

Smoke Rising

Mohamad Kobeissi

I hate the smell of smoke.

The stench of burned garbage on the streets of Beirut was unavoidable the day I learned of my best friend's death. There were about four cars honking in frustration behind the idle cab I was sat frozen in, with my eyes glued to a blue text message on my broken phone. It was as blunt as it could be, "*your brother Ahmed is now with God.*"

Up to a certain point, death never fazed me. I spent nineteen years of my life thinking the worst would always avoid me, and I spent the twentieth year being proven wrong. I hadn't cried in seven years before I had to break the news to the woman he loved. I always lived in a hurry; even in that very cab, I was on the way rushing to meet up with a cinematographer for a music video I was shooting. No matter how many swear words I was fed that day from the angry drivers behind me, I would not move an inch. The cinematographer kept calling me, and so my phone kept ringing with a song my now deceased friend had first played for me.

Just a day prior, we had talked about traveling to New York in the winter. It was a dream for the both of us, a statement of success. I had promised him that it was finally looking possible, that this music venture was finally about to start paying off. Ironically, he left right before the song was released. Smoke surrounds the air and then eventually, it disappears, and the sky turns blue again. I got out of that car, and eventually, the drivers drove me past. His mother had to teach herself how to sleep again, and eventually, she slept. Up until then, I would only think of smoke in the presence of fire. There is so much more to smoke than fire.

Now, I tell my friends I love them. Now, I know how quickly life goes on.

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"Why does it smell like fire?" my friend Anahid said, from the passenger seat of my brand-new black hatchback car. Well, 'new' is a stretch. I had just been handed down a car my brother-in-law owned, as he had traveled after the war to start a new life elsewhere. The car was flawless. He never had to take it to a mechanic once! I heard so many good things about what was about to be my first ever car. It drove easy, it smelled nice, and it was cost-efficient in the sense that I could drive it to my sick girlfriend's house eight times before I had to fill gas again. I was dying to see her, to bring her flowers, and to write her a letter that was long overdue.

Our relationship had been put on hold because of the same war that almost took my grandmother's life. My beautiful grandmother, no matter how many times I told her to stop smoking, she refused, until cancer took her kidney. That's the thing with smoke, you never expect to see it, and you are never mentally prepared for it, no matter how many fire extinguishers you own.

"I don't know, it can't be my car though" I responded.

"We've passed two streets, the smell is still there," Anahid said, before abruptly facing her sister Avery in the backseat with eyes of intensity, "Remember when we were six, and dad's car lit on fire from the front? This is that exact same smell."

I heard that and my heart took control of my body. I parked as fast as I could, got out, and to my surprise, the car started smoking from under the hood. Another thing about smoke is that it is almost always a sign of something worse. It's never smoke you actually fear, it's what comes after. No one's scared to see smoke coming out of a building, they're scared of the child left burning in their room. It isn't necessarily the smoke from a cigarette that gives you cancer, but the chemicals from the tobacco plant itself. The smoke cloud that comes from a bomb is only scary because it signifies just how much damage the bomb itself had actually done. Right before this very point, I hated the smell of smoke, but I never feared it.

Anahid shakingly pointed at the bright orange radiance coming out of my car's hood. What can you even do? I put both hands on my head and rushed to close off the incoming traffic, in fear of the fire spreading to the back. Anahid rushed to the nearest gas station to ask for a fire extinguisher, and Avery called the firemen. Never in life is one adequately prepared for a fire, especially when your shady unregistered car is parked in a crowded area filled with life. I rushed to open the hood; the first fire extinguisher was of no use. We had essentially painted the car white, but the fire was stronger than ever. Pieces of my car's battery were melting as chunks of burned metal hit the floor, sparks of fire dropping beneath my feet, the yelling of people who held no emotional connection to me begging me to step away from the car.

There was a homeless lady that lived under the bridge yelling at me in a language I could not for the life of me understand. To be fair, she could've been yelling in the language I spent my entire life speaking and my brain would not process a word in that moment. It wasn't until the firemen ripped off the front bumper of my car that the second fire extinguisher would finally be put into good use. The fire was put out, the smoke was gone, but the smell lingered. In fact, against my will, the smell of smoke stuck with me. I look for that smell in every car I step foot in. I smell it walking back home. I even smell it in bed, with my eyes closed, attempting to sleep through to a day where my heart doesn't beat out of my chest. The smell never escaped my body. That's another thing about smoke that I despise. It never leaves.

You can clean your burned kitchen cabinet sixty-four times following a housefire, but the smell of smoke is stubborn. You can smell smoke in the lack of its presence. I have to live with the fact that smoke is an inescapable phenomenon that will always surround me, no matter where I go, or what I do. What I hate the most about smoke is that it's uncontrollable. I have no control over it.

You can extinguish a fire fully, but you can't control the smoke that surrounds the atmosphere. Truthfully, I was never a man with self-control. If I hadn't slapped my father

back that day, I would have done so another day, because the anger was there my entire life, and the smell of cigarette smoke would have always been on his breath.

I hate not having control over my own life. I could not control the passing of my Ahmed, the war, my grandmother's cancer, and my car setting itself on fire. People often live in denial of smoke, and that's okay, but we are made aware of our insignificance and lack of bodily control the second we see smoke rising. No one has ever lived a life without smoke.

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