

## The Erotic Charge of Taboo (Revisited)

Written by

Saturday, 31 August 2013 17:29 - Last Updated Saturday, 31 August 2013 17:42

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by **Vesperae**

#### **SMOKE SIGNALS MAGAZINE - September - October 2013**

Life is unfortunately still very messy and complicated for me at the moment, and my personal distraction level is still pretty overwhelming, hence another offering from my earliest days with *Smoke Signals*

. Many thanks for your continued patience and understanding, and especially for all of your kind emails, good wishes, and generous financial contributions to my forum. Your friendship and support mean a great deal to me, and have touched me deeply.

Again, even though I've got a lot on my plate at the moment, I'm OK, and I'm going to be OK. Better days (and more "Kayla") ahead! ;)

This is the very first guest column that I ever wrote for Smoke Signals Magazine, originally published in the July–August 2003 issue, and presented here for the first time outside of the Smoke Signals Online membership area.

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A woman stands in her kitchen preparing dinner with the television on in the background.

As she works a knife repeatedly across a cutting board, she hears ominous music and a dramatically read voice-over in the middle of a block of commercials:

*"A man smokes a pack a day..."*

She drops the knife instantly as her head spins to face the screen.

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*"A woman, the same..."*

Everything else in the world disappears from her awareness as she absorbs the image of a male and female actor each taking a drag on a cigarette.

*"So who's twice as likely to die from it?"*

She experiences the sudden sensation of free falling, and a rush of arousal that takes her breath away.

*"Shocking new research every woman should know."*

She feels like her knees are about to collapse.

*"Women and Cigarettes - A Fatal Attraction, ABC, Thursday."*

Her heart is pounding so hard that she feels like the entire room is throbbing as she rushes to the pack of half full Virginia Slims menthols and gold Colibri lighter on the kitchen table, collapses into a chair, lights up, and begins to run her trembling fingers over her inflamed and tingling body as she pops the first thick drag of mentholated cigarette smoke deep into her lungs.

\* \* \*

The commercial was for an ABC News documentary that aired in the wake of the 2001 Surgeon General's Report on Women and Smoking.

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The woman was me.

The number of women with the Smoking Fetish is dwarfed in comparison to the number of men with the Smoking Fetish, and there are some psychologists who erroneously believe that it isn't possible for women to develop any sort of Fetish component to their sexuality.

We may be an extreme minority, but we most definitely exist, although the reasons for the relative rarity of reported female Fetish sexualities are not clear. It may have to do with differences in sex-typical brain structure and neurochemistry, differences in psychosexual development between boys and girls in a male dominant society, or it may be that women are generally more sexually repressed by societal norms than men, and therefore are less likely to express their sexual interests, including Fetishes.

The second and last possibilities seem more likely to me than the first, since I have personally known at least a dozen women who definitely have some sort of mild to substantial kink, and despite their varied interests, the thing that they all share in common is a healthy overall acceptance of their sexualities and libidos.

In my case, I believe that having to come to terms with growing up lesbian in the midst of an overwhelmingly straight world forced me to get much more in touch with the nuances of my own "non-mainstream" sexual triggers, including my Fetish interests.

Based on the description of the scene in my kitchen above, you might easily arrive at the conclusion that I have a Death Wish, or that I get off on the idea of disease and dying. Actually, nothing could be further from the truth. I take my vitamins. I eat healthy foods. I get regular exercise. I wear my seat belt. I look both ways before I cross the street. I hope to grow to be an old woman in good health, and to enjoy life for as long as I possibly can. And I take absolutely no pleasure of any kind in the thought of the suffering or death of others.

But I freely admit to taking *great* pleasure in the very personal and deliberate violation of the many layers of Taboo that have become attached to smoking for me during my lifetime.

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I was born in the mid 1960s, which could perhaps be considered the beginning of the end of the "Golden Age of Smoking" in U.S. society. Smoking was allowed virtually everywhere, and was widely portrayed as being a perfectly normal adult behavior in the media. Cigarettes were still advertised on television and radio, and tobacco sponsorship of the arts, popular entertainment, and sporting events was widespread. But the aftermath of the first Surgeon General's Report on Smoking in 1962 was looming, and the first televised Anti-Smoking Public Service Announcements began at virtually the same time as the Virginia Slims advertising campaign was launched on U.S. airwaves.

My parents both smoked heavily, and their smoking was a constant source of acute irritation to me throughout childhood. And they weren't the only ones. Virtually every adult member of my extended family smoked, and it seemed to me that the vast majority of all adults were smokers as well, happily puffing away cigarette after cigarette, filling my world with a toxic haze that I could never seem to escape, no matter where I went. I wondered endlessly how anybody could deliberately and repeatedly fill their bodies with thick clouds of cigarette smoke when I couldn't even stand to get a whiff of the stuff.

And yet it was obvious that smoking was somehow pleasurable at the same time. Noxious, but clearly pleasurable to those who did it. And when I wasn't overcome with secondhand smoke, I did find the image of smoking to be visually striking and very dramatic looking, perhaps even because I did find it irritating.

The riddle of why anyone would want to smoke was also compounded by the widely differing messages that I absorbed from the media, which at one end of the spectrum painted smoking as sexy, independent, and glamorous, and which painted it at the other as dirty, deadly, and dangerous.

I remember one PSA from the early 1970s in particular very clearly. A mother is playing with her young daughter on her lap as a voice-over proclaims: *"This is life..."* The mother reaches out of the frame and retrieves a smoldering cigarette and lifts it to her lips to take a drag. The frame freezes as the voice-over continues:

*"...this cuts it short."*

I instantly related to the scene on the television screen, because I had played it out countless times in my young life with my own mother. I became terrified that smoking was going to kill my parents and take them away from me, and I begged them both repeatedly to quit, to no avail.

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It seemed so simple to me, so absolutely cut and dry. Cigarette smoking will kill you. And from the tender age of six or so, I understood that it is very difficult and perhaps impossible to stop smoking once you start. All I had to do was look at my own parents, who doted on me and catered to my every whim as their only child, but who absolutely would not, or could not, quit smoking for me, for themselves, or for anyone.

And every anti-smoking lecture, film, filmstrip, and demonstration that I received while in grade school deepened my fear of smoking to the point that it almost became a phobia for me, with the only small consolation being that I could escape the trap that my parents and so many others had fallen into. I took comfort in the thought that I would never smoke, and my parents even took pride in the thought that their daughter would be happier and healthier than they were. At least she would avoid their mistakes, even if they couldn't seem to undo theirs.

I also had a precocious and perhaps somewhat unusual interest in the human body, and my favorite toys were not dolls or coloring books; my favorite toys were encyclopedias and anatomical model kits from hobby stores. I was in absolute awe of the human body in all of its exquisite detail and fantastically varied and inter-related forms, and I had a deep respect for life that extended to environmental concerns. I saw my body as a microcosm and extension of the world around me, and just as I was disturbed by the sight of a smokestack belching poisons into the air, I was also disturbed by the sight of people polluting their bodies when they smoked.

But the tobacco companies would be delighted to learn that despite my intuitive grasp of just how toxic and obviously addictive their product was, and despite all of the effective efforts of the Public Health Campaign on me, I found myself repeatedly drawn to the vast array of cigarette print advertising in my mother's magazines by the time I was approaching adolescence.

The urge to study these ads felt very much like that moment when you look down from the window or ledge of a tall building and recognize that if you fall from your present height, you will almost certainly die. In such moments, a part of you also tends to recognize that you have incredible power to control the course of your life, because you could always jump and just end it there. For some, the experience results in psychogenic vertigo. For me, seeing cigarette advertising in this way strongly shaped my adult Fetish Identity.

I studied the FTC report tar and nicotine content numbers listed in small type in the cigarette print ads to the point that I actually had most of them memorized by the time I was ten or

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eleven, because I would occasionally entertain the thought that if I were ever to try a cigarette, at least I could try one that was the least dangerous of those available. But I would always quickly dismiss the idea of smoking even one cigarette as being unthinkable to me, because I had this idea drilled into me that smoking even one cigarette would damage my body and shorten my life by a few minutes. And the idea that each cigarette you smoke leaves a residue of toxins in your body was something that also made intuitive sense to me.

It seemed to me that once you smoked your first cigarette, it made you forever dirty inside, and you could never be completely "clean" ever again. And part of me desperately wanted to remain "clean."

Thinking about cigarette smoking evoked deep and equal measures of fear and fascination for me. It was the thing that I was never to do, the step outside The Garden that would forever deny me reentry, my own private Pandora's Box.

In other words, cigarette smoking had become deeply invested with all of the mythic energy of a Taboo for me, and I wasn't even an adolescent yet.

I became fully conscious of my lesbian identity during the fall of my sophomore year in high school, and my first sexual experiences involved returning to my mother's magazines and masturbating while fantasizing about the models, especially the cigarette ad models.

Scattered throughout each glossy slim volume was page after page of smiling, confident, playful, sexy, independent, beautiful women with lit cigarettes proudly held between their elegant fingers. And juxtaposed with each of these images of vibrant femininity was a black and white box proclaiming the danger that the woman is putting herself in, as well as a statement of just how much tar and nicotine will end up in her lungs as a result of smoking the freshly lit cigarette in her manicured hand.

I reflected endlessly on the idea that the smoking women portrayed in the ads were all a little "dirty" inside, all a little "toxic" inside, all a little "damaged" inside, which was in direct contrast to the image of perfection that they seemed to embody on the outside. These ads, which to me represented danger and death in the guise of the very essence of life itself - healthy feminine sex appeal - focused the ongoing emotional charge of the Taboo violation of smoking, and

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deeply sexualized it for me.

Nonsmoking women quickly vanished from my newly emerging erotic interests, and I loved to steal glimpses of the other girls and teachers at my school smoking, even if only from afar. But I continued to be much too afraid of smoking to even associate with the kids who smoked, let alone think about trying it, even though I had ample opportunity with two smoking parents and plenty of time to myself.

The remainder of high school and most of college passed for me in much the same way, admiring smokers from afar, before I reached out and finally opened what was to be my own personal Pandora's Box.

In my case, it happened to be a flip-top box of Virginia Slims menthol 120s purchased from a convenience store on a chilly late Sunday night during the fall semester of my senior year. And just to underscore the irony of the timing, I was completing an honors degree in Biology with an emphasis in Human Anatomy and Physiology.

I eventually just became so tired of living up to all of the expectations that I had set for myself, and those that I perceived others held for me. I was ready to be imperfect, and eager to finally attempt to solve the riddle of smoking that I had carried around with me for the whole of my conscious life.

After a week of tentative experimentation with uninhaled puffs in the privacy of my apartment, I accidentally inhaled a puff of cigarette smoke for the first time in my life, momentarily held it deep in my lungs without even first realizing that I was doing it, and then watched the smoke stream from my lips and spread out in the sunlight of my kitchen like tranquility made visible. I felt the rush of nicotine in my head for the first time, and the tingling of cigarette smoke in my respiratory tract was a deep sensual caress unlike anything I had ever felt or imagined it could feel like.

I knew that I would never be the same after that moment, because just as my lungs could never quite be completely clean again, my relationship with my body had been forever changed as well. Once I had violated the Taboo that smoking had become for me, there was nothing to stop me from doing it again, and again, and again.

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And of course I did.

Perhaps fear and lust are opposite sides of the same psychological coin, because that part of me that used to tremble inside at the dangers of smoking as a child became deeply aroused as an adult over the idea of conditioning my body to be able to deliberately embrace risk. The connection between fear and lust had really been there since puberty for me, but it didn't reach its fullest bloom until I had lost the "virginity" of my lungs to that first inhaled puff of Virginia Slims menthol smoke.

For me, the transformation from aversion to acceptance conveyed a psychological thrill of self-dominance, a thrill that I continue to experience the echoes of to this day, every time I light up another cigarette. And the thought that I share in an intimate variation of the same ritual of sensual risk taking with women all over the world everyday endlessly enchants and excites me.

It simply feels so deliciously Good to be so very, very Bad.

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**Vesperae's discussion and DS multimedia forum:**

[The Sublime Desire of Cigarette Smoking](#)