

## Last Cigarette © Jessamine Matheson

Before the smoking ban, June was a pack-a-day smoker. A happy smoker. The prospect of cancer in the distant future didn't worry her. Three of her four grandparents had smoked like trains and lived into their nineties so she figured that she probably had good genes. And she was likewise unconcerned by the possibility that her mouth might taste like an ashtray. The various men who came and went in her life were mostly fellow smokers and those that weren't - well, she'd had no complaints so far.

But when the ban was announced it became clear that the writing was on the wall – smokers were soon to become social pariahs, forced to skulk in urine-smelling alleys and drafty doorways while those whose vices ran to illegal substances were free to do coke in the ladies'. Smoke alarms were everywhere but where were the coke alarms? It seemed unfair.

Still, as the ban approached she realised there was really no choice. June's mother, though a heavy smoker herself, had nevertheless drummed it into June that only cheap tarts smoked on the street. And one wouldn't want to look like a cheap tart, would one? No, one would not, June agreed. So, on the fateful night when the ban was introduced, June smoked one last, perfect, wistful cigarette and resolved to smoke no more.

Six months and 20 pounds later things came to a head. June couldn't claim any mystery around the weight gain. She had, there was no way around it, been eating her head off. But what could she do – she had to do something to distract her from the desire to smoke. And then, of course, as her sense of smell and her palate recovered, everything began to taste so much better. Her idea of lunch had gone from a long black espresso and several cigarettes to a latte big enough to take a bath in, a bap with everything and a substantial wedge of cake. Now she had a party to go to, a work thing, something she would have enjoyed six months ago, and nothing in her wardrobe that even remotely resembled a cocktail frock would go near her. Eventually she noticed a kind of loose caftan in the back of the wardrobe. Something she had bought on holiday without trying it on, it looked more like a sofa cover than anything one might actually wear, but it had the advantage that it would accommodate her bulk. June went off to the party feeling frumpy in her sofa cover dress, and sat miserably through the dinner. As the dessert trolley came around she made a decision: better a cheap tart than a fat slob. She waved the waiter away and blagged a cigarette and lighter from the last remaining smoker amongst her work colleagues.

June stepped out into the alley at the side of the restaurant and put the cigarette between her lips. It felt like it belonged there. As she fumbled with the unfamiliar lighter she realised that she was not alone in the alley. As the man - James as she later came to know him - came towards her out of the shadows June saw that he was handsome, very handsome indeed. Then suddenly he was right in front of her and he did an unexpected and appalling

thing. He plucked the cigarette from her lips, threw it down and ground it into a puddle with his shoe. An expensive shoe, June noticed. Highly polished. Italian.

Then James leaned in, as if he intended to kiss her, but instead turned to the side a little and sank his teeth – fangs, June had to admit, sank his fangs into her neck. Before she passed out, June had time to notice the little lapping noises and to think the single astonishing word: vampire.

Over the following week, as she went about her business, June reflected that James' bite was the most pleasurable experience of the last six months that hadn't involved putting something into her mouth. She had telephoned work the next day and explained that she had been mugged and would need a few days off to recover. June walked to her local news agent and bought a selection of glossy magazines aimed at women. Back at home, she went straight to the small ads at the back. Over the next three days, she systematically contacted every clinic or beauty salon offering help with weight loss or the removal of cellulite and arranged to visit those that were reasonably nearby. Her last visit was to a Dr Gina Young, a fashionable hypnotherapist with well appointed rooms just off Kensington Church Street.

Gina was an attractive and stylishly-dressed woman in her mid thirties but, worryingly, the beautifully cut clothes couldn't quite hide the fact that she was, not to put too fine a point on it, rather well upholstered. June decided that she had nothing to lose by being frank and asked directly whether hypnotherapy really worked for weight loss. Gina looked thoughtful and then gazed down at her expensive-looking mahogany desk for a few seconds before replying.

"I suppose I would have to say, sometimes yes, but mostly no. Our lack of success with weight loss is a topic that greatly exercises the profession. Eminent therapists go on about the cycle of commitment and how the therapy fails to work because the woman – it is still mostly women – isn't fully committed to achieving the goal. And it's all total nonsense. These women are utterly committed to the goal. It just isn't the goal the therapist thinks it is." She paused for breath and June nodded for her to continue, not wanting to disrupt the flow.

"So if a woman comes in and her goal is not just to be slimmer but to really become the type of scrawny, self-absorbed, stick insect that thinks it's a treat to nibble on a stick of celery, who would rather ride an exercise bike than sit in the garden and read a book, who thinks it's more important to go for a run than to comfort a sad friend or read her kids a story, then yes, hypnotherapy will work perfectly for that type of client. But for the majority of women who come to me for help, that isn't the goal at all. They don't want to become the stick insect, they want to remain their own wonderful, indulgent, generous-spirited selves – they just want to do it in a slimmer body. In short, they want to become that magical creature – and let's face it we've all met them – who can eat their heads off all day and not put on weight."

Gina paused again and met June's gaze, a serious and slightly sorrowful expression on her face. "And, sadly, we just don't know how to do that. Yet."

That evening June went to the alley beside the restaurant, "bite alley" as she now thought of it, at 10 pm and waited in the shadows until 11:30 pm. She estimated that she had been bitten around 10:30 pm and was banking on vampires being creatures of habit with regular haunts. The next night she went again, wearing more comfortable shoes. The third night she took a small camping stool. The fourth night, she almost didn't go, but decided to give it one more try. By 10:45 she was beginning to give up hope, when, suddenly, she realised that she was no longer alone in the alley. A figure emerged from the shadows and she saw that it was James, he approached quickly and this time she observed the quick grace of his movements. Then he was in front of her and she saw the shock of recognition on his face. He started to back away and she spoke quickly "It's ok. I just want to talk to you. I have a proposition for you."

Back at June's flat, she broached the subject as delicately as she could: was blood the only substance that would be acceptable sustenance for a vampire or would... other... bodily substances do just as well. James looked puzzled. June would have to spell it out.

"Well, for example, fat. Would fat work?"

James thought about it for a minute then replied that he was not sure, that, as far as he knew, no one had ever tried it. They agreed to perform the experiment and June delicately raised the hem of her skirt to indicate an area of cellulite on her thigh that she would like to be rid of. She would really have liked to start on her bottom but the bottom seemed somehow too personal for a first date.

When June woke afterwards, James was beside her. He declared that he felt satisfied, more satisfied even than after taking blood. June was puzzled at why she had still passed out, even though he hadn't taken blood – she had assumed the first time that she had fainted due to blood loss. James explained that his fangs emitted a mild mood enhancing sedative from which people generally awoke feeling relaxed, up beat and maybe a little sexy. "Even better", June thought, "Even better".

Later that night, June and James made love. June reflected afterwards that it was definitely the second most pleasurable thing she'd done in the last six months that hadn't involved putting something into her mouth.

Over the weekend they experimented with James taking varying amounts from different parts of the body and, by weighing June before and after, were able to determine that James could take from 3 to 4 pounds per feed and that the fat could be extracted from any reasonably fleshy part of the body. They took digital photographs of the bite marks to illustrate how quickly they healed and disappeared.

On Monday June quit her job, ordered an examination couch, half a dozen white nurse-type uniforms and a couple of lab coats. She dragged all the furniture out of her living room and hired a decorator to paint the walls the exact shade of pale pink she had found so appealing in Gina Young's consulting room. On Tuesday she placed a number of small ads in glossy women's magazines: "Safe, painless, instant removal of cellulite and unwanted fat. 100% refund if not completely satisfied." She then headed off to the local auction rooms in search of the perfect antique mahogany desk to complete her consulting room.

It would be vital, June and James agreed, that the clients should remain unaware of the exact nature of the "treatment" and, as the first desperate women responded to June's advertisements, they quickly worked out a method of ensuring this. It was quite simple really. June would greet the client, explain the need for secrecy around the exact method of treatment – patents pending etc - ascertain the area to be treated and then instruct them to pop behind the curtain and undress. June would then draw a half length drape across the woman's body at about waist height and buzz to summon the "technician" who would carry out the secret treatment. James, waiting in the kitchen, would enter the other end of the curtained off space, sink his fangs into the area which June had thoughtfully circled in felt-tip pen, and drain off several pounds of fat. June would sit chatting to the client until she fell asleep and then read her book until James was finished.

The system worked beautifully but, as the clients flooded in, James could cope with at most three "meals" a day and the third tended to be less successful as he was already satiated from "lunch". Fortunately James had friends. Soon June had ten vampires on the staff and had to move to larger premises. Even after deducting rent, the cost of supplies, wages and James' cut, she was making ten times her old salary. And providing a genuine service to distressed women – well, rich distressed women anyway.

June contemplated the dessert menu and smiled fondly. Since an incident a few weeks earlier when some B-list celebrity had come in for treatment and James had showed rather too much interest in her air-brushed rear, June had decided that James should no longer work in the clinic, that he should feed only off her. With James' assistance she had quickly regained her slender figure of course, which meant that now, sustaining James' appetite single-handedly meant she really did have to put considerable effort into making sure she took in enough calories. Perhaps she should have two desserts, just to make sure?

June sighed happily as she gave her order to the attentive waiter. Life was almost perfect. If only she could have an occasional cigarette. But James didn't like her to smoke and it was no use pretending, he could always tell. He said it made the fat taste icky.