

Jackson Deakins

## Smoke Break

### *A Fag.*

That's what they used to call him in high school. That's the brand they tattooed to his sleeve for those four grueling years. He's since graduated and gone to university, but it doesn't matter. That scarlet letter remains, etched in bold, fearsome font, under his skin and on the surface of his mind.

Fags, man. He smokes them now – or did he start in high school? Did you know they call cigarettes *fags* in the U.K.? You probably did. He takes short, quick drags, racing to the filter – to the *fix*. Maybe he's ashamed, maybe he really just wants his head to spin, to get that otherworldly lightheaded bliss, or, it's probably because he just can't stand the taste.

The term “fag” is derived from the English and Scottish terms *faggot* c. 1300, *fadge* c. 1588, and *faggald* c. 1375. The origins of the words all refer to the Norwegian meaning of “a bundle of sticks, or heap”. Only the terms *faggot* and *fadge* develop a colloquial meaning for “woman,” but only *faggot* retains its homosexual connotation. Historically, none of the terms directly coincide with the meaning of the word *fag* –an effeminate homosexual, but in 1920s America the terms *faggot/fag* reappear with that shared meaning.

He isn't gay, though he's never touched a girl before. He's become the brunt of a joke that has criminalized, delegitimized and degraded an entire community and for that he is guilty. He's guilty for being a part (even if he is the punch-line) of a cruel joke that still holds people to their place: below.

***A Sick-person.***

When he thinks about high school, the veritable Hell he was put through, he knows it was all his own doing. Why couldn't he listen to the music they listened to? Why did he quiver so when talking to girls, why did he seep a cold, clammy, sweat at every interaction?

In a 1965 study for the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers separated subjects with and without anxious tendencies into four groups: the non-anxious shock-threat group, the anxious shock-threat group, the non-anxious nonstress group and the anxious nonstress group. While members of the anxious/non-anxious shock-threat groups were threatened with electric shock, anxious/non-anxious nonstress groups were in a resting state. Those threatened, regardless of anxiety level, experienced highly decreased basal resistance, or clammy hands. Even those in a resting state experienced a decreased level of basal resistance, due to their anticipation.

How did they know he was afraid? How did they know he wasn't strong enough? Like a pack of wolves, hovering, waiting for the weakest of the herd to fall behind just enough to be torn apart.

Those answers, and others, came to light at the edge of a thin steel blade: each nick into the flesh of his forearm gave him the deadly self-assurance that this was, in fact, his fault. This phase of his coping was brief, how long can you hide blood-soaked sleeves? Apparently, not as long as he has been able to hide the gaping hole in his chest, a wound, though intangible, deeper and darker than any incision he could make.

No, now in the months following his rehabilitation and return to “normalcy” (as his psychiatrist put it), he copes with a much duller pain. The type of self-harm that is not registered through bleeding sleeves, but in slow, methodical steps: one rushed cigarette at a time.

In the average smoker (assuming they smoke regularly), there is an average loss of eleven minutes of life per cigarette smoked. He sought pain that is exponential – pain that is quantifiable, *one rushed cigarette at a time*.

### ***A Free-man.***

Aristotle argues that humanity is driven by a sense of purpose, *telos*. Teleology is at the center of all philosophy, as philosophers throughout the ages offer theories to explain what makes humans tick.

Centuries of heated debate have culminated in the ultimate understanding that it is impossible to provide a universal causality as to what makes us do the things that we do.

That being said, there have been *attempts*.

Socrates to Plato, Plato to Aristotle, Aristotle to Rousseau, Rousseau to Hegel, Hegel to Marx, Marx to Lenin, Lenin to Stalin, etc.

Similar timelines across the ideological spectrum can be drawn to illustrate the grand progression of human reasoning, morality, all to the resounding silence of the fact that we still have no idea why we are the way we are.

How can he be what they tell him he is, if they don't even know what they are? Don't you see?! We're all celestial bodies trapped in a terrestrial realm – under the same illusion of control. We all die, we all rot away into dust–

*“Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”*

–the same way a dog or worm or microbe would, so *why* does anything matter?

And so, as those who seek to prey on nonconformity hold him, face-first in the toilet bowl, that resounding silence echoes through the very chambers of his mind and – *he is free*.  
However, it is *fleeting*.

***A Real-man.***

A lump of ember-rich ash falls to his foot, he winces and shakes it off quickly. He’s been daydreaming out on his dorm’s balcony, cigarette in hand. He’s late for his first class as a college-man.

## Bibliography

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