

JOKES FOR SMOKES

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Dedicated to my best friends, who I only met because we're smokers.

I.

I make people tell me jokes for cigarettes.

II.

The old men who sit at the corner of the bar at Pour Nelson's in Daphne, AL taught me how to play [liar's poker](#). I made friends with them when I was working for Enterprise Rent-A-Car. I'd get off work around 6:30, finishing up a 12-hour day, and head to my favorite dive bar. It was a safe haven from the intrusive questions and performativity that came with the cushy paycheck The Man put into my account every two weeks. Plus, you could still smoke inside. That was back when I could afford to lose twenty bucks and still enjoy myself doing it. Hell, maybe that's what prompted me to start declining people's money when they wanted to get a cigarette.

I think the old men were there every day because they were lonely: a combination of widowers and alcoholics who had fallen off the wagon sometime during their fourth step, and who had no reason to start a new life outside of Daphne. But they were good people. We got along; all sitting at the corner of the bar under dim lighting, even further hidden from whatever reality we were escaping by the dark, divey windows that had something like a 70 percent tint. To people like us, bright lights and acting right were something you do in church or at somebody's momma's house, not when you were busy embracing the anonymity that comes with a good dive. We were friends, at least in the dive bar sense of the word.

So far in Tucson, the closest place I've found to what I consider a dive is the Bay Horse. *But then, everyone does tell me to go to Danny's if I want a good dive bar.* The Bay Horse Tavern has been around "since anyone around here can remember," according to their website. That ambiguity might be part of why it there so much. It reminds me of Alabama dive bars. No one needs to cite facts to build an ethos because everyone is there for their own reasons—and nobody asks questions.

In Birmingham, one of my favorites is called The Upsidedown Plaza. They used to be only open from 3:00 pm to 2:00 am, but at some point, they changed their license to be a "private club" so they could stay open 'til 6—an act of rebellion against the bible belt. The membership fee was \$3 until you either lost your card and had to pay again or got to know the door guys well enough to skip the line.

It's called The Upsidedown Plaza because it's underground. I remember afternoons, showing up at 3 o'clock to shoot pool and watch Jeopardy with Kimbo—the only bartender I know who still rocks a mullet. The Plaza is where I started turning down quarters for bumming out cigarettes. That quarter, that 50 cents, hell, even that dollar won't replace the cigarette I give you when I run out at the end of the night. So no, keep your money and tell me a joke. A good joke—one that makes me laugh. I like corny jokes, in particular. Humor *is* my number one priority, after all.

That's probly why I like dive bars so much—no one's a stranger and anything goes. Even a dumb barter system like this one.

Here in Tucson, the Bay Horse crowd is just as friendly as the one at the Plaza—best friends for the night, brought together by a shared appreciation for cheap drinks and cigarettes. But sometimes people at the Bay Horse are a little too friendly, breaking the unspoken "rules" of the dive bar system and actually remembering my name for the next time, or god forbid, asking to exchange contact information. *So I really should check out Danny's.*

But there's this guy there—at the Bay Horse—a regular, who calls himself Batman. I don't remember his real name, or if I ever actually got it, but I'd say we're friends. Dive bar friends, I mean. There're limits. He knows better than to ask me for my number, and the expectations we have of each other a confined to the pool table and smoking section. He does the Tuesday night bike ride that starts at the flagpole on campus, and he's always wearing something with a batman symbol on it: Socks, an undershirt, one of at least a dozen hats. And let me tell you, this man has never met a stranger. He's got jokes. And when I meet new cigarette bums at the Bay Horse, Batman's jokes put theirs to shame. But he always gives them the cigarette he just won. He's a good guy. A little weird, but good.

I'm most comfortable in a dive bar, which likely led to my overconfidence in demanding jokes from strangers. There're also more smokers in dive bars, the drinks are cheaper, the standards are lower, and socialization isn't mandatory. But correlation does not imply causation because I sure as hell bum out cigarettes when I'm *not* at a dive bar.

III.

One night in June of 2018, I went to my first *Female Story Tellers* reading. It was at a new place on 4th Avenue called Cans Deli. Out front, I've got about a minute left on my cigarette and 3 kids walk by. I guess technically, they were adults, but they acted like kids when they gave up so quickly. They ask to bum in exchange for a dollar, and I tell them no and that I make people work for it. They seem excited, but really it was just overconfidence. Again, they gave up so fast. I told them that I only had one to spare, and that they had to tell me a joke that actually makes me laugh.

Cans is a little too hidden to last in downtown Tucson, but that's just my opinion. The venue itself is spacious, dimly lit like a dive bar, and has a separate entrance than the deli, so I'm comfortable there. But deli part is small and noticeable from the street. No one walking by would even think that on the other side of that small Sitcom-esque deli, there's a fenced-in outdoor area for smokers, or a decent-sized stage, or seating for 50. So I doubt it'll last.

It would have been a dicey move to cross the crowded room and check out the designated smoke spot - risking trips and stubs, or god forbid, my stomping boots *actually* stomping someone. So I went out front.

I first started avoiding eye contact with people when I was in grad school in Birmingham. Not because if our eyes met, they'd ask me for a cigarette, but because I had become recognizable as one of the English teachers who also tutored in the writing center. If even one student caught my eyes between the library's front door and the writing center sanctuary at the very back of the library, it was 20 questions and a tap dance.

I'm not on the clock yet. Don't make me late. Set a god damn appointment.

At least cigarette bums are aware that they're taking up your time. *And* they offer to pay you for it. Not college kids. Maybe that's why I engage the smokers, because they're thoughtful, even if they are bums.

But the kids; the bums. Their jokes didn't make me laugh. The first one simply wasn't funny, so another of the three stepped up to prove herself. But she told a racist joke, and I never think those are funny. I didn't laugh, instead letting out an "ehhh," and the trio composed variations of "pshh," "let's go," and "I give up."

I couldn't let them leave without acknowledging their collective efforts. So I offered them the alternative option—Plan B. It's not as fun for me, but it is a crowd-pleaser. I explain the rules: the two guys can either do 10 pushups or a 30-second wall sit—each—and then I'll give her the cigarette. You know, "because us women gotta stick together."

IV.

There's a [spot](#) on the U of A campus where I can smoke guilt-free. It's close to a street, so I'm abiding by the general nature of smoking on a smoke-free campus, and more importantly, I'm being polite by smoking in a space where people don't generally gather. Hell, it's far enough off that people walking by wouldn't even smell the smoke. A good smoke spot is one that's a secret.

That makes me a good smoker, right?

Plus, all the smokers I know—we don't litter; *so don't be an asshole and assume we do, just to use that as an excuse to rat us out to the bicycle cop.* And, when I bum out, I even tell the bummer that they have to throw their butt in a trash can. We're good smokers, and you're probably a prick.

So yeah, the spot might still be on campus, and we might even commandeer ourselves an actual table to sit at, or even enjoy taking some shade while we smoke—a privilege rarely granted to smokers, even though we're all outside in the desert heat. But shit, we don't even litter. We hide our cigarettes and hold our smoke when kids walk by. We are good fucking smokers.

This spot on campus, it's not really a gathering spot for smokers—maybe there's just fewer smokers these days, or maybe I finally found the best spot—but occasionally I make new smoker friends there. Midterms and finals bring in the bigger crowds: an additional 3 or 4 anxiety-ridden over-achievers, usually. The type of students who have unhealthy relationships with their parents because, even though they somehow earn more than a 4.0, they still can't get mom and dad to be proud? Probably a middle child, or the youngest of two. You know those kids. They're the ones who turn out to be cigarette bums.

As an English major, midterms and finals don't affect me the way they do most other students. The ones who end up pacing back and forth and engaging in atypical smoking habits. I don't have a test to cram for or an algorithm to memorize; I just have another essay to revise or a proposal to write, so my stress levels don't lead me to lie to myself about being a smoker. I'm lucky. I try to share my timely state of calmness—or acceptance of the inevitable—with the poor, panicked, circumstantial smokers, bless their hearts. I truly believe I'm doing them a favor when I make them switch from left brain to right. They need to give their left brain a break from all that studying and exercise the right side's creativity, and tell me a joke.

Maybe the reason their jokes aren't that funny is because of the location. *Not* the dive bar, and *not* dive bar people. These are the type of people who say shit like "I'm not a smoker because I don't buy any." *Well with that logic, it's no wonder you're stressed out over exams.* I'm not sure how long people like that would last at a dive bar. Dive bar bums are only bummin' because they ran out before you did.

V.

I always tell people, "Don't talk about it, be about it." Consider it a method of holding myself accountable.

I know I'm a good smoker because a stranger told me so once. Somewhere in Alabama, I was standing outside a National Tire and Battery. I'd wandered toward the Southeast corner of the building in search of an undesignated smoking area, following the now tacit math that most smokers use when no ashtray is around:

Distance from entry point(s) + butts on the ground = smoke-friendly

Other variations of the math account for pedestrian traffic, alleyways, and makeshift seating, of course. But I was at a mechanic's franchise, all of which are known for being smoker-friendly.

Standing mostly in the sun, I positioned myself so that my face would be barely shaded by the awning that hung over the front door, but only *just* shaded enough to still be following the

math. It was hot, but breezy, so I was attuned to my second-hand smoke when the family of four walked by. Mom was first. She didn't quite glare at me, but would have had she not been focusing her energy on distracting the two daughters—blonde-haired and blue-eyed, the younger one with a plastic toy, maybe 6 years old and fully engaged in her mother's ruse; but the other daughter, no, she could not be hoodwinked as easily as her baby sister. She looked directly at me, even though she knew mom didn't want her to for some reason. Curious, but tactful for what could be no older than 9, she did not see my cigarette or smoke.

With my lungs full, I refused to exhale while positioning my right hand behind my back, leaving my arm at a 90° angle as if I were Alfred from the cartoon *Batman*. Reposturing both my physical body and mental addiction to shield these girls from the sight and knowledge of their proximity to such a bad habit, I was being a good smoker and smiled through my breathless lips.

Dad brought the happy-family train to a close. He seemed average on all accounts, and I expected him to act like every other parent who watched me hide my habit from their kids—to just give the polite Southern smile and nod. The one where no teeth show, and you can't seem to decide if you're *actually* smiling, so the corners of your mouth don't quite go either up or down, and your molars are grinding together in the back, but not hard enough or long enough for you to notice. That's what I usually got if eye-contact was made (which was usually by accident, anyway). Just an acknowledgement of my physical presence. But this one man. Maybe he had been a smoker in a past life, because instead of defaulting to what would normally have been a split-second regrettable nod, he was deliberate with his eye contact, and made sure I knew it when he mouthed the words "thank you." He recognized my intentions, as well as my actions.

This is the only time I have been thanked for trying to be a good smoker. And this is all it took to validate my persistent claim. *Or did it just serve to further validate the rebellious egos of all of us good smokers?*

VI.

Jessica got my name tattooed on her ankle in white ink sometime in May of 2012. The caption on a photo she uploaded to Facebook says, "On my Achilles tendon, because she is my only weakness." Our relationship couldn't be described more perfectly.

We must have met around 2007 or so, in one of our English classes at the University of Montevallo—our quaint Small Liberal Arts College in the dead center of Alabama. Back then, we hadn't yet told each other our deepest secrets (that we would later realize were nothing compared to the ones we'd make together), but we had realized that we were soul mates.

We met at a picnic table outside of Comer Hall—the smoker's table, of course—and were inseparable immediately; over time, nurturing our friendship through international travel to

Europe and Asia, Mardi Gras balls in its birthplace of Mobile, hostels in New Orleans, and countless misadventures that built our ethos over the years.

Our smoking habits brought us together, and manifest through our sparse catch-up phone calls that accommodate our 14-hour time difference. Jess in South Korea, and me in Tucson, we video chat any way we can, sharing the new jokes we've heard and always smoking a cigarette together while we do. We'd rather be drinking cold beer in my kiddie pool, or a truck pool like we used to back in the glitter party days: smoking next to the President's lawn, laughing at the parent's horrified faces as they drove their age-appropriate-but-definitely-too-innocent-and-pure-for-this kids around Alabama's 5th best college (as of 2018), and one of the United States's top 20 most beautiful campuses. It was designed by the brothers who designed Central Park, after all. We were Montevillians, Queens of the Glitterati, and living up to those titles requires a certain level of pride-induced maintenance, like demanding jokes for smokes.

Jessica taught me some of the best jokes I know, and I'd bum her cigarettes all day. She once said, in a moment of bliss, that our tattoos should have magnets in them. She was implying that we're stuck with each other, always, and that we should be. But before [those tattoos](#), our cigarettes might as well have been those magnets. Either way, we're never gonna get rid of each other.