



Essays

The Smoulder of Defiance

Definition: The Smoker

1. Informal. A reckless or irresponsible person, especially a show-off or one who undertakes a dangerous or sensitive task heedlessly.
2. A Modern Cowboy—A social outlaw; one who straddles the bounds of social acceptance, playfully bucking the rules, cigarette ablaze.

Smoking was at first an act of rebellion—as a teenager it's a rite of passage—but I liked the distance smoking put between me and the well adjusted. A cloud of noxious smoke is a repellent. I didn't feel like I was acting outside of who I was but conversely that I had begun to take ownership of the maverick aspects in my character, and that I was for the first time an independent. An agent provocateur. I wasn't consciously making that choice at 15, of course, but I was already aware that there existed a chasm between what conventional wisdom purported as sensible and the world I wanted to live in.

If this was a country song perhaps I'd be lamenting my revolt against society and how in essence I've been in revolt of my self. But this is not a sad song at all—it's the song, if the metaphor will permit stretching, of someone who does not crave the approval of the normal and well adjusted. It's the slow burn of a smoky blues song about a good woman who likes her lover's hands around her throat when they make love.

I have attempted a life of smoke-free virtue. I'd quit smoking in favor of nutrition consciousness and general corporal edification by channelling my fire for smoking into living correctly but found that at that level of self-

control and containment, one gradually morphs into a poster-child for smug self-righteousness and, in retrospect, every reason one *should* light up RIGHT NOW! A banal three months.

Smoking confers thrill seeking and risk taking. It's a mode of expression. It's saying that I'm an outsider, a social outlaw—and that excites me.

Remember how good audacity felt in your youth and play it again, Sam.

Definition: The Femme Fatale

1. An irresistibly attractive woman, especially one who leads men into difficult, dangerous, or disastrous situations; siren.
2. Uses a cigarette as a weapon of seduction, an oral fixation, the eloquence of gently pursed lips; compelling her target.

Smoking conjures images of silver plated pistols, pink silk panties, wild hair, red lacquered lips and alabaster skin atop black velvet. It's the iconography of Yves Saint Laurent's le smoking jacket shot by Helmut Newton in '75. It's Rita Hayworth playing Gilda in '46. It's Lauren Bacall resonantly purring "Anybody got a match?" in '44. It's that rock 'n' roll moment when Olivia Newton-John's Sandra Dee abandons her modesty in favor of skin tight leather, a simper and a cigarette in '78. Attitude and the chutzpah to stand apart is ageless.

And so then defiance is the root of smoking. Because defiance is sexier than certainty. The reason for becoming enamoured of the choking embrace of suicide is not elusive. However to someday not be able to draw in a deep enough breath is as terrifying as the idea of drowning in the vast ocean—it's a death-defying feat that one can dauntlessly smoke. But still, to crudely repurpose the intended context of *The Importance of Being Earnest*—"Romance depends upon uncertainty."

Smoking is an accessory—the veil between all that can be seen and that which can't, the cloud formed between what is hidden and what is shown. Smoking is a fevered mind; burning, consuming itself to shine.