

PUFF MUMMY

RELATIONS

I began my lifelong affair with cigarettes when I was 15. I puffed on Dunhills because the "New York, London, Paris" tag line struck me as sophisticated, which I was not.

Women have always figured prominently in my addiction. I had my first cigarette to impress a girl. The girl was decidedly straight, but no matter. She asked me if I smoked.

"Occasionally," I replied with studied nonchalance. From that very first drag, I fell in love with the ritual. I didn't cough, throw up or even get a head rush. I was made for it.

I was even proud to be a smoker. I announced this to my parents with predictable results. My sister hissed that I was crazy and promptly changed her brand to match mine, so she could blame me if mum ever discovered her stash. Coward.

Within half a year, I was an addict, counting down the minutes in class until I could sneak out for a hit. I smoked maniacally through my first heartbreak — the girl was decidedly straight, but



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no matter. Then I smoked nervously at Chez Moi, the only gay bar in Toronto where I could get a beer.

I was delighted to seem old enough to smoke and to sit in a gay bar by myself. In fact, I looked like what I was: a child nursing a bottle of Blue and playing with a pack of Belmonts. By then I found "New York, London, Paris" repellent to my budding socialism, having recently seen Reds and developing a crush on Diane Keaton. Finally, I smoked through my last days at home with my parents and then puffed into freedom.

I smoked anxiously for the next 10 years in a radical feminist fog. Eventually I came to my senses, remembering that feminism, for me, was just a good way to get dates. In the end, I decided there wasn't much more to it than that so I tore up my membership card, and smoked through the fallout.

I smoked through every significant relationship in my life. Silk Cuts in London and in love with an English girl who was decidedly straight. Finally it mattered, and I left.

I preferred the taste of Player's Extra Light by the time I met my partner. She smoked Matinées. I thought that made me more butch. I was wrong.

We wheezed happily together for years, and then she quit. It was only a matter of time. My clothes suddenly smelled. Kissing me was akin to licking a dirty ashtray. When she grabbed the dog as a ventriloquist's dummy and moved the poor hound's lips saying, "Please mummy, my lungs, my lungs...." I caved.

Quitting was hell. I sulked, I cried, I chewed Nicorettes until my jaw ached and I developed strange sores on my tongue. I was addicted to gum for a year, but I didn't smoke. I didn't smoke for another two years. I had become a heavier, healthier non-smoker. A part of me knew it was all just a sham.

I had a good reason to return to the smokers fold, but in fact, any reason will do. If you really want to smoke, you will eventually find a way. Ironically, I fell off the wagon due to a cancer scare; I'm all right, but the experience made me want to enjoy life to its fullest.

My partner tumbled off right along with me. We took another stab at quitting two weeks ago. Today, we rationalize the presence of cigarettes in the house if we limit ourselves to a daily ration of five apiece.

"Deal," I said excitedly, and dashed off to the store. When I returned, she lit a smoke and levelled me with an odd stare.

"We are weak," she said.

"Yes. Yes, we are. Can I have the lighter?"

Relations is dedicated to exploring our many kinds of relationships. Send ideas to paul.gallant@xtra.ca.