

## GOT A LIGHT?

by Michael Ventura

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Tonight I make the sort of announcement usually designated “a public service.” Since I am not yet required to wear a label on my forehead or a placard around my neck, it is only fair to warn you: I AM A DANGER TO YOUR HEALTH.

I smoke cigarettes.

If ever you enter my apartment you will risk intense exposure to second-hand-smoke which, the Surgeon General has recently concluded, is an even more hazardous hazard than we thought. I read somewhere that spending a full night in a place as dangerous as my apartment will subtract two full minutes from your life. I like to think I’m worth that, but hey, it’s *\*your\** life, and those last two minutes in the old age home or in that hospital with various machines and tubes attached to your person may be precious, so best give it some thought. I don’t desire to rob you of anything, even two minutes’ worth -- hence this public service announcement.

I offer the small comfort that your appearance in my apartment is unlikely. See, I’m a Scorpio and, especially as we age, Scorpios are famously stand-off-ish. Also, I’m Sicilian. There are few things more rare than crossing a Sicilian’s doorsill unless you’ve undergone the equivalent of pricking your finger, swearing the oath of *\*Omerta\** on pain of death, and otherwise proving that you won’t be a pain in the ass. We’re really awful that way. Think I’m kidding? I have a very close relative, we’re related by blood -- in fact, we have the same mother and father -- and I have *\*never\** seen the inside of this relative’s apartment. Never. And that’s when we’re getting along! But this relative knows I’m a pain in the ass. We Sicilians are like that.

So I probably won’t endanger you in particular. Still, one never knows. Lillian Hellman said, “Crazy people are crazy *\*all\** the time,” to which I add: dangerous people are dangerous all the time. No getting around it: I am a hazard to your health.

It is perhaps in bad taste but I must admit that I find amusing such headlines as I’m about to report: TOBACCO WILL KILL 1 BILLION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY (CNN, July 10).

For the sake of argument, let’s say they know what they’re talking about. I propose a counter-headline: THE UNIVERSE WILL KILL *EVERYONE* BORN IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY! The universe is like that. It killed or is in the process of killing everyone born in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the 19<sup>th</sup>, the 18<sup>th</sup>, and on and on back to when people didn’t even know what century they were in because they hadn’t figured out how to count. The universe makes life very interesting -- to cop a line from *\*Babylon 5\**, “Isn’t the universe an amazing place? I wouldn’t live anywhere else!” -- but the universe demands payment for being so entertaining: 100% casualties.

Headlines like CNN’s -- and they are legion -- present themselves as though if tobacco didn’t kill you perhaps you’d live... forever? We forget the lesson a crusty old coot once told me: “You’re born with a hand grenade up your ass. And you never know when or why it’ll blow.”

A billboard I saw recently (I didn’t take notes, I may be getting the numbers wrong, but this was the gist): ONE OUT OF FOUR WOMEN WILL DIE OF BREAST CANCER. Ok, cancer is no joke. It’s killed my friends and my family. The joke is the billboard’s and headline’s unconscious implication. Tobacco may kill 1 billion in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, many will die of breast and prostate cancer, all kinds of cancers, but I look at that billboard and think: I hope they beat breast cancer but, if they do, a more pertinent headline will remain: FOUR OUT OF FOUR WOMEN *WILL DIE*. So will four out of four men. The inconveniently inserted grenade will blow eventually.

Ban me from restaurants, bars, beaches, parks -- I’m a hazard, and the present consensus is that hazards must be banned. I do believe these venues will be less interesting without me but, hey, you’ll get a few extra years in the nursing home, where you’ll be lucky if your kids visit once a month and luckier still if you can remember who you are. (If you have enough money the place may not even stink and the attendants may give a damn.) So, ban me. I have no objection to being

banned, nor to higher tobacco taxes (if the money goes to education). My one and only objection is to the way the tobacco hazard and all other hazards are presented. The headlines, and the slant of the news stories, imply that without tobacco or cancer we're less likely to die. Ban what you please, but... you, in particular, are going to die. Me too. And it likely won't be easy or pretty.

To put it mildly, we're not very consistent about our health preoccupations. Our inconsistency presents some queer sights. For instance. In Los Angeles, in an expensive part of town, there's a boulevard called San Vicente. Lovely place. Two lanes of traffic run on either side of a substantial grassy "island" studded with trees and wide enough for maybe eight or ten people to walk abreast. Joggers jog. Power-walkers walk powerfully. Mothers wheel strollers. And four lanes of busy traffic rush by on either side. I bet those joggers, power-walkers, and moms would not let me smoke in their homes. But as they take their healthy strolls and runs they breathe a concentration of exhaust fumes engineered to be almost scentless (as far as our urbanized nostrils are concerned). Those fumes are really bad for you. There's a little label on every gas-pump telling you how bad. It makes no impression. The joggers and power-walkers especially scoop the fumes into their lungs with every deep aerobic breath. The poor little babies are breathing the stuff! And everybody's just sort of unconscious of it. When I lived in L.A. I asked my M.D. and then my acupuncturist if twenty minutes on that island, especially jogging, wasn't the equivalent of smoking a pack a day. They both said the same words: "At least."

Another strange sight and occurrence. There's a school where I love to teach. It's a marvelous place. Great kids, dedicated teachers. The school is on a lovely hillside in a well-heeled suburban neighborhood. There's a wide driveway up the hill and a traffic circle at its top. For about 20 minutes before 8AM, and another 20 minutes or so after 3PM, a long line of mostly SUVs idles and/or slowly rolls up and down the hill as parents transport their kids. Used to be, in an area by the main office enclosed by a high plank fence, teachers and staff who smoke could smoke on our breaks. There were always a few passionate puritans who wanted to ban us, but they weren't successful until (I'm told) a parent and/or parents smelled cigarette smoke wafting over the fence. We hazardous teachers -- or rather, our smokes -- were banned. Fine. But no one has addressed how for forty minutes a day the air is thick with the scentless (to us) exhaust from two lines of slowly rolling and idling SUVs and cars (one going uphill, one downhill), while children, parents and teachers inhale a concentrated cloud of deadly glop.

In fact, we breathe this stuff by the lungful every time we drive. Or sit idling in traffic. Or walk the streets of any major city.

Where's the Surgeon General's report on that? Where are the headlines and billboards? Are there studies of the effects of our daily and (in urban areas) constant exposure to these deadly fumes? If they exist they don't get much coverage. I'm a news addict, I scan two or three major newspapers a day, I read at least two news magazines a week, I've been doing so for years, and I've seen *not one* mention of this health hazard. As I write, the World Health Organization is calling on all nations to ban smoking in all public buildings, workplaces, and "public spaces." Fine. Where are warnings on exhaust fumes? I guess the Surgeon General wants us not to fear our major mode of transport. Breathe all the crud we can as long as it's good for the economy.

Americans inhale a constant toxic mix of illusions of safety and illusions of fear, a brew more dangerous to the polity, to the world, and to our physical and mental health than all the cigarettes ever lit. Meanwhile, most real and present dangers go unaddressed and unnoticed -- though they are right under (and in) our noses, our food, our entire way of life. Ban tobacco. Fine. You'll spend more time in a nursing home than me. But the reason for the *\*publicity\** about banning tobacco is that it's an easy target and gives you the illusion of being safer when you're really, really not.

For myself, I'll take these lines from Ursula K. Le Guin's earthy translation of the *Tao Te Ching*: "To live till you die/ is to live long enough."

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