

### Smoking Virtuoso

by Freida Theant

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When the famed violinist Dalila lights up, she turns the heads of concert-goers who flee outdoors during intermissions at Severance Hall, Cleveland. They are agog at how she enjoys a smoky duet with her Dunhill Black. One observer remarks “she deserves the title ‘smoking virtuoso’ bringing her gold Yves St Laurent lighter up to her cigarette to bestow it with life, and thus entwine with her in a glowing, smoky creation, flowing together”.

And with good reason, because for her, an unmarried concert violinist with raven hair, a mildly olive complexion and a slender build over a medium height frame, each smoke concert is rhapsodic and as sinuous as a Vivaldi or Paganini concerto on her Stradivarius. She was recruited from the Richard Strauss Conservatory in Munich and has since worked her way up to second-chair violin for the Cleveland Symphony.

As in her musical performance, she strives to improve the interaction between the active principal...Dalila herself, and the passive principal, her freshly-lit Dunhill; the glowing partner who like the musical scores she plays in concert, promises to fulfill her. And she understands that she when interacts with her cigarette as much as she does with her violin, she expands her enjoyment to an ecstasy, savoring every precious facet of that rondo. Flame-up, kissing the filter, inhaling the vaporous cloud and giving it the right amount of in-dwelling time before showering it forth. She performs with the tenderness of a lover still fascinated by the infinite variety of smoking aspects that can be changed to alter her enjoyment.

For Dalila smoking is far from the mindless, habitual rounds of self-medications that other women burn through subconsciously during makeup application or driving the car about the suburbs of Cleveland. For this classic violinist, cigarette smoking's all about the intensely sensual communion of fire, cigarette and the tingling burn the enchanting miasma confers in her soul from each draw that her lips invite from its porous filter. Smoke thus enticed is carefully inspired within her breast to penetrate and absorb at its smoky leisure and with each kiss she sacrifices more of the pristine cylinder to the voracious cherry who gnaws its way onward leaving a fragile ash loosely clinging in its wake. This fire that transforms the tobacco into the opaque river she so lovingly coaxes from the filter tip is at the same time a beacon of how much pressure her lips and mouth exert, for the more heartily she strains, the brighter the corresponding glare of the beacon, and in perfect harmony with her muscle movement. Just as the violin strings resonate to the pressure and speed of her rosined bow with varied tones and volumes, so the Dunhill's smoldering coal reflects her emotional nuances as she expresses them through her buccal expressions.

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Her flame, when Dalila produces it with a rasping click, shimmers atop her 18 karat Yves St Laurent lighter as she draws it into the space adjacent to the naked face of her Dunhill. She watches herself before the mirror during occasional nicotine duets during her down time. She discovered it enhances her sensory interaction when she consumes a 'gourmet' cigarette under the gaze of her own eyes where she enjoys the sight of both partners, Dalila and Dunhill performing for her. The mirrored image of herself as the smoker serves to revalidate that she is still the woman unchained and self-sufficient, beholden to no one and is free to make her own life-style decisions.

Occasionally she enjoys a 'gourmet cigarette' nude on the couch or on her silk covered mattress, where she tunes her body with her skillful fingers moistened just so, rather like she tunes her Stradivarius. Dalila inhales directly from the filter straight to her chest when her body reaches the peak of its tension, and she presses forward with more vigorous strokes and intense direct inhales so that the collision of this building orgasm and the nicotine rush arrive nearly simultaneously. The virtuoso's orgasm has a visible and outward sign at the moment her sexual tension snaps, for she floods the air with copious flowing nostril exhales.

During her childhood Dalila enjoyed a classic education as did the other girls from Teheran whose families came from old-money. These maidens lived those conservative values cherished amongst the elite before the fall of the Shah. Unmarried women had enormous privileges of wealth but lived under the yoke of strict control in accordance with Islamic law. The concept of such women smoking back home was unheard of, except for a few families who had travelled and 'westernized' renouncing such Islamic fundamentalism as 'backwards'. It wasn't until Dalila left to study violin in Cambridge that she first bathed in the liberating waters of freedom and self-choice. There on England's most prestigious campus, she quickly absorbed the near monastic rigors of a classical violinist and vowed to dedicate her life to the perfection of musical performance. This new, self-imposed regimen freed Dalila from the constant supervision of family and tutors, for a new persona was emerging. Dalila grew in strength as her skills with the violin manifested, and she saw herself now as a whole woman, and not as a ward of her father or a husband.

In England her self-realization was accompanied by other changes in her personal habits, amongst which was trying the occasional Navy Players or Gauloise while out with other music students in the pubs and restaurants of Cambridge or London, or travelling through Paris, Vienna or Rome. The distaste from lighting those first unfiltered cigarettes faded as she tried again after a pint or two at the pubs. By the time she was in her last year, she slid into craving them, especially after leaving unfiltered cigarettes for the milder smoking Lambert and Butler.

Unlike the European girls at University, Dalila felt cigarettes were emblematic of the woman transformed and emancipated and could not and would not go back to the passive subservience of Islamic culture. In point of fact, she was fulfilling her vow and devoting herself body and soul to the study of the violin which left little time to spare, but when she did, it was with fellow musicians.

As might be expected, her skills and abilities blossomed to where she routinely took top honors in violin competitions. Married to her music as she was, Dalila's Lambert and Butler cigarettes evolved into a communion that celebrated her emancipation. They became the kind of friends for her that never threatened to derail her musical pathway. Her musical reputation diffused throughout the academic halls of Europe, and upon her baccalaureate, she was invited by post-graduate programs in the United Kingdom and the Common Market countries.

Father visited her in London at graduation and made this visit the occasion to announce that the unrest at home had forced him to consider relocating the family. Breaking this news while they were seated at a sidewalk café table over strong tea, he proposed the United States or Germany might be the best choices for a safer family environment. She listened in acute silence, masking the stabbing pain of disappointment with a passivity she did not feel. If Father took the family to a foreign residence, she would never see her beloved childhood home again, which brought tears she struggled hard to disguise.

Appearing composed, but in a haze of confusion Dalila subconsciously lit her cigarette. Father was struck through his heart. Even at first glance, he saw her for the regular smoker she had become, but like her, kept his reactions under tight control.

"You are smoking now?" he finally challenged, without raising his voice but sternly, "And in public. Such things as the whores do on the streets?"

She responded unapologetically, "Smoking is something I allow myself as a small pleasure in my new world so filled with strict routines and constant self-criticism, for such is the way of the virtuoso." The daughter took a slow, thoughtful draw on her cigarette, and filled the momentary quiet with her exhale before continuing, "This is the only vice I have acquired since leaving home. Really it is a small thing but my cigarettes have great meaning and benefits for me. I am sorry if this offends you, Father."

The old man sat immobile, seemingly tranquil, thinking. When finally he spoke, it was evenly, "Your achievements as a violinist brings honor to our family; this during a time when our world is crumbling around us. So after I have attended to the family's residence, I will send you a graduation gift that speaks of the pride we feel in your graduation." He spoke no further about her cigarette which Dalila finished in her usual relaxed manner. The weeks that followed were hectic: Dalila settled on the Richard Strauss Conservatory of Munich for her continuing studies and busied herself with living accommodations, visa and transportation minutia. Once again, just as she had done in front of Father, she found herself lighting up her Lambert and Butlers for stress relief, and that so increased her daily cigarette use that it left her with a smoker's cough and raw throat.

The Revolutionary Guard, under the direction of the Ayatollah, was orchestrating greater violence and rioting, Dalila overheard from the newscasts during those hectic weeks. Father had been right!

A family letter from Teheran arrived telling her that Father had found a haven for the family in Frankfort am Main, Germany, a few hundred kilometers from Munich, where Dalila was studying. In a month she could plan for a reunion with her family for the first time in four years.

Several weeks into her new routine at the Richard Strauss Conservatory a letter from her oldest brother confirmed the family was safely installed in Frankfort, except that Father returned to Teheran to expedite remaining financial transfers. When she called the family on the phone at their new Frankfort household, they told Dalila that Father had not been in touch with them for over a week, and they were worried that unstable political change had caught him up in the street rioting. Days later the Munich Post Office wrote her that they had a heavily insured package addressed to her. When she brought the unopened box back to her apartment, she unwrapped the parcel breathlessly to see how Father's thoughts would be reflected in his choice of a graduation gift. What Dalila uncovered from the first bundle overwhelmed the daughter.

From a pile of wrappings she withdrew a priceless Stradivarius violin! Written in Persian was a note that read, "You have the finest instrument to go forth and make the finest music." It would be her lifelong, inseparable musical partner, worth tens of thousands at least.

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The parcel had one more gift ensconced within a fashionable little box, from which she recovered with trembling fingers, an 18 caret Yves St Laurent lighter. Tears filled her eyes. The golden object she held was in a parchment wrapping proclaiming, "Zoroaster, first Magi of ancient Persia held flame to be the most sacred principal: so may it light your way."

From thence, she re-oriented her aspirations to rededicate herself to attaining only the highest levels of musical virtuosity. Now with her father's reluctant but complete approval of her smoking, she applied that same commitment to excellence, choosing only fine cigarettes (for Dalila, Dunhills). They were never to be debased by overuse, but to be smoked leisurely and with appreciation for true quality and variety in both the cigarette and the manner of smoking it.

Like other wealthy Persians during that the fall of the Shah, Father never reappeared from Teheran, nor was his fate ever determined. But Dalila keeps his memory alive with every virtuoso piece she wrests from her Stradivarius, dedicating each to him. The flame of Zoroaster from her golden lighter, on the other hand, reminds her of how Father had accepted her as a free, mature and accomplished woman before he was snatched from her life.