

A Brief Meditation on Smoking

by Ajay Nair

I will start smoking again before I am done.

The first time I smoked was when I was twenty, in the back of a friend's car. I was drunk and my vision had acquired that liquid quality which makes drinking wonderful and dangerous. My friend passed me a lit cigarette and I sucked in the burning nicotine without inhaling. Nothing happened. My friend told me how it's really done — how to breathe the poison in all the way to my lungs. Nothing happened for a while. And then, sweet violence rocked my head. It was the most beautiful thing.

There are two kinds of stupid in the world of smoking. The first kind includes anyone who smokes — knowing well that it is likely to cause terrible pain at a later point in their lives. The second kind includes the people who tell the first kind that smoking is injurious to health. That is the point.

I quit smoking, as I am sure anyone who has ever given it up, for someone else. It is that sacrifice that wins you points even though it never sits comfortably inside you. That someone else is here today, sitting in the back row. I am surprised she had the inclination to dab make-up on. It is indecent and inappropriate, just like those women who paint their lips a bright red at funerals. There is enough blood already, isn't there?

What I loved about smoking was the mechanics of it. The soft swish as the stick is pulled out of the carton; the scratchy friction of the match against the side of the match-box; the birth of the

intimate flame, all slinky and seductive; the small window of opportunity before the flame's abducted by a passing breeze or falling rain or my clumsiness; the first pull which is at once familiar and exotic; the dynamics of how to hold the cigarette — between what fingers for what occasion; the correct interval between pulls; the ghost of the burned out part that hangs as ash at the tip before you flick it off; the last few drags as the paper flirts with the edge of the filter; the chalky grinding of the remnant on the ground with the sole of a tired foot. I loved smoking. I love smoking. Which is why I will start smoking again.

The judge is back now. His lips have a dark flaky texture — he is a smoker. He looks at me as he pronounces the sentence. I can only see those lips moving. Evidently, the price of a man's life is fourteen years of my freedom. I wonder how that math works. I bet there's advanced calculus involved.

I hope to god that I find a steady supply of cigarettes in prison. I have found them to be the best markers of time. By the time I am released, I want my lungs to be shining with fire so that when they take them out at my death, they are glowing like Christmas ornaments.

