Cigarette Psychology 

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Image Credit: Samantha S.,

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     Ariel tells me that I have to buy the cigarettes myself, that if I plan to be addicted I should learn how to ask for Marlboros with a straight face. She's right, in a diluted way. I stall by admiring the flowers outside this pathetic little convenience store we're about to enter. The deep ruffled reds and pinks of the carnations clash with the opening intensity of the irises and the simple ugliness of the dyed daisies with their sickly turquoise petals and bluish-green centers. I get a folded twenty from my wallet and put it in my pocket. My wallet has my high-school ID prominently displayed, and I believe that the knowledge that I am a 16-year-old would deter anyone from selling me cigarettes. Actually, I'm not sure whether it would deter them, or whether it simply should.

I ask for two packs of Marlboros, and the clerk lethargically reaches to the shelf over her head and puts them on the counter. I hand her the money, she gives me change. She asks if I want matches, and I say yes. My hand is shaking, and my head is filled with the harsh fluorescence of the store, the languid buzz. I take the matches and cigarettes, hand one of each to Ariel, and pocket the rest. I thank the clerk (for what?) and we walk out of the store, down the street, too quickly.

Halfway down the block, Ariel and I start laughing. Sometimes things seem like they should be harder than they really are.

Ariel smoked at times last year when she had an older boyfriend who thought she was 18 and gave her cigarettes and hit her when he was angry. She sat broken in her room, and resolved never to let someone control her like that again. She always makes bad choices. Goes to sleep at the wrong time, goes out with the wrong men, goes to bad places at the worst times. She is constantly sick, missing two, three, four days of school at a time. This winter, when the ice threw itself in sheets across the sidewalks and the sky flattened into that pale, ominous gray, she missed all of her mid-terms. We imagine that while she is at home during these days she is doing something incredibly creative, like painting a masterpiece on her bedroom wall or writing a novella or stealing more alcohol from the supply her parents bought years ago and never drank. She had to go to the emergency room after he hit her the last time, implanting shards of broken pottery into her arm. She says the hospital was the worst place she's ever been, with its astringent aesthete and endless parade of quiet suffering. Still, we are all jealous of her, and in a way she is jealous of us. She lives on the third floor of her house, all alone. Every time I call her I feel guilty because her parents have to yell and trudge up the stairs and it always seems more effort than it's worth. Her signature color is this pinky mauve, beautiful like dusk, just beautiful. She looks so natural in it. She smears black eyeshadow across her eyelids; I can never remember her deep eyes without that cloak, so purposefully tragic.

I have always harbored a secret love for cigarettes. All the boys I like are smokers (though the boys who show interest in me are not). In a strange twist, my father has always secretly smoked, and when I was little I loved his smell. It was only after I turned 14 that I spent enough time around people who smoke to realize that their odor was just like his. After the dog he had walked every night died, he still went outside around eleven and when he came back he had that familiar smell. I started listening closely for his exit, then rooting in the dark through his briefcase, his coat, the trash can outside. I would find the flattened butts, but not the unlit cigarettes, not the lighter.

I confronted him about it when we were alone and fighting. He confessed and told me that he never meant to set a bad example. I believe him, but in a way I still blame him. He has always been bad at keeping his failures secret.

Obviously, both Ariel and I harbor a psychologically screwed-up attitude toward smoking. But then again, any attitude that leads tenth-graders to purchase something which will bring them closer to their demise is pretty complex. Ariel justifies it by saying that we should be able to make mistakes when we're teenagers. I think she's lying to herself, because I'm sure that I am. She had purchased cigarettes from the same convenience store earlier this week, and I understood exactly why she suddenly wanted them again. After her success she invited me over for the express purpose of purchasing more Marlboros.

After accomplishing our goal, we walk in an insistent patter of rain to a little diner with battered metal ashtrays on the tables. We drink coffee and gossip about nothing substantial and she laughs nervously like she always does. The rain stops and we walk home, side-stepping the puddles where dead leaves float. Our city has been waterlogged for three weeks by a depressing on-again, off-again rainfall.

At a concert I went to last summer, the lead singer started smoking a cigarette onstage. He was so beautiful, with the blue light and the bright orange embers and the smoke curling up and seducing me. And it crept out into the audience and into my head, and I don't think it ever will leave.

Ariel and I go back to her house, and up to her attic where she had begun to paint a mural with acrylic paints on the soft plaster wall - large swirls of green and blue and yellow. She tells me that her parents don't know about it, or that she comes up here. Her attic is full of turpentine and paints, and dry wood that would catch fire so easily, a tinderbox of dusty past pursuits. But it's secluded and nice, and the CD player and pillows she stows up there make it a comfortable place. And so we sit and I smoke my first cigarette rather haphazardly and realize that at home I don't have an ashtray or an attic with a window.

That night, I use an old soap-dish as an ashtray and smoke out of my bedroom window. I know that I am slowly giving something up, but I'm not so sure what that is. A future enshrouded by soft, mysterious fog, another weak mystery? I smoke the cigarettes for no reason, but I don't feel motivated to stop. Objects in motion tend to stay in motion, you know?