

Ashes to Ashes

First Person Essay

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The smell has always brought me back to my youth. It follows me everywhere. A waft of it hits me as I pass a stranger on the street, or the ashtrays on restaurant table send up lingering tendrils to tickle my nostrils. Every time I smell it, I am once again a little girl entering my grandparent's house.

I remember it embracing me like a warm, familiar hug when I entered their home—smoke. They smoked cigars and cigarettes, whether they were eating or drinking, walking their dog, watching TV was of no relevance to them. Where they were, and no matter what they were doing, a smoking stick was in hand.

Even when cancer struck my Grandpa's lungs, the smoke continued to puff from their mouths most eagerly. I sat Indian style in front of their rocking chairs, too young and unaware of the fact I was inhaling the diluted poison from their exhale.

I remember my grabby hands reaching for the cigar from my Grandpa's ashtray, and the tender slap he made at my hands. Shocked and hurt for receiving punishment from my doting Grandfather, I sat back aghast.

"This is not for kids," my Grandpa said, brandishing the cigar in front of me like some form of weapon.

"Why not?"

He puffed on his cigar, "Because it's not good for you, that's why."

I watched him expel the smoke from his mouth. Curiously, I asked, "Is it good for you?"

He puffed again on his cigar before looking at me, "Not particularly, but better me than you."

This exchange taught me that some things are bad for you, yet somehow still okay for others. I didn't understand how something my Grandpa did every day could have any negative effect. It was just a part of his routine.

*Eat-Smoke-Drink-Smoke-Sleep-Smoke-Repeat*

However, when his cough stopped sounding like a common cold and began to sound more like barbed wire had somehow mangled with his lungs, it was decided by my family he needed to see a doctor. Even when the harsh verdict of cancer rang in my ears, I never attached it to the smoking sticks in his back pocket. Surely, if something were killing you, you wouldn't keep it in your back pocket, right?

Life went on. I continued to grow up, and his cancer grew too. Grandpa's black hair was replaced with shiny, vein bulging skin atop his head. "So you're bald now?" I asked.

He puffed on his cigar again, because if he was living, he was smoking, "Oh, so you're getting smart now?"

Grandpa wore caps then. I'm not sure if he thought maybe I'd forget his sudden balding, but I never did.

When we drove to the grocery store down the street, he insisted on keeping the windows down while he smoked. I was proud to be allowed in the front seat and feeling bolder than usual, tried to roll up the windows.

"Whatcha doing that for?" he barked rather suddenly.

"You're letting all the smoke out!"

"Well, yeah, that's the point. You shouldn't be inhaling that stuff."

"I don't mind; I kind of like it."

My Grandpa looked at me with bewilderment as he quickly pulled into a parking spot. He turned toward me, forcing me to meet his stare. He made a weird sound with his throat, which for some reason no matter how much he cleared always sounded funny.

"Why would you say something like that?"

Now it was my turn to be bewildered, “Say what?”

“Why would you say you like the smell of smoke.”

“Because I do,” I said. Grandpa was always asking such silly questions.

“But, why?” he persisted.

I shrugged, “I don’t know, I guess it reminds me of you.”

He leaned back into his seat and looked out the car window for a minute before reaching down to pick up his cigar again. He looked at me gesturing with the cigar, “This is killing me, you know that?”

Before I could say anything, ask any questions, he raised the cigar to his lips and kept on puffing. It was the most bizarre phenomenon my seven-year-old eyes had ever witnessed. I envisioned a pig ambling into the slaughterhouse, or a lamb climbing into the jaws of a wolf. The thing he loved was killing him, yet he loved it all the more still.

Grandpa didn’t quit smoking, and his cancer didn’t stop either. Within a few months a section of his lung was removed, and in the following year, a heart attack struck. I remember watching the gurney fly past me, his face deflated, his eyes delirious. I thought it was over.

But it wasn’t, in fact, I never knew how perilous and drawn out dying could be. Through it all, smoke followed, ashtrays were emptied, and cigars were repurchased. Death was served at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. All the while, my young mind began associating smoke with things I could understand. I could not grasp cancer or the consequences a life of smoking brought. But, I could grasp death, so I began associating smoke with the demise of life, and eventually I associated that with my Grandpa.

While I watched the process of dying, I convinced myself my Grandpa must be suffering a case of madness. How else could someone keep returning to the thing that destroyed them? Now,

as I look back and view my present, I feel foolish for thinking that. How many times have I allowed myself to fall into the same sin? How many times did I amble into my slaughterhouse and climb happily into the jaws of the wolf?

I began to picture sin as a cigar, and my Grandpa, the sinner. With every fiber of my being I loved him, but with equal ferocity, I hated his cigar. Love the sinner, hate the sin, as the saying goes. Often, the comfort and familiarity of sin are too tempting for someone to let go of them. But rest assured, while there may be false comfort there is no safety in sin. A person must make the decision to empty their ashtray for the last time, to exit to cigar shop, and to extinguish their cigar indefinitely. I find you can breathe much easier without poison in your lungs, and sin in your soul.