

Smoking Kills

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Looking back over the somewhat dizzying landscape of my life, I would say that before the events that turned it upside down, I was an unremarkable man, bordering on the dull. I had a wife, a daughter, a profession in which I was respected, and my criminal record was a blank sheet. But then, I was the victim of an attempt to oust me at work, my wife left me, and I had four murders to my name. If I had to sum up my unusual trajectory in one sentence, I would say ‘it was all the fault of the cigarettes’.

It was in 2007 that the heinous law took effect. The law that drove smokers to congregate outside office buildings in courtyards where smoking was soon also banned. Janitors and office cleaners quickly made it known that the sudden increase in their workload, from all the extra cigarette butts, would rapidly become unmanageable without a consequent re-evaluation of the fruits of their labour. Businesses ignored their demands and smokers were thrown out onto the street.

‘These heinous laws will have everyone doing it in the street.’ I had suggested this startling phrase to my lawyer, with a subtle nod to Marthe Richard’s law of April 1946 that ordered – with not a trace of irony – the closing of the *maisons closes*: luxurious, legal brothels across France, where champagne and other delights had been liberally dispensed for decades. Proprietors and madams suffered the torments of nervous depression, previously known only to bourgeois ladies of leisure and their overworked husbands. As for the girls, they found themselves out on the

street. Self-employed, until they fell into the clutches of merciless, often violent, pimps.

Our sweetest vices – stockings and suspenders, champagne, curls of cigar smoke, sexy girls, packets of twenty – have been thrown out onto the street with the rubbish, with the State in the role of sanitiser-in-chief. The dreams of our elected representatives are the nightmares of science fiction: a world where no one smokes and no one drinks, where the men are all thrusting executives with dazzling teeth and careers to match, and the women are all smiling, professionally fulfilled mothers of 2.5 children. Sanctimonious laws for the good of one and all are building, brick by brick, a sad, uniform world that reeks of bleach.

My lawyer had been unconvinced by my reasoning, and even less about using it himself. Obviously, he would cite my nicotine dependency, but without making too much of it. I wasn't in trouble for having smoked in a public place – it was 'a little more serious than that, Monsieur Valentine'.

There are various ways to embark on a criminal career. The first is to discover you have a calling. Serial killers are an excellent example: from an early age they feel different and experience strong animosity to the world around them, coupled with a highly questionable determination to shape it to their own ends. Psychopathic, schizophrenic, paranoid: medical terminology abounds for those who choose to dispatch their neighbour, often with elaborately staged savagery. And yet, since they repeat the same type of crime over and over again, they are quickly identified and generally end up behind bars, where they keep their psychiatrists happy and, more recently, make novelists rich.

It's very important to distinguish the murderer, who is an occasional killer, from the assassin, who is a professional. The murderer may be the unhappy cheated-on husband who, on

discovering his misfortune, seizes his hunting rifle or his lobster knife; if his career ends there, he will just be called a murderer. But the assassin makes a career of murder. The number of murders and the resulting criminal record determine his right to the title. A murderer could also be a bank robber who finds himself cornered by the forces of law and order, uses his weapon and kills two or three police officers. He's dangerous, but he's motivated by money, not by bloodlust. That said, the desire to grab someone else's cash regularly leads to violent misunderstandings with bank cashiers.

Where among these examples would I place myself? I'm a little of all of them. I progressed from an initial blunder to fully premeditated crimes.

At the beginning of his career, the smoker is generally intent on killing no one but himself. But forces beyond my control drove me to become a killer of others. And not through passive smoking. When it came to murder, I played an active role. A very active role.