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My Daughter Smokes

Alice Walker

Not every part of the heritage a family passes from one generation to another is necessarily a positive inheritance. In the following autobiographical essay, prize-winning writer Alice Walker tells of an undesirable tradition in her family, a tradition that fortunately may be at an end.

1 My daughter smokes. While she is doing her homework, her feet on the bench in front of her and her calculator clicking out answers to her algebra problems. I am looking at the half-empty package of Camels tossed carelessly close at hand. Camels. I pick them up, take them into the kitchen, where the light is better, and study them-they're filtered, for which I am grateful. My heart feels terrible. I want to weep. In fact, I do weep a little, standing there by the stove holding one of the instruments, so white, so precisely rolled, that could cause my daughter's death. When she smoked Marlboros and Players I hardened myself against feeling so bad; nobody I knew ever smoked these brands.

consort
the spouse of a king or queen

pungent
sharp and penetrating

2 She doesn't know this, but it was Camels that my father, her grandfather, smoked. But before he smoked "ready-mades"-when he was very young and very poor, with eyes like lanterns-he smoked Prince Albert tobacco in cigarettes he rolled himself. I remember the bright-red tobacco tin, with a picture of Queen Victoria's **consort**, Prince Albert, dressed in a black frock coat and carrying a cane.

3 The tobacco was dark brown, **pungent**, slightly bitter. I tasted it more than once as a child, and the discarded tins could be used for a number of things: to keep buttons and shoelaces in, to store seeds, and best of all, to hold worms for the rare times my father took us fishing.

4 By the late forties and early fifties no one rolled his own anymore (and few women smoked) in my hometown, Eatonton, Georgia. The tobacco industry, coupled with Hollywood movies in which both hero and heroine smoked like chimneys, won over completely people like my father, who were hopelessly addicted to cigarettes. He never looked as dapper as Prince Albert, though; he continued to look like a poor, overweight, overworked colored man with too large a family; black, with a very white cigarette stuck in his mouth.

5 I do not remember when he started to cough. Perhaps it was unnoticeable at first. A little hacking in the morning as he lit his first cigarette upon getting out of bed. By the time I was my daughter's age, his breath was a wheeze, embarrassing to hear; he could not climb stairs without resting every third or fourth step. It was not unusual for him to cough for an hour.

perennially
continually, regularly

6 It is hard to believe there was a time when people did not understand that cigarette smoking is an addiction. I wondered aloud once to my sister-who is **perennially** trying to quit-whether our father realized this. I wondered how she, a smoker since high school, viewed her own habit.

7 It was our father who gave her her first cigarette, one day when she had taken water to him in the fields.

8 "I always wondered why he did that," she said, puzzled, and with some bitterness.

9 "What did he say?" I asked.

10 "That he didn't want me to go to anyone else for them," she said, "which never really crossed my mind."

11 So he was aware it was addictive, I thought, though as annoyed as she that he assumed she would be interested.

chronic
lasting a *long* time

12 I began smoking in eleventh grade, also the year I drank numerous bottles of terrible sweet, very cheap wine. My friends and I, all boys for this venture, bought our supplies from a man who ran a segregated bar and liquor store on the outskirts of town. Over the entrance there was a large sign that said colored. We were not permitted to drink there, only to buy. I smoked Kools, because my sister did. By then I thought her toxic darkened lips and gums glamorous. However, my body simply would not tolerate smoke. After six months I had a **chronic** sore throat. I gave up smoking, gladly. Because it was a ritual with my buddies-Murl, Leon, and "Dog" Farley-I continued to drink wine.

13 My father died from "the poor man's friend," pneumonia, one hard winter when his bronchitis and emphysema had left him low. I doubt he had much lung left at all, after coughing for so many years. He had so little breath that, during his last years, he was always leaning on something. I remember once, at a family reunion, when my daughter was two, that my father picked her up for a minute-long enough for me to photograph them-but the effort was obvious. Near the very end of his life, and largely because he had no more lungs, he quit smoking. He gained a couple of pounds, but by then he was so emaciated no one noticed.

14 When I travel to Third World countries I see many people like my father and daughter. There are large billboards directed at them both: the tough, "take-charge," or dapper older man, the glamorous, "worldly" young woman, both puffing away. In these poor countries, as in American ghettos and on reservations, money that should be spent for food goes instead to the tobacco companies; over time, people starve themselves of both food and air, effectively weakening and addicting their children, eventually eradicating themselves. I read in the newspaper and in my gardening magazine that cigarette butts are so toxic that if a baby swallows one, it is likely to die, and that the boiled water from a bunch of them makes an effective insecticide.

15 My daughter would like to quit, she says. We both know the statistics are against her; most people who try to quit smoking do not succeed.*

16 There is a deep hurt that I feel as a mother. Some days it is a feeling of futility. I remember how carefully I ate when I was pregnant, how patiently I taught my daughter how to cross a street safely. For what, I sometimes wonder; so that she can wheeze through most of her life feeling half her strength, and then die of self-poisoning, as her grandfather did?

empathy
identification *with another*

17 But, finally, one must feel **empathy** for the tobacco plant itself. For thousands of years, it has been venerated by Native Americans as a sacred medicine. They have used it extensively-its juice, its leaves, its roots, its (holy) smoke-to heal wounds and cure diseases, and in ceremonies of prayer and peace. And though the plant as most of us know it has been

*Three months after reading this essay my daughter stopped smoking.

Readings

poisoned by chemicals and denatured by intensive mono-cropping and is therefore hardly the plant it was, still, to some modern Indians it remains a plant of positive power. I learned this when my Native American friends, Bill Wahpepah and his family, visited with me for a few days and the first thing he did was sow a few tobacco seeds in my garden.

18 Perhaps we can liberate tobacco from those who have captured and abused it, enslaving the plant on large plantations, keeping it from freedom and its kin, and forcing it to enslave the world. Its true nature suppressed, no wonder it has become deadly. Maybe by sowing a few seeds of tobacco in our gardens and treating the plant with the reverence it deserves, we can redeem tobacco's soul and restore its self-respect.

19 Besides, how grim, if one is a smoker, to realize one is smoking a slave.

20 There is a slogan from a battered women's shelter that I especially like: "Peace on earth begins at home." I believe everything does. I think of a slogan for people trying to stop smoking: "Every home a smoke-free zone." Smoking is a form of self-battering that also batters those who must sit by, occasionally **cajole** or complain, and helplessly watch. I realize now that as a child I sat by, through the years, and literally watched my father kill himself; surely one such victory in my family, for the rich white men who own the tobacco companies, is enough.

cajole
to gently urge repeatedly

Questions for Critical Thinking

1. What do you think is the writer's thesis? Consider the title and the first sentence. Is this a case of a thesis where the attitude about the topic is unstated, but readers would understand from the very beginning what a mother's attitude would be?
2. In this essay, how many family members' stories are told?
3. Narration involves a story, usually with a sequence of events. This essay uses elements of narration to develop the main point. What is the sequence of events Alice Walker has chosen for this essay?
4. In order to achieve coherence, writers need to use transitions of time in narrative pieces. Review the essay and underline all the transitional expressions you can find.
5. In the final paragraph of her essay, Alice Walker quotes the slogan "Peace on earth begins at home," and she adds, "I believe everything does." Make a list with your classmates of the kinds of problems that can be solved in the home. What if any are the problems that cannot be solved in the home and for which government intervention is needed?
6. When Alice Walker remembers the Prince Albert tobacco tin, with its picture of the elegant royal prince, she observes that her father "never looked as dapper as Prince Albert . . ." Examine advertisements for widely used products that you consider harmful or dangerous. In your view, how far away are these advertising images from the reality you know to be true about the product?

Writing in Response

1. Alice Walker describes a bad habit that links the generations of her family. Look at your own family. Looking back on your parents or grandparents, and then considering yourself or your own children, what habit

(bad or good) can you observe going through more than one generation? Write an essay in which you trace your own family history in terms of this habit.

2. Alice Walker tells us in a footnote that three months after reading her essay, her daughter stopped smoking. Do you think Alice Walker's essay played any part in her daughter's success in quitting? Write an essay in which you deal with the issue of a bad habit. You might choose from the following:

How you were able to break a bad habit

How you helped someone else break a bad habit

Advice to someone trying to break a bad habit

3. Write an essay in which you discuss the possibility that some products being sold on the market today may be judged harmful in the future. Your essay could include discussions of a number of products, or you could choose to concentrate on one product and discuss its future in detail.
4. Alice Walker gave up cigarettes because her throat hurt, but she continued to drink wine as a "ritual" with her "buddies." Write an essay in which you discuss the ways in which teenagers are tempted by peer pressure to engage in harmful activities. How do some teenagers resist this pressure? Give examples or a story from your own experience or observation.