

Circles of Smoke

A Sacramento writer watches her daughter's adolescent escapades and recalls her own "glory" days.—by Sigrid Bathen

She came home on time, bounding in the front door shortly after 10 p.m. with her typical energy—long, tan legs quickly covering the few steps to my perch on the couch where I was watching a movie with her father—and bent down to give me a kiss.

As her heavy auburn hair (last week it was black) brushed my face, the smell struck me like a blow to the head. *Cigarettes! She's been smoking cigarettes!*

Time was, not too long ago, when I would hardly have noticed the smell. Smoking was, after all, a common vice, and one particularly endemic to the successful practice, we thought, of hotshot big-city newspaper work, which is what I did for many years. You know, complete with green eyeshades and the bottle of Jack Daniels in the file drawer.

I remember when I bought my first pack of cigarettes from a machine on the ground floor of *The Sacramento Bee*. It was 1969 and I was 22 years old, just out of college and in the newspaper job of my dreams—one of the first women to be hired to report *real news*, not just engagements and weddings and other "women's news."

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It was important that I not appear "weak." So, one evening when an irascible old editor failed to appreciate my deathless prose and snapped at me to fix it, I started to smoke rather than cry.

Now, it would be unfair to blame the editor. I could have taken a walk. But instead I bought a pack of Virginia Slims and a cup of acrid, machine-made, black coffee and collected myself. Smoking, like coffee,

then became part and parcel of my work, and—God knows—not a particularly original choice of vices.

I had tried cigarettes in high school, during my "French period," when wearing black tights and turtlenecks was as de rigueur as it was to purchase European cigarettes from an aromatic, handlebar-mustached old man at Ed's Pipe Shop in Chico. I thought the cigarettes were awful, so I gave them to a friend who was active in the high school drama club and a chic little theater group that put on bleak plays in a bleaker storefront south of town. Everyone there, it seemed, wore black and smoked foreign cigarettes with odd smells. I found the scene intriguing but preferred the more frenetic, but oddly more ordered, world of the high school newspaper, with its messy room and tidy columns of type.

I saw that same friend a few weeks ago, and we sat on a bench in front of her stylish, popular housewares store in downtown Chico. Having postponed childbearing until she was nearly 40, she is now the mother of two young children—a doting, thoroughly responsible mom with high expectations for her daughters. We don't talk much about her high school years of cutting classes and getting lousy grades

despite her keen intelligence. Like so many of us boomer parents, she may have some serious explaining to do when her girls reach adolescence, and no one is more acutely aware of that than she.

As we sat on the bench and talked about old times, our kids (growing up), our parents (getting older), she surprised me not at all when she lit up a cigarette. "I've tried to quit so many times," she said with a sigh. "I can't believe I actually *forced* myself to learn to smoke." I remember visiting her in Oregon that summer between our junior and senior years, when she worked in the Ashland Shakespeare Festival. "Everybody smoked, so I kept trying to learn, even though it made me sick. I just kept trying until I mastered it. Helluva skill."

We talked about the strong foreign cigarettes from Ed's Pipe Shop and cracked up once again over the time she was smoking some brackish brand in her bedroom with the doors and windows closed. "My mom saw this big black cloud of smoke billowing under my bedroom door," she recalled. "She thought my room was on fire."

At Chico High School in those days, smoking within six blocks of campus was an offense of major magnitude. Residents at the six-block limit had to endure piles of butts in the street, but few students dared to break the rule.

Today, I watch little knots of students at my daughter's suburban Sacramento high school, smoking in small, grim groups by the road on the side of the school. Although American teenagers now represent a troubling, growing blip in the de-escalating use of tobacco, these kids do not look happy and they certainly don't look chic. My daughter, so far as I know, is not among them, though since she started to drive I have less opportunity to observe.

When she was 4 and attending a Montessori school with an environment- and health-conscious staff, she prevailed on her father to cease a smoking habit that had begun, oddly enough, when he was a high school athlete. I had stopped years before, when we decided to have her. Her father, having started as a kid, had a tougher time of it. Though not a heavy smoker, he had become so accustomed to the habit that it had become . . . a habit.

With the great wisdom of 4-year-olds and, I admit, some coaching from me, she lectured him about the dangers of smoking. She taped Surgeon General warnings to his toothbrush. When he didn't seem to take that advice to heart, she resorted to a

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more aggressive tactic: She would confiscate his cigarette packs and break each of the cigarettes in half, throwing them gleefully in the air.

Her father was so startled—and moved—by the gesture that he stopped.

And we thought that was the end of it.

As a child, she had no obsessive habits other than a brief bout with her thumb, and she has always been an athlete. Until recently, she became indignant when smokers lit up in restaurants.

Until she discovered coffee.

I figure that if you live long enough, eventually you see it all again. Before her father and I retired to our weekend video movies, we cruised the coastal haunts of Marin, Monterey, Sonoma and Mendocino and went to jazz clubs in San Francisco, where smoking in 1974 was as “in” as black tights at Chico High had been a decade earlier.

I could barely contain my amusement when she brought a young theatrical friend to visit, dressed head to toe in black, complete with black turtleneck and beret. They were going to the neighborhood coffee house for a mocha or a latte and to, you know,

Conversations

hang out. And, I gathered, some of them smoke.

“Mom, I’m just an occasional *social* smoker,” she said, as I raged the night she came home smelling of cigarettes (we ’60s boomers are facing some mighty ethical dilemmas these days in the defense of what we didn’t do), “but I don’t really inhale and you know,

I’m hoping my teenage daughter can deal with the incredible pressures in her social life, where I’m *not allowed* to go.

I’m not *addicted* or anything. Didn’t you just *try* things when you were younger?”

Try things, indeed.

We’ve thrown the cigarettes—*Marlboros*, for heaven’s sake—that we’ve found in the trash, and periodically we sniff out her clothes and car and hair. Annoyed by the aromatic ashes on her nightstand, I even confiscated her impressive collection of Cost

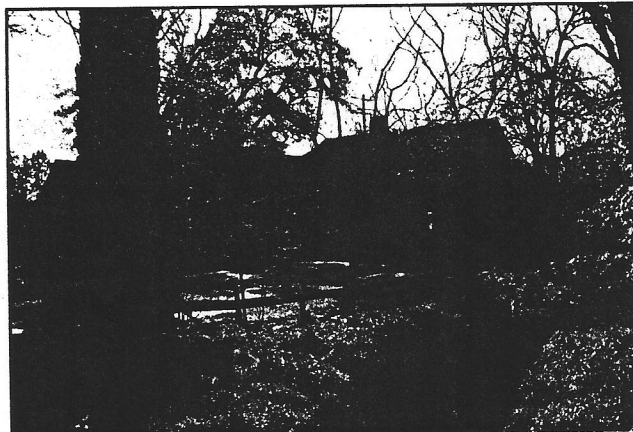
Plus incense—with the proviso that she could not have any even vaguely incendiary devices in her room until we were certain this “social” flirtation with cigarettes was over. And I wonder if I’m going about this in the right way—parenting, I’ve learned, is a bewildering course in on-the-job training. Just when you think you’ve figured it out,

another crisis comes along for which you have *absolutely no* immediate solution or experience, except some of your own adolescent idiocies to recall in a state of abject horror.

She promised us she wouldn’t pursue the habit any further, though I’m still holding the incense as a weak sort of insurance. She’s pretty busy these days with school, SAT terrors and her job in a pizza parlor, and I’m hoping she can deal with the incredible peer pressures in her social life, where I am *not allowed* to go.

I told her about my visit with my friend from high school, who “learned” to smoke while learning Shakespeare and whose conversation now is punctuated by a dull cough—a sound I noticed with an eerie wave of sadness as we sat in front of her lovely store and talked about her little girls. □

Kids' Corner



CREATIVE FRONTIERS

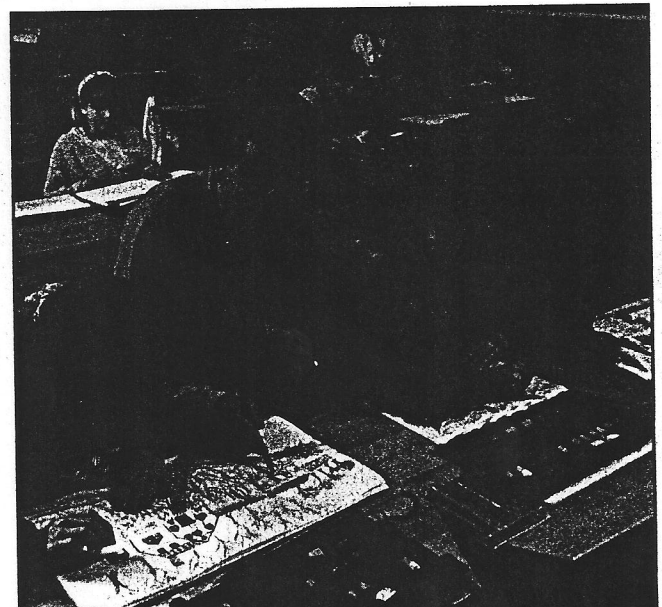
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