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# The Art of Smoking, What a Beautiful Drag This Ritual Is

Tilt the cig, tap the ash: one man's cancer stick is another's man's wand of dreams

Different things make different non-smokers happy. All smokers are united by one thing that offers happiness: the pleasure to be had from a puff. David Hockney explained it with true painterly precision. The artist once said, 'Smoking calms me. It's enjoyable. I don't want politicians deciding what is exciting in my life.'

Now spare me the infantilism. If I had ₹10 for every time someone said, 'But it's bad for you, you know!' I wouldn't need to work for a living. I know, I know. But here we are. We, the exiles and the outcasts of our puritanical, freedom-curbing, politically correct times. We, the sneer gatherers and the condemnation magnets. But when it comes to this vile love of ours, we have our own code of enjoyment.

In his 1994 book, *Cigarettes Are Sublime*, Richard Klein, a professor of French at Cornell University, describes cigarettes as 'one of the most interesting and significant cultural artifacts produced by modernity' and 'a great and beautiful civilising tool'. Indeed. You would expect no less in a book that its author calls an 'ode to cigarettes'.

Klein tells us how cigarettes help in abating anxiety, encouraging introspection, or creating a bubble for oneself amid the noise of the world. So what that he wrote the book as therapy when he quit smoking? Or so he said.

One of the things smokers are consciously, as well as subconsciously, aware of is the ritualistic aspect of smoking. Taking the thing out, tapping the end to be lit on a hard surface, rolling it gently between thumb and index finger, or dangling it between index and middle fingers, drawing out the process, delaying the pleasure, and indulging in the fact that the anticipation of pleasure is keener than the pleasure itself.

And then lighting it, holding it in a certain way, (don't get me started on elegant smokers), letting it smoulder and burn down, always conscious of the manner and angle at which we flick the ash, inhaling ourselves to the nothingness of 'butt-ends of our days and ways'. One of our most convivial and enjoyable social exchanges is to offer a light to a fel-



## WHERE THERE'S SMOKE THERE IS FIRE

low smoker — or be offered one.

A key elements of this ritualistic pleasure-seeking is the pack itself. Or it once used to be in this country. Tapping the packet, easing it open, sliding a cigarette out, coaxing it upwards with a flick at the bottom of the pack if it was full and its contents all snugly sat together. There was the beauty of the pack itself, the solid reassurance of it lying on the table, its top open at a slight angle. The pleasure was visual, tactile, and olfactory. The repulsive warnings made mandatory on cigarette packs in India have now killed off that aspect of the ritual.

On a recent long holiday in New York, having exhausted the cigarettes I had travelled with, I had to buy them over there. And there it was again. A smooth, glossy white pack embossed with gold, pristine in its beauty, elegant in its design, on the front only the brand name and a tag line about the quality of the flavour. I ran my fingers over it. Tucked away on the side of the pack was a warning about how smoking when pregnant can harm your baby. I nodded in agreement. Yes, I agree, I can completely get behind that.

Governments will never dissuade serious smokers by putting ghoulish pictures on cigarette packets (or by taxing cigarettes inordinately). In my case, when the warnings were made mandatory, I bought an elegant cigarette case. Quite retro chic. Ever since, I look the other way as I unwrap the cellophane on the pack, flick it open and, still looking the other way, transfer what Klein calls the 'wand of dreams' into my case. I snap it shut and toss the pack away. But it detracts from the ritualistic pleasure.

In America, I rediscovered that aspect of the ritual. It has been so long. I had forgotten what an inalienable part of smoking it used to be.

*The writer is author of *Thirteen Kinds of Love**