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{COLUMNIST} DANIEL BARNES

Daniel Barnes has a day job as a philosopher and art critic, but his social life is a one-man mission to explore the depths and excesses of 21st-century gay life. This column offers a glimpse into his misadventures, such as **The Time I Gave Up Smoking...**



I'd like to preach to you about the virtues of giving up smoking, but, in good conscience, I can't. It's an unpleasant process that poses a tangible threat to your intimate relationships. It's good in the long run, but in the short term it sucks. Trust me, I'm a doctor (of sorts).

It all started with a trip to the dentist. As I'm sitting in the chair, the dentist is probing an infected tooth. She does a sharp intake of breath and says, "It's going to have to come out." The next thing I know, she's holding one of my molars in her bloody rubber gloved hand, looking pleased – as though we've just given birth. While beaming with the glow of a thousand suns, she says sternly, "Now, to prevent us doing this several more times before you're 50, you must stop smoking. Today."

A few hours later, I'm giving the hairdresser a roundup of the morning, in the same prosaic way I do most days: "Oh, not much. Went to the gym, found a cheaper brand of spirulina, had a tooth pulled out, gave up smoking."

"You what?!" he says.

"Yeah," I reply, swallowing a bit of blood, "I went into the Turkish market instead of Holland & Barrett and there it was. Such a bargain, and not so middle class." It eventually occurs to me that there are more momentous things going on than blue-green algae: "Yeah, and the dentist said I had to stop smoking. So that's happening." He doesn't believe I can or will do it, and, to be honest, nor do I – but I want to keep my teeth.

A few disgusting things happen when you give up smoking, which non-smokers might be surprised at. Firstly, you cough up your lungs day and night, spluttering like you've got TB. Secondly, and most repellently, your gums excrete years and years of toxic sludge, ruining every meal and every kiss. Thirdly, you cannot get a good night's sleep. All these things are disturbing to you and

whoever is sharing your bed. Add to that the irritability, anxiety and sheer madness of a recovering addict, and relationships are rather strained.

Two months in, and to make up for all the trauma, I take the hairdresser for a curry at that really swish Wetherspoons at Bank. Throughout dinner he just keeps talking, while I'm gazing into the distance behind him. He thinks I'm looking at boys. The truth is, I'm always looking at boys, except for now, when I'm dreaming of a cigarette. Only half with it, I ask him if I can have one and he thinks I mean a boy. He's furious and won't eat his curry. I ignore him and pretend this indelicate situation is not my fault. He's a nice boy, and I'm being a dick, but I just want to smoke and it's obviously his fault that I can't. This pattern repeats itself regularly enough, in various guises, that eventually we both go through the motions as if performing a solemn dance.

After four months, while the cravings have largely subsided, I am sad at having

renounced one of life's great pleasures. Relations with the hairdresser steadily improved, until one day he appears in the doorway of my study brandishing the last issue of *Winq*. "I've told you about this before," he hisses.

"What?" I plead, unsure of quite what I've done wrong.

"You're calling me your 'hairdresser' again, as if I'm some domestic servant," comes the retort. He has objected to this for some months, but he also refuses to call himself my boyfriend. "Well," I say, "you won't recognise our relationship, but you're part of the story. You're the embattled hero in this episode about my not smoking."

He is unimpressed, and concludes, "It doesn't matter anyway. Nobody reading this is going to fancy an idiot who goes to the theatre by himself and then writes about it as if he's the hero." He's right, of course, but I say nothing and think how lucky I am that he stood by me through these rocky, nicotine-free days. ■

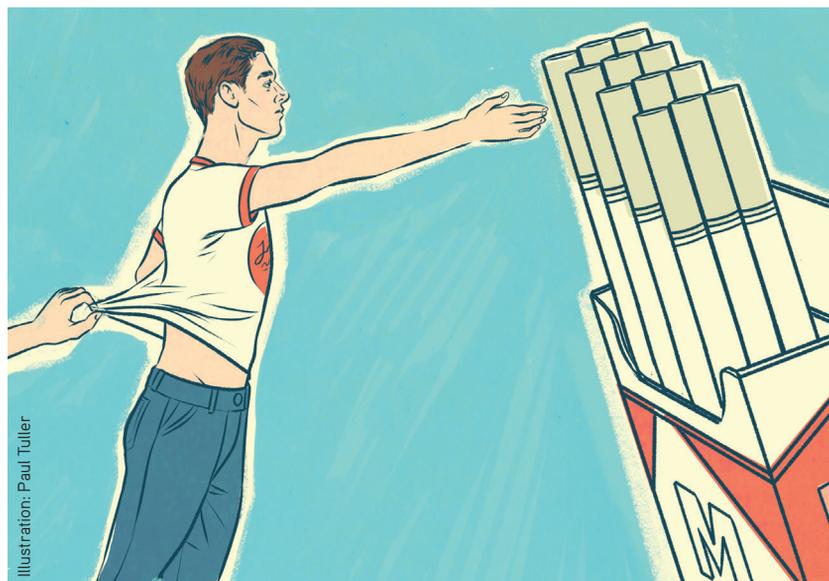


Illustration: Paul Tuller