

Title: Deepavali Cigarettes

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My aunt Marie was a smoker. She loved her cigarettes in the morning; she loved them in the afternoon, the evening and the night – in other words, the time didn't matter in any manner whatsoever. They probably gave her some sense of independence. They probably elevated her to the same level as some actresses who were famous in Bollywood at that time.

We lived in a small cottage at Number 5 Kingston Road, in Richmond Town, Bangalore, in a large compound filled with various trees, and Marie's home was just down the road from us. Therefore, it wasn't infrequently that Marie graced our door to while away her free time behind a curtain of smoke. She'd walk in several times each day, chit-chat, light up, dust away the smoke and ash from her person, vanish through the kitchen door, to reappear later when the urge caught up with her once again. Perhaps my grandparents, Nan and Gramps whom she resided with abhorred the habit.

Marie is the youngest of my mother's five siblings, so she isn't much older than my eldest brother. I would peg that age difference at perhaps eight to nine years (that's how much older I am to my youngest brother.) It was hard to tell then and it continues to be hard to tell now. It's not because my brother looks to be a grand old man. It's because Marie hasn't aged much in all these years; at that time, when we lived at Number 5, Marie, though in her mid-twenties, looked like a teenager. Nevertheless, despite the juvenile looks, she was a strong woman, with an equally volatile demeanour, and none of us wanted the business end of her arm slam across our necks.

At that very time when we were kids, we also had an acquaintance, Uncle Dan who visited very frequently – in fact too frequently. He was not related to us, but the title was still bestowed because he was much, much older – as old as Mum or Dad. He'd come home, flop into a chair, pull out a hidden bottle like a rabbit out of a top hat, and drink away thirstily. He'd smoke as well, as he progressively got more and more drunk, slowly sagging in his chair and finally falling asleep under his deep, loud and irritating "chainsaw" snores.

He had a flat, brown, smooth-shaven face, shaped like a hatchet with long "Elvis Presley" sideburns, and between the helix and antihelix of his bat ears, dark tufts of hair curled out. This man looked like a monkey, smelled like a brewery and none of us liked him much.

One evening in November, as the fireworks of Deepavali crackled in the distance, under an illuminated sky of sparkling sulphur, and my friend Nita's home was brightly lit up in the veranda pot holes by at least a hundred candles, the sot staggered past our door, and mock saluted us by way of greeting. My mother and father were not home from work yet, and Rani our maid was in the kitchen cooking dinner. He sank heavily into a chair, and as he did so, unbeknownst to him dropped a packet of cigarettes to the floor. Then he pulled out a bottle and a packet of small red crackers (called *bijillies* in local parlance) and attempted to shakily hand the latter to my brother. He missed my brother's outstretched hand and the pack of *bijillies* fell to the floor, not a foot away from the cigarettes.

"Go, an' 'ave fun," he drawled, dismissing my brother, who scooped up the packet of fireworks, and in that single move also swiped the cigarettes. Then my brother glanced at Tony, his friend who virtually lived in our house and both disappeared into the bedroom.

I followed, curious to see what was going on, but was shooed out from the room the instant I put my foot in.

Now we lived in a cottage. It was a small, four room affair, if you counted the bathroom as a room as well. The living room area had been a much bigger room – Dad had installed a huge board of ply wood across half the room to make a screen with a doorway that now portioned the living room area where Uncle Dan sat drinking, from what was now the bedroom. This screen was painted blue, was decorated with many drawings and stickers of cartoons, and had a peep hole about an inch in diameter, some four feet from the ground. I promptly applied my eye here and watched as the boys giggled away, opening the cracker packet and the pack of cigarettes.

Then Tony noticed my eye through the peephole and alerted my brother, who instantly hung a heavy coat on a nail on the other side of the board and completely obscured my view.

"I'll tell," I whined.

"What will you tell," I was asked and those words dissolved into muffled laughter.

"That you and Tony are smoking," I replied.

"*Go tell it on the mountain,*" sang my brother.

"*Over the hills and everywhere,*" added Tony in tune and both guffawed in mirth.

So reluctantly I applied myself to my homework and was called a 'good girl' by the inebriated uncle.

A quarter of an hour later, Tony and my brother emerged, one whistling and the other humming their school anthem. Drunken uncle was sucking away at his bottle and smiling at some thought, and I was at the table trying to focus on my studies.

It happened quite smoothly. Tony walked by the kitchen door. My brother was right behind. Both pretended to collide – Tony's rear into my brother's front and I noticed the cigarette pack fall, close to the place it had fallen earlier. One boy's foot toed the pack a little closer to the chair that the boozier almost lay in, and with red faces, and trying hard to control their laughter, they disappeared outside.

I presently finished my homework and was dealing with a confusing school time table for the next day, when I heard the uncle mutter to himself. I turned and watched him search his person – each pocket, under his legs, then his pockets again and finally under the chair.

His searching fingers found the box of smokes and he exclaimed, "aah – found you buggers!"

With a gleam of satisfaction, he clawed at the pack, lit up one avidly and smoked it dreamily. Then he lit another and relaxed in his chair, slowly dropping off into a drunken stupor.

Outside my brother and Tony were banging away at the crackers and I watched them from the doorstep, wondering what they had been up to in the room. If they had smoked any of the cigarettes, I would have heard a matchstick fizz to a fire. Cigarette smoke, in our small home was not easy to conceal, but I got none of the whiff. Perhaps they had saved up two from the pack for later?

At that moment Marie dashed in and flopped into a chair, glancing at the slumbering man who had now begun to snore. She got up and nudged him, and he snorted awake.

"Uh...aah...whaa...what ma?" he asked groggily.

"Do you have a smoke?" she asked flatly.

Uncle Dan clumsily handed her his pack and dropped back into his slumber, muttering unintelligible words. Marie took out one, then she took out another, threw the pack on his lap and marched to the kitchen, where she relieved Rani of the match box for an instant. Then she was back in the room, sinking into her chair and drawing deeply from the cigarette.

I had just closed my satchel and was putting it into its place for easy retrieval the next day, when I heard an angry fizz and a yell.

I can see it in slow motion now.

There was Marie relaxed and enjoying her smoke, when a sudden cloud of white, sulphur smoke enveloped her face, and from within that thick curtain a streak of angry flickers erupted, leaping forward in one ferocious flame of red, blue, green and orange sparks. Then the cigarette issued forth, flying forward like a missile as Marie spat it out and leapt up like a spring from her chair, frantically beating her chest and neck. The drunken uncle snorted awake, Rani ran into the room shouting, and Tony and my brother stopped their games and barged into the house.

The offensive cigarette was now on the floor, burning away slowly with ruminants of a sparky, blue flame, and Marie turned an indignant glare upon all of us.

Then with one deft movement she lunged forward, grabbed the drunken uncle by his collars, lifted him bodily from the chair and threw him right past the door of the house, where he crashed untidily in the dust outside, totally stunned.

The second cigarette she had swiped from the pack followed next, and she flung it with precision; it bounced off his face and landed by his ear, cushioned by the tufts of hair that curled out from his pinna.

Then she washed her mouth thoroughly and left, very, very annoyed.

Tony picked up the cigarette by Uncle Dan's ear, furtively examined it and shook his head at my red-faced brother. It wasn't hard to notice that they were doing all they could to control their laughter.

Uncle Dan, meanwhile heaved himself up and staggered away, muttering and cursing, dusting himself and absolutely astonished; and perhaps a little sobered up now. The two boys watched him leave, still red faced and laughing silently into each other's necks.

"One down," said my brother with a smothered laugh. "One to go."

"Marie got a dud," Tony chortled. "Did you see her jump?"

The drunken uncle never returned to our home, but years later, while on my summer holidays at my other Nan's farm, I caught a glimpse of him. Under his nose, on his upper lip was a tiny scar that looked like a single suture. He was slumped in an arm-chair, under the veranda 'three sheets to the wind' with a green pack of 'Honey Dew Golden Virginia' on his lap, and a self-made smoke smouldering between his trembling fingers.

He wasn't taking chances with packaged cigarettes again.

And Marie? For a long time after that she tried to fight the habit, though unsuccessfully. It was a laugh to see her all decked up on Christmas Day, or on Easter, or at someone's wedding with glitter, glamour, lipstick, powder and paint, sitting at a table with elegant ladies, and puffing away at a humble but obnoxious 'beedi.'

Now who could possibly shove a *bijillie* into one of those things?