Smoking with Mom

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# Smoking with Mom

BY RALPH KEYES

When I try to recall the scent of my mother, what comes to mind is burning tobacco. As she held my little body closely, I could smell its residue on her fingers, and lingering around her lips. If she'd just drawn on a cigarette before hugging me, our bond was confirmed with a puff of smoke. Perhaps that's why the smell of cigarette smoke bothers me less than it does many non-smokers. I detect love in its odor.

Since Mom breast-fed her four children, it's easy to imagine my tiny nose inhaling smoke from her cigarette even as my mouth sucked milk from her nipple. She herself once composed a ditty that went:

> Here I lie,
> On mama's breast
> When she smokes
> She is a pest.

When not in her mouth, a cigarette was like a sixth finger on my mother's hand. It's hard to picture her without one. In the most vivid image I can conjure, a white tube juts from my mother's tightly clenched jaw—straight as an archer's arrow—while she scrapes a match across a matchbook's sandy strip to ignite its glow.

On Sunday mornings Mom couldn't wait to break the spiritual fast of silent worship by stepping outside to light up a cigarette. Although nominally Jewish, she attended Friends Meeting for Worship with my Quaker father. Her favorite Quakers were the ones who joined her in the semi-sacred ritual of lighting each other's cigarettes from matches cupped in hands. Smokers were excellent company, Mom told us. She said that the most congenial passengers on long train rides could always be found in the club car, passing around packages of cigarettes and holding fire to each other's lips. That's where my mother liked to be. Cigarettes were her letter of introduction, an icebreaker, a social lubricant, and a first-rate smokescreen.

While growing up, it never occurred to me to wish my mother wasn't a smoker. Weren't all mothers? I may also have sensed that smoking made her *happy*. Later I would say *less unhappy*. But as a child I didn't think that way. Then I only saw her as a warm woman with huge gray-blue eyes, frizzy brown hair, and a wide mouth from which words and laughter continually spilled, like balls of gum pouring from a broken gumball machine. As an adult I wondered what lay beneath that exuberance. As I child I didn't wonder. My mother was simply a woman who greeted me with hugs and cookies after school, then sat me beside her at the dining room table so we each could *write*.

I wrote with crayon on newsprint. Mom wrote with a mechanical pencil on lined pages of a spiral-bound notebook. A gleaming cigarette usually nestled between the index and middle fingers of her left hand, or sat smoldering in the ashtray beside her. As she wrote and smoked, my mother talked about her childhood. She told me how she and her friend Pat Glasgow used to rub cigarette ashes into their seventh-grade homework so their teachers would know whom they were up against. She told me about "The Snifflers," a club she formed with friends in junior high school that was dedicated to reading books, writing poems, and smoking cigarettes. She told me about the speakeasies she frequented as a young teenager, about hitchhiking around Philadelphia, and about another friend named June who became a show dancer.

As she told me these stories, Mom scribbled furiously in her notebook. This was a habit she'd acquired as a young girl. Recording her thoughts on paper felt like preparation for her career. From an early age my mother knew what she'd be when she grew up: a famous writer with bohemian tendencies. "I am extremely unconventional," she'd written at thirteen. "I love to flirt and am not averse to necking and kissing a man—if I like him! . . . I am fond of swearing and smoking and I am a 'wet,' but I only like wine and highballs, having never tasted whiskey or champagne."

This thought is scrawled in volume three of the twenty-six notebooks my mother left behind. These journals are filled with philosophical musings and autobiographical notes. In the margins are doodles of women with cigarettes hanging from their lips. Neatly folded inside an early notebook is the typed manifesto of the "Gotta Getta Guy Chapter of the NIGHT CLUB FOR INDEPENDENT SNIFFLERS":

> Oh, Snifflers are we, are we, are we,
> Snifflers till we fall . . .
> For goddamn we'd rather be Snifflers

Than anything else at all!
——-
Seagull, turtle, dove,
What do we love?
Chesterfields, Chesterfields,
Rah, rah, rah!
——-
What do we always get on a date?
What is it that Snifflers hate, hate, hate?
Luckies!

Long after the Snifflers took their stand, I watched public relations pioneer Edward Bernays being interviewed on television. Bernays recalled with a chuckle how he fulfilled an early assignment from the American Tobacco Company to make smoking more acceptable for women. A psychiatrist had told him that for many women smoking was both a "sublimation of oral eroticism" and a symbol of freedom. That's why Bernays recruited a group of debutantes to march down Fifth Avenue on Easter Sunday in 1929, waving lit cigarettes. This "parade" was front-page news. Probably my fifteen-year-old mother heard about it. Perhaps she imagined herself marching, too, holding her cigarette high, a walking Statue of Liberty. If so, Edward Bernays certainly won a convert in Charlotte Schachmann. My mother was a dedicated smoker of cigarettes for over half a century, until she died of lung cancer at sixty-six.

Mom and her friend Pat started smoking at twelve. Decades later, Pat told me that one reason they began smoking, drinking, and running around with boys at such an early age was to escape from their homes. Her own parents were divorced, and Mom's should have been. Pat, who became a psychiatric social worker, said my mother's family was dysfunctional long before that concept became a psychological commonplace.

Mom's dentist father was a charming philanderer. One of her notebooks includes a profile of him. "Very handsome," she wrote, "with broad cheekbones, a slender, well-shaped nose with interesting flared nostrils, and beautifully modeled lips." My mother portrayed her father as an old-world gentleman who routinely kissed the hands of women, including her own. "He smoked with great grace," Mom added. "I used to love to watch his curved, graceful fingers holding the cigarette."

In pictures of her taken at Penn State, Mom routinely held a cigarette. These pictures show a voluptuous young woman who liked to strike sultry poses. In one she pulls her skirt up to mid-thigh. In another she laces her finger behind her head and splays both elbows wide. Here Mom throws her chest out like Mae West. There she braces one hand on her hip, Garbo-like. The cigarettes she held were often used as a prop in these poses. Sometimes she held one aloft, like Bette Davis about to say something droll.

Throughout her college career, Mom wrote poems, stories, and essays. Some were published by Penn State's literary magazine. In every story cigarettes were part of the action or, once, the pipes she and Pat sometimes smoked to save money and shock classmates.

According to Pat, cigarettes were a common medium of exchange at Depression-era Penn State. Many co-eds gave the nod to men who supplied them with cigarettes. My mother wasn't among them. Even though she was surrounded by men thrusting cigarettes at her, and could barely afford to buy her own, Mom ended up with a soft-spoken upperclassman named Scott Keyes who was so poor she sometimes provided them both with cigarettes.

Scott later wrote some notes about a typical evening they spent in his apartment: "I remember you there, pecking away at the typewriter when you were getting out one of your stories for a contest. Sometimes we would lie on the bed for a while; at other times you would come over to my table, and put your arms around me while I worked. In your lighthearted thoughtfulness you would leave some cigarettes for me from your pack; for I never bought them, always smoking a pipe, except when we were together."

Smoking never had the same resonance for Scott that it did for his wife-to-be. For him it was more of a pastime, something he could take or leave, or give up altogether, as he did in his forties. For Mom smoking was far more than a pastime. For her it was closer to a passion.

I think one reason smoking meant so much to my mother during her forty-two years of marriage to Scott was that it was a last vestige, a single thread tying her to a rambunctious past. Also, in her time writers smoked. Smoking and writing, writing and smoking; to aspiring authors like my mother it might have seemed that one couldn't happen without the other. Mom had more success as a smoker than as an author, however. She left behind a file cabinet full of mostly unpublished literary efforts spanning six decades. They begin with *Two Jolly Friends,* a novella penciled into a composition book, and end with

*Peacenik,* an aborted 70s-era novel written longhand on three-hole punched paper. My mother's archives include her journals, lots of poems and stories in manuscript, published biographies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Herman Melville for young adults, "Four at the Breast," a small magazine piece about breast-feeding her children when few mothers did, a few published poems, and one article in a national publication—*McCall's*.

That wasn't the *oeuvre* Mom had in mind as a young Sniffler. Mom always felt frustrated by not having won the literary recognition she'd felt sure would be hers. Writers usually have ways to explain why they didn't publish more, and my mother was no exception. Mom thought marriage and motherhood had derailed her literary career. She told me this often. My mother felt trapped as a housewife, marooned in a more conventional life than the one she'd dreamed of as a budding Virginia Woolf. Long before Betty Friedan wrote *The Feminine Mystique,* Mom objected vehemently to the lot of housewives and mothers. She enlisted her four children as allies. We grew up with aching sympathy for a mother who hadn't realized her literary potential because she'd been shanghaied into domestic service.

Mom was willing to let Dad be our family's breadwinner. After graduating from Penn State he spent his career working as an economist, planner, and professor. Mom worked intermittently, teaching preschoolers and clerking at a library. But these stints—undertaken when we were strapped for cash—distracted my mother from what she considered her real job: writing. Even worse was the distraction of keeping house.

In the summertime Mom wore shorts and a halter as she swept, mopped, and vacuumed our home in State College, Pennsylvania, a cork-tipped Raleigh cigarette dangling from her lips, or one she paid her kids a penny apiece to make for her in a little roll-your-own machine. Penn State co-eds who roomed with us sometimes followed her about, chatting. They seemed to enjoy my mother's company. So did their boyfriends, who nicknamed Mom "S.W." Years later I discovered that this stood for "Sexy Witch."

Like Mom, I started smoking at twelve. I was "caught" by her after my second cigarette. Probably I wanted Mom to know. Why else would I light up in front of my eight-year-old brother and six-year-old sister? Not that our mother seemed upset when they tattled. Then, as always,

she was ambivalent about my smoking. Mom never actually encouraged me to smoke. Nor did she say I couldn't, or shouldn't. I probably wished she had. Why start smoking at all when you're twelve if not to horrify your parents?

I can still recall the flavor of my first cigarettes: a sharp, acrid taste, filled with rebellion and communion. Done as an act of defiance, smoking actually brought me closer to my mother. Pro forma she counseled me against this habit. But in subtle ways I sensed her approval when I smoked, and disappointment when I stopped seven years later. Dad had long since left the fraternity of smokers. Now Mom had company again. Or so she thought. Despite my mother's invitation to join her—"as long as you're smoking anyway"—holding out her package of Kents, a cigarette for me sticking up from its depths, I always demurred. Who wants to smoke with Mom? Instead I took to sneaking cigarettes in my bedroom or when carousing with pals, as if this activity were just as illicit for me as it was for them. Except it wasn't. Far from increasing the distance from my mother, smoking narrowed it. We didn't just share a love of cigarettes. We also shared a smoker's outlook. Were we timid, respectable people, strait-jacketed by a fear of dying? Hardly. The proof glowed between our fingers.

I think Mom loved the *idea* of smoking cigarettes as much as filling her lungs with smoke. Smokers were bold. They took their life into their own hands. There was magic in the fumes they created. While filling the air with clouds of combustion, my mother may have seen herself as a more imposing figure than five-foot Charlotte Schachmann from West Philadelphia. Surrounding by billowing smoke she had much in common with a circus performer being shot from a cannon. When holding a cigarette delicately between her index and middle fingers Mom might have imagined she was Greta Garbo, about to be swept into John Gilbert's arms.

Just as my mother once struck Garbo poses, I took to wearing motorcycle boots like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One,* sulking moodily as James Dean did in *Rebel Without a Cause,* and putting a sneer in my smile as if I were Elvis Presley chatting with Ed Sullivan. If smoking couldn't get a rise out of my mother, maybe boots like Brando's would, a hat like his, and a jacket that read THE SATANS, even if The Satans were a mere parody of a gang, one that was threatening only to its members' mothers.

None of it worked. The only item of clothing I ever wore that got

a reaction from my mother was a black shirt. That pushed her political buttons—"No son of mine is going to look like a Fascist blackshirt!"—and she forbade me to wear it.

As a one-time hell-raiser herself Mom undoubtedly knew what I was up to. On the surface she didn't seem alarmed when the police called to say they were questioning me about being part of a burglary ring. (I wasn't; my best friend was.) Yet she must have known better than anyone the danger I was courting, and the inner turmoil that pushed me to the brink.

To firm up my bad-boy credentials I added drinking to my smoking, and roaring around late at night in friends' cars. After I became the only one of Mom's four kids to follow in her rowdy footsteps, cigarettes became part of our bond. Or was it our bind?

The knots of this bond-bind grew especially taut during my rocky adolescence. After raising two teenagers of my own, I came to understand better the grip of love and rage in which Mom and I held each other. As an adolescent I was only aware of how frustrating it was to rebel against a tolerant mother who'd taken risks of her own. As a parent, I can see the ambivalence this must have created in her. How should a mother respond to risky behavior she'd once indulged in herself?

We were too much alike to have an easy relationship. The deeper I got into adolescence, the edgier that relationship grew. Our interaction consisted mainly of pitched battles. One of the few times in my life that I got anything like a spontaneous, heartfelt comment from my mother was when, early in high school, I stood behind her in our kitchen, pressing some demand as she stirred a pot on the stove. Finally Mom dropped her spoon, spun around, and said, "You know, I don't like you." Those words still reverberate in my memory. Did she mean just at that moment? Or while I was being a surly adolescent? Or forever and all time? I never dared to ask.

Even after arguments became our main means of communication, it wasn't our only means. I still discussed any and all subjects with my mother. When girls began to interest me, she became my consultant. Mom said a woman might try to arouse my interest by fluttering her eyelashes down my cheek, then demonstrated how she would do this by brushing her own lashes down my cheek. My mother assured me that I was a good-looking boy, but added that even more than good looks something called "sex appeal" was what counted in the mating marketplace. Mom also discussed French kissing with me. That was

something she hadn't cared for. Whenever a man tried to stick his tongue in her mouth, Mom said, she pushed it out with her own.

This was one of many ways in which my mother reminded me that she'd once been a woman for men to reckon with. That was hard for me to picture. Mom's face wrinkled early, especially around the lips that had clenched so many cigarettes. Her nose grew more prominent with age, her hair more sparse. She seldom wore makeup. My mother's everyday outfits were whatever she found on sale at J. C. Penney or a Goodwill thrift shop. Her dress-up look was semi-bohemian—hoop earrings in earlobes pierced long before that was common, ruffled peasant blouse, plain skirt, and sensible shoes—as if she'd started out to be fully bohemian but lost interest along the way.

I left for college with some relief on both our parts. Distance lanced the boil of our tension. When I came home on vacation we'd chatter up a storm. What courses are you taking? How do you like your profs? Isn't Vietnam outrageous? Despite our renewed rapport, we continued to argue. During one heated discussion about abortion Mom gave me a knowing look, then said, "Girls in your generation weren't the first ones to get abortions, you know."

The sixties were in full swing and Mom was swinging with them. She demonstrated against the war, took up yoga (or at least read books about it), switched from white bread to whole wheat, and ate the occasional bean sprout. Without irony she began calling herself "a health nut."

There were still the cigarettes, though. Mom smoked as much as ever. She took to carrying a little folding ashtray in her purse so she could smoke politely wherever she happened to be. Changing times put my mother in a bind. For most of her life, smoking was part and parcel of a bohemian lifestyle. A cigarette in one hand and *Das Kapital* in the other made for a dashing figure. During Mom's middle age, however, smoking developed a bad odor among radicals. Dissidents became more concerned with health than dash. As the popularity of Karl Marx waned, that of Andrew Weil soared. This left my mother stranded with a habit she couldn't break and didn't want to break.

Mom considered her lifelong relationship with cigarettes more romance than addiction. This makes better sense to me today than it did then. Smoking, we know now, can be a potent anti-depressant. Undoubtedly it was for my mother. She called cigarettes "little points

of happiness all through the day." I'm sure Mom's exuberance was at least partly nicotine-induced. How could she not love a substance that was her ally in the struggle against depression?

In notes for an essay titled "My Lady Nicotine," my mother defended her lifelong affair with cigarettes:

*I have never joined the ranks of those smokers who admit they don't really enjoy smoking, that it's just a nervous habit (though I'll confess; occasionally I nervously take one & there's no joy at all). But almost every cigarette I smoke is a delight. There's an "ahhhh" to that long inhalation—especially the first one of the morning that accompanies pre-breakfast coffee. But there are also deep breaths of bliss at others during the day—when I pause for a rest and smoke; when I've put off having one for awhile; when I'm doing something I dislike—usually housework—and the smoke & the breathing take the curse off the monotony of the chores. The ever-present fear of cancer does, of course, mar the complete bliss. Where did I read that part of the tremendous condemnation of smoking arises from the puritanism of the United States people which sees all pleasure as sinful? I much prefer the attitude of the Delaware Indians who felt "Tobacco smoke pleases all spirits."*

After leaving the ranks of smokers early in college, I urged Mom to join me. Breaking this habit improved my breath, I told her, my stamina, and sense of smell. Food tasted better. My fingers lost their yellowish stain. I didn't miss smoking at all. I did miss the fellowship of smokers, including my mother.

Whether or not one should smoke joined our many subjects of contention:

*"Mom, the Surgeon General's report says it could kill you."*

"We all have to die sometime."

*"But it's such a nasty habit."*

"I don't consider it a habit. It's just something I like to do."

*"How about its effect on the people around you?"*

"Don't be such a Puritan."

During our constant chatter there were few limits on what Mom and I could discuss. The only taboo topic was how we felt about each other. I don't recall ever saying "I love you" to my mother, or hearing her say those words to me. Not that we didn't love each other. Or not that I didn't love her, anyway. There were just too many footnotes,

asterisks, caveats, and qualifying phrases to say those three words outright. Our relationship was chatty, warm, and wary. Only once do I remember hugging my mother in other than a hello or goodbye clench. That was in the kitchen of our home when she was upset about something and I embraced her as I'd learned to do in encounter groups. At first Mom tensed. Then she relaxed and let me hold her. I got the impression that this felt dangerous.

I don't think relationships were easy for my mother. Not that she didn't try. On their thirty-eighth anniversary, Mom wrote to her husband:

The years they are
Thirty-eight
And every one
Has been just great
With my Scott
My love, my mate

Love poems notwithstanding, I doubt that Mom ever resolved her ambivalence about being married, and leading a relatively conventional existence as a wife and mother. But she did her best. Unlike so many unconventional mothers, Charlotte Schachmann Keyes accepted the responsibility of being a wife and parent. She realized that she had to choose between raising hell and raising children. Mom chose.

Dad was not ambivalent, at least about being married. Late in life my father told me often how passionate he was about his wife. On the surface Scott Keyes was a reserved Quaker WASP. Beneath that surface beat the lusty heart of a panting Byron.

On the eve of their fortieth wedding anniversary, Scott wrote this poem for Charlotte:

GOLDEN YEARS
It's so wonderful when
You're in my arms
And the tip of your cigarette's
Glowing
And gently you put your
Lips on mine
And between us the smoke is
Flowing.
Soon we'll be on the
Other side, and
Just think—there we'll
Be able

To light up again in the
Same old way
And forget what it says on the label.

A few months after he composed this poem my father wrote me a letter, something he seldom did. In his letter Dad said that a "spot" had been found on Mom's lung during a routine checkup. There was no need to get upset. Her doctors were looking into it.

They found a tumor. This tumor was malignant. The half million cigarettes my mother smoked in over half a century's time had finally collected their toll.

After losing part of a lung to the surgeon's knife, my mother finally stopped smoking. She wasn't happy about it. Mom said she enjoyed none of the benefits I'd promised her: better sense of smell, taste, breath, stamina. By then it was probably too late. She just missed her cigarettes. Later I learned that Mom had Dad smuggle some into her hospital room.

Continuing to smoke was part of Mom's fantasy that she was on the mend. This was a fantasy, of course. It lasted only a few weeks. Dad and I were with my mother at the end. I'd been on a book promotion tour. My contribution to the illusion that she wasn't dying was to go on that tour as if her future looked bright. By the time I reached San Diego it was obvious that it didn't. Dad called me there to report that the doctors thought Mom didn't have long to live. After canceling Houston and Atlanta, I went home and spent my mother's last two days in her hospital room.

A hospital is a wretched place to die: cold, barren, sterile. Tubes tie you to your bed. Roommates overhear the grief of your visiting relatives. Doctors summon them into the hallway to ask what plans have been made for the body. Yet—if you're pretending you're not dying—then you're presumably getting better and a hospital is the place to be.

This was our outlook at Carle Hospital, in Champaign, Illinois. We dealt with my mother's impending death by avoiding the subject. That was fine with me. To keep up appearances she, Dad, and I tried to act "normal." We made small talk, cracked jokes, kept things light. On the surface this seemed gutsy; grace under pressure. In retrospect, I think it's a miserable way to die and be with someone who's dying. Because in order to express the important, the felt, the unsaid words you want to say—words like, "I know it hasn't always been easy for us, Mom, but I've always loved you and wouldn't want anyone else to

have been my mother"—you must face the fact that the end is near. To maintain an illusion that death can be beat, however, no one can say anything of consequence. Doing so implies that time's running out. What you do instead is try to keep things light and laugh a lot.

All of this is hindsight, however. At the time I was as active as anyone in Keeping Up Appearances. Not long after Mom's second son joined her husband by her bed in Illinois when he was supposed to be on a talk show in Houston, she broke through a morphine haze to say, "We're kidding ourselves, aren't we?"

"About what?" I asked.

"About my getting better," she murmured.

This threw me. I didn't know how to respond. So I said, "What would you rather do?" That's a little technique I learned from psychologist friends: turn a touchy question back on the questioner and play for time.

"Go to sleep," Mom replied. And she did. My tactic worked. I successfully deflected my mother's one attempt to get us to face her death.

All of this took me years to sort out. Today, I wish we'd faced my mother's death more squarely. I wish she'd died at home, in her own bed, without tubes up her nose, technicians doing x-rays, roommates eavesdropping, and doctors whispering nearby. Instead of a hospital I wish she'd died in a comfortable, familiar setting surrounded by as much of her family as possible. What I really wish is that Mom's cancer had never been found. If her tumor had grown at its own pace undetected, I think my mother would have lived longer, died better, and enjoyed more the life she had remaining—surrounded by clouds of smoke.