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### Suicide by Cigarette: Embracing the 21st Century Smoking Culture

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*suicide*

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Embracing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century  
Smoking Culture

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# CIGARETTE

By Kate Nigosanti  
Photos by Mackenzie Reiss

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“THE PUBLIC HEALTH AUTHORITIES NEVER MENTION  
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SMOKING HEAVILY, WHICH IS THAT SMOKING IS A  
FAIRLY SURE, FAIRLY HONORABLE FORM OF SUICIDE,”

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reads the preface of the first book I ever read by Kurt Vonnegut. I was fourteen and had been moderately depressed for four or five years. It would be another six years before I started receiving treatment for my depression, and in those six years I would take up the habit myself.

It was my best friend who gave me my first cigarette, nine months after she attempted to commit suicide by overdosing on anti-depressants. After she woke up in a hospital and was put in therapy, she switched to committing suicide by cigarette. It's slower that way, but not as taboo.

The two of us had arrived in Coney Island mid-morning for the free music festival that was going on that day. It was both of our first visits to the New York City neighborhood, and the first thing we learned about it was that there was hardly any shade anywhere. At the end of July in an urban heat island, you want to be in either air-conditioning or shade. The closest air-conditioned space we had access to was back on the subway, and there were only a few shady areas—the cramped arcade, the umbrella tables in front of snack shops (which were for customers only), and the narrow edges under the buildings with overhanging roofs. We spent all the money we could afford in the arcade. We milked our spots at the umbrella tables for as long as our ice cream lasted. We sat on the concrete against the wall of every building with an overhanging roof we could find until our asses started to hurt. We were still hot. We didn't know any of the bands performing at the festival. We weren't too impressed by any of them. But the only thing we could think of was the heat, so our critical skills might have been biased.

I didn't know she smoked until I came out of

the port-a-potty and caught her sneaking a smoke. She told me she thought I'd be mad, but I had already been thinking of starting myself, so I told her it was cool. When she found that out, she offered me one. We sat on the curb in the boiling sun because all the shady spots had been taken. The cigarette felt awkward between my fingers. I watched her to make sure I was holding it right. I don't think I inhaled. I was scared of coughing and giving away to all the passer-bys I was new to the art. When we finished, she taught me how to flick the butt like a pro. What you do is rest it sideways on your thumb and roll it back with your middle finger until you get to a strong icking position and then watch it fly.

There's a difference between smoking in the city and smoking in the suburbs. The city feels so dirty, the nasty act of smoking seems to fit right in. But my middle-class suburban neighborhood in Connecticut feels so proper and civilized that smoking there seems taboo and almost nauseating. So after I started the pastime that day in Coney Island, I only kept it up if I was hanging around downtown, which has that dirty city-like atmosphere, or attending outdoor concerts.

## MY EYE FELL ON THE SMOOTH, SLENDER CANCER STICKS AS A WAY TO CREATE THAT FUN CONCERT ATMOSPHERE WHEN I COULDN'T GO.

In middle school and high school, going to concerts was pretty much the only thing that got me excited. The wild, laid back, let loose atmosphere of a rock concert was such a departure from my suffocating, conservative home and school life that I attributed everything about concerts with fun and happiness. That meant, along with loud music and dancing, drinking and drugs were things to be savored. My first encounters with the various worlds of drugs, like those of chewing tobacco, marijuana, nitrous, ecstasy, shrooms and acid, were at concerts. But they seemed both more



dangerous and more inaccessible than cigarettes at first, so my eye fell on the smooth, slender cancer sticks as a way to create that fun concert atmosphere when I couldn't go to a concert.

If marijuana can really be considered a gateway drug, so should cigarettes. I don't know very many people who smoke weed who didn't smoke cigarettes first, and I can say for certain, I would have never accepted a joint if I didn't already know what a cigarette was like. The act of smoking weed in the form of a joint or a blunt is not much different than smoking a cigarette. Then after you taste how much sweeter it is than nicotine, you're ready to try new methods of smoking weed, like out of bowls or bong

or hookahs. Then after weed doesn't do all those awful things to you that your anti-drug class preached it would, you're ready to try the harder stuff, which is in easier reach to you now that you have marijuana connections.

I snorted cocaine for the first time with one of my smoker friends. After each line, we went out on his porch to smoke a cigarette to cover up the rancid taste of the coke dripping down into our throats. I know some people who gave up cigarettes once they got into pot or coke, but most continue smoking cigarettes. Cigarettes are legal, and therefore more convenient to buy and do in public. And even though smoking is banned inside all public places now, you can usually





nd a nice smoking spot outside near the door with a considerate ashtray welcoming your stay.

The one time I felt embarrassed smoking in public was when I was at the airport. It was either Washington-Dulles or Sao Paulo-Guarulhos, and I was on my way to Rio de Janeiro. They had this little “smoking lounge” set up in the middle of two terminals that looked more like a high security prison cell or a human zoo cage than a lounge. I felt like I was on display in a freak show inside that tiny glass room. I remember seeing a smoking lounge in an airport once that was extended off the side of the building like an enclosed glass balcony. Now, that would have felt special in an exclusive, VIP

way, more than an exclusive, contaminated way. Location, location, location.

I smoked more in the one week I was in Rio de Janeiro than in a typical month in the States. In the same way smoking is better in a city than in a suburb, smoking is better when you’re in a foreign country. It’s the same concept as the saying that “people do stupid things in foreign countries.” As a foreigner, your whole lifestyle is shook up and spun around. You’re free of your daily routine and usual stresses and New Year’s resolutions. The fresh stamp in your passport is a license to be someone else. One of the guys in my group in Rio bought a pack of cigarettes after not smoking for two years

in the States. When he told me he wasn't a regular smoker, I asked him why he was smoking now. "I think it makes me look cool," was his response, as we passed beautiful Brazilian girls on the Copacabana Beach boardwalk. He was serious, too.

In my many encounters with smokers over the years, I've become enlightened on the infinite number of reasons people have for smoking, which most non-smokers will never realize. My parents, for example, always have and always will consider it a

But I know of another philosophy that is just as simple, yet makes an almost opposite claim. I became fascinated with eastern religions when I first learned they existed in my World History class in high school. Maybe it was my disenchantment with the Catholic Church I was brought up in that was leaving my spiritual nature unfulfilled, which made me immerse myself so completely in eastern religions. I was in love with my public library at the time, and I ate up all their books on Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, Jainism, Zen, Confucianism and Taoism.



disgusting habit and nothing more. "Don't you know it's bad for you?" In the United States, Christian morality has become embedded in the mainstream notions of right and wrong, good and evil. It is right and good to take care of your body, which houses your soul, the eternal part of you, which is supposed to want to go to heaven. Smoking has been proven to have a negative effect on your physical health, and therefore it is wrong and evil. Simple as that.

The concepts shifted my whole perspective on life.

The one that intrigued me the most was Taoism. Most people may not be familiar with Taoist philosophy, but I'll bet they have heard of the yin yang symbol. It's a symbol that has come to be casually tattooed on drunken forearms and carelessly scribbled in the margins of notebooks, its true meaning unbeknownst to the artists. But the concept it represents presents an intriguing challenge to

Christian morality. Instead of good being superior to evil, Taoist philosophy teaches a balance of the two being necessary for harmony. That's why the black and white sides of the yin yang symbol are equal in size and shape, and overlap each other's side. There is also a little bit of black in the white and a little bit of white in the black, which suggests nothing is wholly good or wholly evil. What I love about Taoist philosophy is that it truly takes to heart that everything is indeed subjective. And that which is "evil" may be pleasing and acceptable in order to achieve a harmonious balance.

Once you begin to consider that concept seriously, it makes a lot of sense and everything begins to click into place. You realize experiences are only good or bad in the moment, but afterward they are all just learning experiences and memory makers. This is why Taoists see even the worst situations as worthy of being embraced. This, however, creates paradoxes. For example, if Taoists have such an unrestrained love for all of life's tricks and treats, why would one want to commit suicide by cigarette? Well, I'm not a Taoist and I don't want to commit suicide, so I can't answer that question. But I will say that paradoxes are nothing to be afraid of, and neither is hypocrisy. I hated most of the poetry my high school English teacher forced upon us, but one line has always stuck with me. It was written by Walt Whitman: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." With that in mind, I suppose I sometimes am a Taoist and I wouldn't mind dying from cigarettes.

But I assume most smokers, at least here in the States, are not Taoists, yet they can still find rationales to continue smoking in this moral Christian society. I dated an Iraq veteran a while back who didn't start smoking heavily until he was in the army. I knew him three years after he had come back from Iraq and his smoking hadn't slowed down at all. We couldn't

even get through a whole movie without him stepping outside for a smoke, and it would always be the first thing on his mind after sex.

He had the greatest front porch, though. It was screened in and wrapped around one side of the house. There were always plenty of chairs and plenty of emptied flower pots for ashtrays. His



favorite phrase was "salty bastard," which is how he described pretty much all of his veteran buddies. He had the sexiest deep raspy voice, too. I could listen to him ramble on about politics or his hard-ass life philosophy for hours. But he was always running out of cigarettes. He'd smoke up all of mine too



# MY FATHER SMOKED CAMEL CIGARETTES AND HE KNEW MANY TRICKS AND GAMES WHICH HE SHOWED US WITH THE PACKAGES. HOW MANY PYRAMIDS WERE THERE? COUNT THEM. CAMEL CIGARETTES WERE MAGIC CIGARETTES.

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without offering to pay me back and then he'd be off to the neighbors to bum some since there were no convenience stores in the vicinity, and he didn't have a car. One time he told me about how his dad once calculated all the money he'd save each year if he didn't buy cigarettes and beer every day. I don't remember the exact amount, but it was significant though, but he just laughed it off and said, "I'd rather smoke and drink it away."

No matter how much they raise the tax on cigarettes, smokers will buy them. It's a necessity. I would seriously rather run out of milk or clean underwear than cigarettes. And you can't make us feel bad about it either. One cashier said to me once, "That'll be \$7.55 for the cancer sticks." I just looked him in the eye, gave him the money, smiled and thanked him.

Most smokers are very loyal to their brand, too, so we wouldn't even switch to a cheaper kind if the taxes increase a lot. The other day when I was buying a pack with my roommate, she said to me after we left, "I don't know, but you need to find a cheaper brand of cigarettes."

"What do you mean?"

"You got the most expensive kind they had! My mom only pays five-something for her Marlboros."

"Yeah, but Marlboros are nasty. I'm a Camel girl."

Camels were only the second brand I tried, too, but they've become my go-to brand ever since. My best friend started me out on Newports that fateful day in Coney Island. I smoked those for months afterward because I didn't know anything about other

brands and didn't know where to start. The wall of cigarettes behind the cash registers at drugstores can be quite intimidating to the unacquainted. You don't want to stare and examine all the different names and sizes and colors with the cashier standing right there.

I branched out to Camels eventually, though, when I was getting bored with getting the same thing all the time. I've always been one to try something new at a restaurant, even if there's one particular menu item that never fails to satisfy me. Plus, when I was talking to one of my smoker friends about brands, he said only black people smoke Newports. I had never heard that, but my best friend was half black and none of my white, Asian or Hispanic friends smoked Newports. Not that that bothered me much, but it was something to think about.

Ever since a traumatic experience in the third grade, I have been very sensitive to race issues. Up until that point, I had thought of race in terms of black and white, and I knew I wasn't black and my dad was white and all my friends were white, so I assumed I fit in the white category. It was Black History Month and to demonstrate what segregation used to be like, my teacher actually called out the names of the minority students in the class, one by one, and made them sit in the back of the room. When she called my name, my first reaction was shock, then confusion. She must have made a mistake. Doesn't she know I'm half white? But they were all waiting for me to get up, so I did and made my walk of shame to the back of the room where a black girl and a Puerto Rican boy sat at the tiny table, and my confusion turned to a burning anger that was so loud inside me, I didn't even hear what



she had to say about segregation.

After years of trying to come to terms with both my minority status and my biraciality, I now feel a certain connection and a real appreciation for other minorities. But I also cannot deny my whiteness, and the whole issue becomes another balancing act like that of the yin yang symbol. It is not one that comes easy.

I will never forget one Saturday summer night spent with my blond-haired, blue-eyed German Prince Charming in his small hometown of high-school dropouts. We sat on his brother's porch, smoking, drinking, listening to Eminem, having a good time with all his white trash friends. Around midnight, a group of black, high-school aged kids came into view and started taunting us. Apparently, this wasn't the first time, and my badass boyfriend and one of his buddies started talking back, dropping the N-word left and right. The battle of words grew louder and attracted the attention of the local cops. When they showed up, the black kids walked away fast, but my boyfriend and his buddy walked right up to the cops and explained their side of the story and

got the white cops on their side. I sat watching the whole incident, feeling like an outsider, wondering if I should do something, say something, use my experiences to unite black and white, but all I did was take another swig.

I have a million stories like that of noticing blatant color prejudices. It is a problem with a long and complex history, and more opinions and perspectives than the usual controversial topic. But my experiences have taught me to never participate in color prejudices and I therefore would never give up Newports solely because of their association with African Americans. So my switch to Camels was never about turning my back on Newports. I just wanted to try something new.

My other reason for trying Camels came from a novel by one of my two favorite writers, Charles Bukowski (the other being Kurt Vonnegut, of course). The novel is *Ham on Rye*, which I consistently cite as both the funniest and most depressing book I've ever read. In the first chapter, he describes the allure of Camel cigarettes, which would forever stay with me



whenever I look at a Camel package.

My father smoked Camel cigarettes and he knew many tricks and games which he showed us with the packages of Camel cigarettes. How many pyramids were there? Count them. We would count them and then he would show us more of them. There were also tricks about the humps on the camels and about the written words on the package. Camel cigarettes were magic cigarettes.

My favorite Camel variety has become the Turkish Silvers, which come in an exquisitely beautiful package and taste so smooth and delicate; they have an aura of royalty. I still buy Newports every once and while, however, out of nostalgia maybe, which greatly contrasts with my Turkish Silvers. Newports are infamous for their strong, harsh flavor, and the packaging is perhaps the plainest of all cigarette packagings. But I'm one to embrace both extremes. I'm a Taoist, remember?

I still get a raised eyebrow, though, when an experienced smoker sees me pull out a Newport. I give cigarettes to the homeless sometimes. I rarely ever have change on me, so I offer them a cigarette instead, which they are always very grateful to accept. Cigarettes are good at curbing hunger pangs, after all. Last week I offered one to a heavy-set black lady, who looked surprised when I, a rich light-skinned college student, took out my pack of Newports. "You smoke the same kind as me!"

Smoking works as an immediate connection and easy conversation starter between strangers like that. Whether it's someone bumming a cigarette or borrowing a lighter from a fellow

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smoker, or a group of smokers taking a cigarette break outside the bowling alley or wherever, the smoking culture is a topic akin to sports and the weather, one that is an appropriate conversation starter with strangers.

But just as smoking works as a socializing tool, it can also work as an anti-social tool. Along with

seeing an individual counselor for my depression, I also participate in a group therapy for anxiety. In that group, I've confessed to going for a cigarette break to avoid certain social situations. The therapist leading the group called that a "distraction" from my anxiety issues, which is robbing me of new learning experiences that will eventually alleviate my social anxiety.

The first day I took anti-depressants, my chest was bursting with this uncontrollable nervousness. I had actually quit smoking for two months prior to that day because I was trying out Marlboros and their downright nastiness turned me off the whole habit completely. But smoking was the only thing I could think of that would calm the totally intolerable nervousness in my chest. So I bought a pack of Newports and they worked just as I expected. I never quit again after that.

Smoking may be a distraction, an expensive habit, a health risk, a gateway drug, wrong and evil, and taboo in the 21st century, but it's a lifestyle I have embraced and have become quite fond of. I'm no Sheryl Crow fan, but one of her songs preaches a philosophy I couldn't agree with more: "If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad."

Simple as that.