm my impression the coffee shop was nearly empty. In fact, the tables on either side of me were open.

“I wish to speak with you.”

I looked at her. She wore glasses and the hand holding her coffee quivered.

She took my puzzled expression as an opening. “I need your help with a complicated social situation.”

I closed my computer and gestured for her to sit. The sooner I heard her out, the sooner I could get back to my work.

Her attempt to settle gracefully into the chair didn’t quite come off. Her bag slipped off her shoulder and jostled the arm holding her coffee, causing some to squirt through the opening in the lid. She shot me a tight smile.

“My name is Merielle Martin. I’m a researcher at the Brightson Genome Institute.”

I nodded. BGI only hired the ultra smart. She wore minimal makeup and jewelry and a high-necked blouse. A nonsense, to the point type, she didn’t look like a damsel in distress. I became curious. I liked her smile.

“My grandmother is in town and my aunts and uncles have organized a big family party so my cousins can show off

their significant others – doctors, bankers, some kind of money advisor.” She inhaled deeply.

“They’re boring but just the kind of people who would mean a lot to her. I’ve accomplished way more than my cousins but my academic achievements and professional status means nothing to Grandma. She judges granddaughters by the status of husbands and boyfriends.”

I got it. “You don’t have one but would like a date for the party that would impress your grandmother. Never thought of myself as a wow factor.”

She chuckled with me and that intriguing smile broadened. “I’ve noticed you here several times. You look like a friendly person. I asked about you. The older lady had your business card. She says you have a wonderful sense of humour. She thought you were single. So I googled you.”

I had recently checked references to my work on the Internet. “Mr. Google seems to know a lot about me.”

She smiled. “He does indeed. One of the top green chemical engineers in the world who recently moved here to work at the renewable energy centre. And you teach at the university as well as have your own consulting firm. Grandma will be dazzled by the value of your patents.”

“If you’re at the Institute, you’re hardly a slouch.”

I flipped the computer open and when the screen lit up, asked her how to spell her first name. Google offered many

pages about her and a very unflattering photograph. She’d earned a PhD and bunch of other academic credentials as well as numerous awards.

“Papers in peer-reviewed journals don’t impress her like patents would.” Merielle sounded disappointed but to my surprise, she didn’t seem bitter.

“My grandparents don’t really understand what I do but they read about environmental issues so they can ask me plenty of questions,” I said. “They’re my fan club.”

“Lucky you.”

It was my turn to smile.

She took another long drink of coffee. I noticed her hands no longer shook.

“I was waiting until I saw you without people seated too close before I tried to invite you.” She blushed.

I guessed asking males on dates wasn’t a regular event for her. “I understand you want to impress your grandmother. But why? She sounds completely unlike you.”

“She’s been nasty to my mum for years, always complaining that I was taking the wrong courses and not trying to be a social success like my cousins. And she always griped about my dad.” Her voice climbed a couple of octaves, presumably to imitate the grandmother. “She belittled him because he was just a school teacher. He’s a wonderful man.”

I smiled. “Ah, payback time! But you’re playing at her level instead of taking the high road.”

“Well, I also wouldn’t mind shutting up my cousins for a while. I’ve had to endure their silliness about boys for years.” She looked at me and then took another drink of coffee. Her face slid into a frown. “You’re right. I shouldn’t be doing this. Thanks for talking me out of it.”

“So when’s the do?”

“This Saturday.”

“Three days away is cutting it close.”

I called up the personal agenda on my computer and turned it so she could see Saturday had not one entry. Nor Sunday. “I’d love to go. We could have a blast. What do I need to wear?”

“A suit and tie.”

“That I have. You got a date.”

I wanted to see her smile some more.

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