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Love is like a cigarette

"Tobacco is a dirty weed. I like it. It satisfies no normal need. I like it. It makes you thin, it makes you lean, it takes the hair right off your bean. It's the worst darn stuff I've ever seen. I like it." (Graham Lee Hemminger, poet who became an advertising man for tobacco.)

"A cigarette is the perfect type of a perfect pleasure. It is exquisite, and it leaves one unsatisfied. What more can one want?" (Oscar Wilde, "The Picture of Dorian Gray.")

Yes, this is an article about smoking (disclosure: I've been an advocate for tobacco control for almost a dozen years, an ex-smoker for 31), but not quite what you'd think. It's about the centuries-old love affair with cigarettes, no matter their foul taste, rancid lingering smell, and their role in premature death from several dozen horrid diseases.

Long before the tobacco industry 'fessed up — sort of — to what smoking could do and how hard it is to quit, Tex Williams sang,

Smoke, smoke, smoke that cigarette.

Puff, puff, puff until you smoke yourself to death.

Tell St. Peter at the Golden Gate

That you hate to make him wait,

But you just gotta have another cigarette.

Something about the buzz from nicotine, 200 hits on the brain's pleasure center for the pack-a-day smoker; the ritual of lighting up, deep inhalation and that stuff with fingers; the romance as Paul Henreid lit Betty Davis' smoke in "Now, Voyager." But then the inevitable disappointment, followed by renewed craving — small wonder cigarettes became the metaphor for love, sex, regret and heartbreak. Life. Frank Sinatra touched that chord when he sang

A cigarette that bears a lipstick's traces,

An airline ticket to romantic places

And still my heart has wings

These foolish things remind me of you.

And remember Bing Crosby's poetry, "Two, two cigarettes in the dark, Gone is the flame and the spark, leaving just regrets and two cigarettes in the dark." Or Duke Ellington's plaintive "Love is like a cigarette."

The tobacco companies were masters at playing on this theme, reassuring smokers — and not-yet-smokers in their teen years — and promising allure, adventure, rugged independence, sophistication, pleasure in good company. Between the Marlboro Man and Joe Camel you had the world at your feet.

But there's a major backlash against smoking in many western countries, led by governments and public health officials. You could say it really took off here in Minnesota, in a courthouse in St. Paul almost a decade ago, with the revelations from previously secret tobacco industry documents. The backlash has led to anti-tobacco campaigns on television, bans on smoking in restaurants and bars in many places, and an increasing disdain for smoking and smokers.

But ... a lot of people still enjoy smoking, even if the majority say, when asked, that they'd like to quit. (Mark Twain gave that hope a sharp twist: "To quit smoking is the easiest thing. I ought to know because I've done it a thousand times.")

Is there a limit to how an adult's right to a private pleasure is regulated, even if it is harmful, even if terrifically addicting? Artists like David Hockney and Sean Penn see such regulation as censorship, an attack on

personal freedom. Indoor smoking in public spaces may be one thing, but many municipalities are also banning smoking in parks and on beaches.

Some legislators want to ban smoking in cars that carry young children. Some corporations are refusing to hire smokers and firing employees who won't quit. How far is too far in protecting individual and public health?

I remember a photograph, circa 1900: An old farmer stands by his outhouse holding up a sign that reads, "No government is going to tell me where to [relieve myself]."

Yes, that's the nature of public health: giving advice, making rules on seat belts, motorcycle helmets, fluoridation, water and sewerage, vaccinations, lead, mercury, asbestos, speed limits, spitting in public. We now pretty much accept all that. If I had one wish in life it would be that cigarettes had never been invented, but given the world we live in we have to keep on helping those who want to quit, and stop others from getting started.

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