

TR Ericsson's Cohabitator

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I remember my first few smokes. In the dawning of the erotic terror of my teens, I discovered a medium to fuse burnt tobacco with my breath and to become ensconced, enveloped, mesmerized by the inexplicable temporary intimacy and relief of my anxious inner alien being.

I was a lifeguard at a country club pool and I was settling into the early evening shift for the task of seeing to it that the body of water remain empty and undisturbed, not even by an occasional lap swimmer. The pool was to function as a sublime sculpture—saturated by glowing gold-aqua light, a clean geometric void, there strictly to captivate club members as they dined.

My partner was a big kid on his way to becoming a third-generation Irish cop, which contrasted with my skinny dark Jewish disposition. The big future Baltimore cop left me that evening with a gift: 3 Camel cigarettes. I remember them sitting side by side next to my whistle and my Sony Walkman playing my cassette tape of this hot new band out of the South called R.E.M. I'd seen them play "Radio Free Europe" and "So Central Rain I'm Sorry" live on Letterman (c. 1983). It only now occurs to me that I must have had a crush on the lead singer. I wanted that shy skeletal stringy haired young man with a throaty voice almost hanging like a scarecrow from his vertical mic stand to be my girlfriend. I looked at the aqua angular stillness, kept an eye on the clock, and struck a match and held it to my first cig. Soon, I'd had my second, on

my trip to the shed to click off the pool light and shut the filtration system down for the night. The third was had on my way down the tree-lined entrance road to the employee parking lot. By now I really had the hang of it, and was taking in deeper drags and exhaling in rhythm with my stride, enjoying the tip of orange embers getting brighter with each inhalation, listening to the frogs and crickets and secedes grind out their hypnotic ambient drone from inside the canopy overhead.

The next time I had a cig was on a dock with Magoo, a girl I did not have a total crush on. Nor did she on me. She was a wasp of French descent living on land with horses and a lake, a perfect snob. The only thing saving me from heartbreak was that I didn't actually think she was all that great.

But now, some 40 years later, I am still at that dock sucking the filter of that Imported French brand, swinging my bare feet through the dark lake, reliving a moment of romantic teenage rebellion. It was like the inversion of a kiss: an anti-kiss—a moment shared dragging those orange embers smothering our frail interiors with an abject cloud, stoking our mutual disapproval of something aching and objectionable within and out there as well in the phantasmagoria.

Years later I was playing in my band at a fantastically rowdy pool party, when Magoo's older sister came up to me smoking and introduced herself. She knew I was that strange guy in the band who had gotten together with her little sister. I guess I had a rep, a fact that I found vaguely satisfying. Magoo's older sister was locked on to my eyes in a drunken flirty extended moment and she didn't even look down to notice that I was not just crowding around the band mingling but was actually playing IN

the band. She may not have seen my Rickenbacker or cared about the bar chords I was clamping under my calloused index finger, or that I was plugged into a black chord that snaked across the wet pool deck to an amp with a small light lit up like a raspberry in a black bush like the tip of a cig rushed by a vacuum of air into the belly of despair by an addicted smoker.

One night I was introduced to another kind of cig. It was a dark brown clove with no filter, like a tiny tight cigar. It was handed to me at a summer party. The drag was dizzying and compelling. By compelling, I mean that single drag gripped me for a seductive second or two more like opium than tobacco... so I gather they've long since been made illegal. I recently went on a clove hunt in my neighborhood in Brooklyn. I asked a Middle Eastern man working in a 24-hour deli if they sold cloves. He looked up at his stacks of generic American Spirits, Camels, Marlboros, Newports and Parliaments, and then looked back at me with blank silence.

Later in life, while no longer lifeguarding or playing in rock bands, I still smoked—and retained an alienated and introspective ultimately poetic dialogue with my inner voice. This is when I discovered an especially iconic painting by Edvard Munch. It is a self portrait in which he stands in black formal attire with a burning cigarette in one hand.

I've studied the painting and unlike Max Beckmann's alluring iconic black-tie masterpiece (with cig) Munch's cig actually comes with smoke. And the entire surface of the painting serenades.

And it brings me back to my first rented tuxedo the night I was brought by the twins Rusty and Pete to a fancy debutante party under a giant lawn tent at their country club. A big band played a waltz. Magoo and her older sister were surely there, somewhere. A man with the surname Martin (he was the squash champion of the club) said “hey Reggie” (his “go-get-‘em-old boy” nickname for me). Mr. Martin’s kids were patients in my dad’s office, and he was kind and unpretentious enough to make the token jew feel a little more at home. And that was cool of him. But unnecessary. I didn’t need to feel at home. Because I was cool. I was fine with being defined as the outsider, the abject stranger, the kid with a Rickenbacker who knew the bar chords of an R.E.M. cover. And most importantly, I had a pack of smokes tucked in my tux’s inner lapel pocket. The cigs were not there to help me live through the evening. On the contrary; they were there to kill me whenever I needed to die. They were there to turn my breath of empty white oxygen (life) into a warm dark phantom. They were my suicide in baby steps.

In the Munch painting I’ve observed his glowing youthful debonair and sinister gaze with its touch of pre-Hollywood glamour in his Victorian black silk string tie (an early incarnation of the bow tie.) But I’m always drawn in closer to the cuffs, the jacket’s fine tailoring, the hand that holds the cig, the cig itself, and most importantly: the plume of smoke rising up from its tip. Each detail is its own unique painterly problem, solved, you might say, in an unfussy, immediate and intuitive way—good enough to pass.

The hand is not really much of a hand. It’s a complex of interwoven marks showing an impossibly gauzy matrix of scrubbed bluish reddish

linear blemishes barely conforming into a translucent veiny fleshy essence. It's a stabbed-at record of a sight observed. But it's not a hand. It's just the chance outcome of a painterly touch and a focused eye at work responding to the reflected particles of light deflecting in a mirror. This hand would be the star of any other painting if it weren't for the cig's fumigation that indeed redefines our expectations, rising into ephemerality, boldly occupying the middle ground of the brushy spongy bruise of velvety black. This smoke is erased in its very presence. And yet, indelibly inscribed. The cigarette's smoke illustrates just how far into formlessness Munch was willing to go. And how daring he was to imitate the dissemination of matter into the immaterial.

In the most modern sense, Munch's suave man with his rapidly burning hand-rolled cig reminds me of the interlocking braids of *geist* Wagner accomplished in the final death-love section of the Tristan opera. The *Liebestad*—an abstraction of the sonic ascension of two vortical spirits in a sweet tornado of desire—two lovers (Tristan and Isolde) finally intertwine like two corpses sharing a moment of bliss in a private post-mortem kiss.

I guess my kiss with Magoo (had we had a crush) could have been such a transformative kiss. Or had I kissed the guy from R.E.M. perhaps we'd have risen against the force of gravity by the voice of love.

Smoking for me (and Munch, presumably) defined a moment, both fundamental and temporary—a means (by smoking) to be intimate with nobody without being empty.

It is this feeling (this drag) I see in TR Ericsson. His art, to put it reductively, perversely and beautifully milks a dark obsession he has with his deceased mother. She remains his motif, his muse, his guide into uncharted terror-story (not to be confused with territory). TR returns again and again (and again) (and again) like an infant to sour milk. Do I think this because I still feel the sourness, the pang of my unfulfilled first crush?

TR's obsession is perhaps something like a grown man compelled to return every day to place yet another flower on his mother's grave—year after year, as he goes gray, he goes back to inhale the spirit, to pause life for a moment of rest. He checks in with the woman who pushed him out into existence (no minor task) and who apparently continues to reach (like a lifeguard to a drowning swimmer) back into the lit pool somewhat greedily to pull him out and take him with her into the afterlife.

What I know is that, while alive, she was a beauty with the mystique of a tragic Hollywood diva from the 60s. A chain smoker, emotionally unstable, self-medicating, and somewhat stranded. According to the artist's confessional archive of letters (most impressive are the three-ring binders packed with pages of plastic sleeves preserving letters that were once upon a time typed up and mailed from mother to son; and the crinkled aged envelopes with postage stamps and postmarks that tell their own subtle stories, and document the the odyssey of snail mail with a moan. She could often act desperate for her son's affection or just ear.

TR has also held onto an archive of the manic-seeming messages she would often leave on his answering machine (or voice mail)—I can

imagine the small cassette tapes spooling slowly as he rewinds yet another dramatic daily SOS. Spooling? Isn't that Beckett's word?

Empathizing with the artist, I can imagine the sense of closure that comes from such an archive, allowing its keeper to meditate his loss. But TR's art is not the typical memorial. It is not a flower left on a grave, but a kind of deep dive into memory with the tender perfectionism of Marcel Proust, whose monumental seven volume novel *À la recherche du temps perdu* (In Search of Lost Time which was earlier titled Remembrance of Things Past) is, by TR's own admission, the compass he uses as he circles the ellipse of his mother's demise and death like a perpetual seance.

He refuses to become an accomplice to her ghostly crime of dragging on the living. His art stands in defiance to her smothering smoldering haunting dependency. He makes evident and material and critical and engaging the terror of his insistent kidnapper.

I found one photographic image particularly intriguing in its conceptual folding in of form and content. On a pretty large canvas/panel, we see a faint blow up of a photograph of TR's mother when she was still in her prime. The monochrome is a dirty stain of ochre, which is in fact the residue of second hand smoke from the burning of hundreds of cigarettes. It is a "smoke-a-graph" (i.e. Man Ray) made from a build up of toxic carcinogens. In effect, the image is neither "painted" nor "developed"; it is smoked.

But does this effect create a ghostly representation of beauty? Is it a study of a smoker's gloomy habit and habitat? Is it a confession of his

fixation on her fix? Is it his meditation on her method of stamping out her life one butt at a time? (What I earlier referred to as my own dependency on what was there to kill me whenever I needed to die?)

TR's "stain" allows us to witness the ghost flickering like a puff of smoke in a strobe. It allows us to witness her pestering return and to verify that she will simply not let go. And so the brave artist exposes this habit and his cohabitor, allowing us to take the muse off his hands so that he may finally be alone.