

Nicotine

Fiction by Toti O'Brien

When I work with my favorite clay (Jamaica—with its chocolate hue, its rich, dense, oily consistency) my hands get a brown stain soap doesn't dissolve. Nothing permanent. It gradually vanishes by itself. But I find my temporary tan kind of pleasant.

It reminds me of my two grandfathers. Both chain smokers, one died of lung cancer at age sixty-nine, the other—much later—of tobacco-unrelated causes. Cigarettes, held by index and thumb, squeezed against the middle finger, were responsible for the other taint of their skin—here more yellow, there darker.

My grandpas didn't share a same background. One was lower class, metal smith by profession. The other had studied as an engineer. He got down and dirty anyway—on construction sites, in the orchard. He cut wood and pruned, he churned and shoveled concrete.

I loved those large, patched, multicolored hands I trustfully held. They looked gorgeous. They meant capability, experience. They were active, savvy. Continuous work peeled and scratched them, digging fields and creases where nicotine dwelled. Labor and cigarettes seemed indivisible—a whole, worthy of awe and loaded with authority.

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Smoke only engraved men's fingers.

Although workingwomen had rough hands—I knew well their touch, their grip and their briskness—their skin was thick, red, but not stained. They rarely smoke and I wonder why. Butts were found in workshops, in stables and fields, but not in the kitchen, the sewing, the laundry room. Was there any practical reason? I doubt it.

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Rich women did smoke. Like locomotives, to be exact. I noticed it on accompanying grandma to see wealthy relatives, who held weekly salons. Fair ladies, with hair dyed and curled, smiled down at me briefly. I recall—in a blurred-yet-creepy nightmare—beringed, high-heeled figures, sparkling with gold and nail polish. They greeted me with gaiety loaded with something damp—teary—always a plaintive note in their voice.

Grand-aunts, second cousins—I never figured out what they were. They stood up at my arrival like jacks-in-the-box, then regained their place on the sofa and forgot about me. I recall kilometeric couches in luxury flats, crowded with carpets, thick curtains, gigantic light fixtures, inebriating flower displays—all things superfluous and strange.

Those reunions involved card games, munching, drinking, lots of gossip punctuated by relentless smoking. But those hands, occasionally reaching me for a caress, weren't stained. Was their skin too compact and smooth? Tightly woven, like silk, perfectly sealed. Nicotine couldn't break the surface.

Lipstick, on the contrary, rimmed the niveous wrap of thin cigarettes flooding marble ashtrays. I lingered on those pretty shades—coral, purple, vermillion and pink— sucking them with my eyes as if they were candy.

Bored upper-class ladies smoke while they spoke evil of their husbands, who of course weren't present. They were not excluded, just busy otherwise. The oldest and dullest men attended for lack of alternatives—tiny, faded silhouettes shielded by humongous newspapers.

Spouse-related complaint was so steady an activity, practiced with such gusto, I— while offering to the conversation a distracted ear—subconsciously assumed husbands were a kind of plague, striking randomly and for undetermined reasons. Widespread, and quite hard to shake off.

All of them acted apparently in similarly obnoxious ways (the detail of which I omitted to realize, part because I didn't care, part because of abrupt volume drops). Luckily, those choral laments seemed to bring relief by mutual support, by kin solidarity in front of a common disgrace. Shared pain became lesser pain. While echoing each other the wives grew merrier. More intent to the game of bridge, delighted by fine pastries, by the anisette they sipped in miniature glasses.

They kept smoking.

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My dad, the son of a metal smith, studied.

He never smoked. He didn't work either. He read and wrote, sure—which were income-making activities, but it took me a while to realize it. Dad's hands were white, small, plump and conical—neither roughened nor stained. I had my personal reasons for treating them cautiously. Dad's hands terrified me.

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Mom and both grandmothers never touched a cigarette. They were often sad. Melancholic—the three of them. I wonder if such mood was due to a lack of tobacco.

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In our Southern, archaic, retrograde little town, a female smoking by herself in the street was a whore. Lighting a cigarette while you waited, let's say, for a date in front of a bar wasn't the best idea. An old code, universally accepted yet unspoken. No one told me. It did not take me long to figure it out.

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My grandfathers lit their next cigarette with the previous one. They were busy men, busy smoking. Large hands, scarred. Milky nails, like abalone shells. Their palms a

geography of marks—mountains, craters, dirt roads, riverbeds. Hands like moons. Like fertile mud.

When my hands resemble those for a while, I breath deeper. They have become rare, endangered. Soon extinct.