

Where There's Smoke

Written by Smoke Signals

Monday, 30 June 2014 22:33 - Last Updated Monday, 30 June 2014 22:41

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by Freida Theant

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“You can tell things about a person by the way they smoke, like what they do for a living, but that applies to women more than men.”

Marsha pauses that thought to seize her cigarette pack from the picnic table, against the green glass ashtray cradling a handful of lipstick stained butts from the five women of today's chit-chat gathering. All four neighbors brought their lawn chairs to huddle under the shade of Marsha's beach umbrella, pour cups of fresh-brewed Folgers and turn the ambience of the Clover Hill Trailer Park to a mid-morning backyard social.

Marsha seems to be moderating it, unofficially.

Lifting the pack, Marsha jostles a cigarette loose from the cluster and snatches it with her lips while drawing the box away. Her lips remain firmly pursed as if she begrudges the inbound filter even the narrowest of space within the seam of her smile, and clicks on her amber butane lighter to feather the cigarette face with the creamery yellow flame. The fire elevates the tobacco to 1600 degrees and with the vacuum she develops from her mouth, a virtual blowtorch condition forms at the cigarette's ignition point. Here the searing gasses and tobacco crumbs melt in consuming plasma that liberates volumes of rolling, fluid, dense, chalky smoke. The river of newly liberated fumes channels along the length of the porous tobacco cylinder to be sucked through the fibrous filter before filling her mouth with the sharp-tasting (almost bitter) flavor.

She separates her lips [somewhat] to let the belly of the smoke ball creep outwards from its cottony chamber, and just as the miasma escapes from betwixt her lips, she inhales and the opaque cloud snaps back inside. From here, she routes the flavor outwards again, but now up; through to her nostrils so she can savor the aroma as it brushes through her sinuses. Outwardly she's seems to be dribbling the white stream playfully from her nostrils, but actually she's modulating the degree of nicotine uptake by controlling the speed of the fumes. Her appetite is acute; she lets the flow sidle along at the laziest pace, and even draws down on the cigarette for an intermediate toke whilst in the midst of the nostril exhale.

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Marsha's diversion for the moment prompts one of her klatch mates at the table to pick up the discussion thread. Jillian asks, "Are women are more defined by their smoking than a man? And how much insight into her life do you think we can get from just observing her smoke?"

Jillian taps the barrel of the cigarette with her forefinger to de-ash and proceeds, "There are so many variations and possibilities to a person's background, but not that many visual clues that you can pick up on by watching them in a cigarette break. Besides," she adds, "on any given day, she will be in a different frame of mind and reflect attitude changes during the time she smokes." Now it's her turn to take a thoughtful pull on her menthol cigarette. She does a direct inhale, pulling the stream of smoke directly into her lungs. Jillian stays quiet a bit as the direct inhale sometimes makes her dizzy. The smoke streams of the smoking women are caught up in the gentle breeze, blended and drift off slowly.

Marsha refocuses, ejecting the last of her exhale mingled with her reply, "I know that there are lots of conditions that can mess up your observations. All I'm saying is that you get some real insights into a woman's life by how she smokes. It's no different from saying that you can tell a lot about a woman by the way she dresses and applies make-up, or using handwriting analysis to decipher features about someone who scribbles out a note."

"So how does this technique work?" Jillian asks.

A noticeably--soprano voice chimes in, "Is this some kind of investigative procedure for use by the CSI, or the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit?"

"No, it's just observing different kinds of people in a routine, and seeing what patterns develop. For example: you can tell when a woman lights up whether she's an experienced smoker or not. A mature smoker doesn't waste a millisecond of time or energy getting the cherry to full flame. She lights the whole thing evenly, not just parts of the tip. And another thing, her hand takes the flame up to the cigarette precisely every time while the novice takes longer and even misses the target. The dedicated smoker doesn't scorch the sides, leaving black smudges or uneven burning even though she lights up in a flash; you know what I'm talking about," Marsha tugs a hard pull on her filter which yanks out a massive batch of smoke that she pours into her chest. As she expels the snowy contents from her pursed lips in a massive opaque cone, she continues, "Something else; a manic smoker jets out that light-up puff immediately and then

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draws down again in the next second for the toke she'll send to her lungs."

Jillian replied, "Well, sure, but that's a long way from making assumptions about her background or lifestyle choices. That would be like stereotyping a smoker on the basis of whether she smoked lights, full-flavor or menthols."

The second participant chimes in, "It's hard enough to gauge whether or not a woman is a smoker at first glance. It's got to be impossible to guess about her lifestyle just from her way of enjoying her cigarettes. And I agree with Jillian, why do you think women reflect more of themselves in their smoking?"

"Because they're much more sensitive than men to creating impressions in public," Marsha replied. "Not just smoking; anything that distinguishes them in any way."

"That's mostly true," soprano-voice agreed, "women pay more attention to the visual impact their smoking has on others than men. I've known women who consider their cigarettes an accessory of their couture and outfit, selecting brands on that basis alone. They don't care how the cigarettes taste, just if it matches their look."

"So if I describe how a woman smokes as I've seen her, do you think you can tell me what she does for a living?" Jillian challenged Marsha.

"Maybe," Marsha said, "I'll tell you what the signs indicate and make guesses as to what she does or who she is. I might need some additional background like what she wears, her age or what kind of body type she is."

"This will be fun," the chorus of voices echoed, "Let's see if your theory of 'Where There's Smoke, There's Intel' really works!"

"Okay, this woman I know smokes who Marlboro light 100's," Jillian opens. "She wears a full

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dress when she goes to work but for everyday knocking around, she wears slacks and blouse, usually pastel shades or white. When she lights up, she keeps the flame on the tip of the cigarette about twice as long as I do. Sometime she keeps it there while she takes that first drag and into the second one before she takes it away. Then she waits a short time before getting the first lung 'hit'.

"Does she mix air into the first drag", Marsha said.

"Yes, because that initial hit is so concentrated, she has to dilute it."

Does she do a snap inhale? Or a French Inhale?" Marsha asks.

"Sometimes she opens her mouth wide enough to where the effect of diluting the smoke with air looks like a snap inhale, but she doesn't do that for the sake of showing off." Jillian finishes her cigarette with a very quick pull and crushes out the butt in the increasingly limited space of the ashtray. "Some smoke does escape occasionally and while it looks sexy that's not intentional."

"Can I ask how old she is? From the description you're giving me, I've get the impression she's been smoking for a while, now, and I'm wondering just how long she's been at this."

"I'd say that she's in her mid-thirties. And just for the record, she's a brunette with medium short cut hair, about five foot seven and probably weighs in at one hundred fifty or so," Jillian affirmed.

"Your 'mystery woman' sounds like she's physically fit and has habits of deliberate action," Marsha mused openly, "making sure that the cigarette is thoroughly lit up. Her choice of Marlboro lights makes her part of the biggest group of smokers so she's not in some oddball category. If she's wearing dresses I'd assume that she's involved in a conservative profession and a service role like waitress or hair salon. That's why I get the feeling she's done college."

"You're right, she's a professional woman," Jillian confirmed.

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"How far down does she smoke the cigarette?" Marsha asked.

"She takes it slow, and spends time with the cigarette as if she doesn't get many opportunities during the day, always outdoors. By the time she's done, the filter is pretty close to the flame. She almost never grinds the butt out with her shoe; always uses her fingers to stub out and then ensure the butt is cool before tossing it into the trash barrel."

"Okay, professional, college-educated detail-oriented woman who takes occasional smoke breaks: I conclude smoking is frowned upon in her circles so she gets outside a few times each day. She could be like an office manager of a Medical Business, Financial or Insurance Institution; they've got the kind of office pressures that will keep a woman smoking long after she's graduated college, which is probably where she picked up the habit in the first place. And her thorough attention to detail makes me suspect that she's in a leadership role, in an office where she leads by example."

"You're correct about her having a leadership role in a conservative institution but not with banks or medical establishments," Jillian counters.

"With the attention she pays to details, I'd wonder if she wasn't like a High School or Junior College Teacher," although I'm not sure she would wear a dress to work," Marsha mused. "But that leadership role concept is still likely. Does she smoke alone or with friends or associates?"

"Both. She's animated when smoking in a group, and very interactive, but she has no trouble being by herself enjoying her Marlboro," Jillian clarified.

"So she's not just a social smoker, but she mixes very well with people of all kinds....if she's not a teacher, then she might be a political type. Maybe an elected city or county official?"

"Once again you're so right, but that 'common touch' didn't take her into politics or government service," Jillian replied.

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“Otherwise, she could be in the television or radio broadcast business,” Marsha proposed.

“You’re on the right track, because she does perform weekly,” Jillian said, “but you’re still way off.”

“Okay, she enjoys contemplative time equally with socializing during her smoking, so what’s left? Casino Dealer, Bartender? Exotic Club Dancer?” Marsha feels increasingly frustrated.

“It’s just like being an entertainer, but that’s still not it,” Jillian answers. “She does draw on all those skills. She does serve wine, and she’s expert in meeting peoples’ needs, especially ones they can’t express openly. And no, she’s not a cocktail lounge waitress.”

“Oh My Goodness,” Marsha exclaimed. “She’s not...”

The chorus of surrounding women were shrieking “a hooker?...a working girl?”

“No,” Jillian laughed. “You almost got it right, but you jumped to the opposite direction for your answer!”

“Well if she’s like an entertainer where she responds to peoples’ hidden desires yet she performs before audiences, and serves wine what else could she be?” Marsha blurted out.

“A minister. She’s the pastor of the Broadmoor Unitarian Church.” Jillian corrected everyone. “She performs her sermons every Sunday, serves wine on Communion Sundays and she counsels parishioners on their private matters in her pastoral chamber, and joins members of her congregation outside the church for a cigarette break at odd times during the day.”