



# HOOKED On WEED

TWAIN, FAULKNER, HUGH HEFNER, HUNTER S. THOMPSON—THEIR GHOSTS HOVER OVER THE AROMATIC MEETINGS OF THE VANCOUVER PIPE CLUB. By **Peter Valing**

I make the walk once a week when my stash runs out. I admit to being edgy on Wednesday nights, when I puff away the last gram. Thursday afternoons I hotfoot it down the East Hastings gauntlet of addicts and dealers, pipe in breast pocket, ready to score. I walk quicker when my pipe is empty. Empty, it taps wistfully against my heart. Making and avoiding eye contact with glazed eyes, I hurry through the drizzle to my destination. Then it's a residue-clearing tap of the pipe against my leg, up three steps and, ding-dong, I'm in.

It's low-lit and quiet in here. I like it best when I'm the only one in the room. Just me, Richard and the product. Once I bought from others; now I buy strictly from Richard. He is amiable and knowledgeable, for the trade is in his blood.

Richard will put it on a scale if you want a specific amount, or he'll hook you up with a zip-lock baggy. Today I've got time to burn and I'm in the mood for something new. I ask for a recommendation and, as always, Richard happily obliges. He opens a container and tilts it toward me. "This is what I smoke," he says. I take a sniff, reach in and pull out pinch after

pinch until my pipe is full. Seem gripped firmly between my teeth, I go for my matches.

"Can't do that in here anymore," says Richard.

"What?" I respond, nearly losing my pipe to the floor. "But last Thursday..." I sadly realize that this pleasure of mine was fated to end. Tobacco consumption inside a retail establishment in 21st-century, Grouse-grinding Vancouver is verboten. Even if that establishment happens to be a tobacconist.

**R**ichard could take measures to allow his clients to continue their sinful act indoors. A wall could be erected to partition the shop, effectively separating those purchasing tobacco products from those who seek to indulge inside. Behind the wall, the active smoker could puff with an easy conscience knowing that residual fumes are being sucked up by ventilators instead of further poisoning the inactive smoker innocently paying for his tobacco at the till. He could even make R.J. Clarke Tobacconist a private club. But such measures would be costly and futile. Walls and ventilators would only keep the anti-tobacco folks at bay for so long. For they are a zealous bunch whose aim is that hallmark of contemporary righteousness: zero-tolerance. "Smokers on commemorative stamps!" they gasp, and the cigarette is painstakingly airbrushed from the lips of Jackson Pollock.

What pains me more than no longer being able to light up in Richard's little shop of horrors is that the shop itself will soon be gone. "I've been given the boot," says Richard. My umbrella has sprung a leak, I can no longer imbibe inside, and now this....

R.J. Clarke's eviction from its historic location on Maple Tree Square in Gastown has nothing to do with Vancouver's ongoing war against tobacco. The building, which has homed a tobacconist for over a century, has new owners who see greater profits in timelier ventures. An "authentic" brew pub, perhaps? Swanky condos? Whatever their plans are, they do not involve Richard Clarke, who has sold tobacco from this street-level shop for 33 years.

"What are you going to do with this stuff?" I ask, motioning to the humidors and the oak floor and ceiling.

"I'll take them with me," Richard grimaces. Is the grey-haired proprietor pulling my leg? He's got wit, after all, sharpened, I assume, through contact with an eccentric lot. "No, I'm serious. It's been done before."

The fixtures that make R.J. Clarke a testament to elegance have a considerable history—one of permanence and adaptability, of deconstruction and resurrection. The display cases and humidors are of oak and brass. One walks on a mosaic of tiles, pieced together like a Roman road.

When, in 1970, E.A. Morris closed up shop on Hastings, the tobacconist had the sense to put all fixtures into storage. There they sat, preserved in 78 years' worth of

## THE TOP 5 TOBACCONISTS IN B.C.

- R.J. Clarke Tobacconist**  
5844 Cambie St.  
604-687-4136  
Rjclarke.com
- Cigar Connoisseurs**  
101-12 Water St.  
604-682-4427
- Cigar Market**  
555 Dunsmuir St.  
604-682-4427
- Sheffield & Sons Tobacconists**  
(15 locations throughout the Lower Mainland)  
Sheffield.com/sheffieldandsons/
- Old Morris Tobacconist Ltd.**  
1116 Government St.  
Victoria, B.C.  
250-382-4811  
Oldmorris.com

exhaled smoke from the lungs of Hastings Park jockeys and lumberjacks, schoolboys and old-timers. Then, in 1971, the fixtures resurfaced in the hands of David M. Stewart, president of MacDonald Tobacco Inc. Stewart was a Big Business/Big Tobacco man, yet one with an eye for things intimate. After finding an ideal location in Gastown, he had the fixtures reassembled. And above his archeological find he hung the ornate sign: MacDonald Stewart Tobacco Shop.

A year later, the sign was replaced with "R.J. Clarke Tobacconist," and thus control of the shop changed hands from East-

ern Big Tobacco to a family of western-based tobacco merchants. Grandfather and father bought the place, and son would run it. "And I'm still here," muses Richard.

**I**ndeed, time in here has stopped. The hands on the clock stand still, the chair beneath me squeaks. Outside they are filming a movie. Inside Richard and I are seated across an empty ashtray. Clients enter; ding-dong. Most of them Richard knows by name.

While Richard tends to them, I think of the walk that I made to get here and the joy that was in me when I walked through the door. So much misery up and down that street. The desperate faces, the leaky umbrella, the wanting to be in this place—to be met with an open hand. And soon it will be disassembled. What seems so authentic to me now once sat in dusty boxes, and into dusty boxes it shall soon return. How would it have felt to have smoked a bowl in the original E.A. Morris, before the disassembling process had begun? Can one take something apart, move it, and recapture its true essence?

Several years ago, old drinking holes of Dublin were being paralled up and shipped overseas in order to recreate the "feel" of the "true" Irish pub. At the time I hoped that the ghosts of a few Irish rebels would be caught up in the freight; to be unleashed upon the unsuspecting tipplers of Toronto or Berlin. No matter how carefully such a pub were reassembled, it would be nothing more than a leprechaun-plastered gimmick. This is a tobacco shop and should, therefore, be pungent with the smell of burning tobacco. Moreover, it should stay where I found it.

My mind spirals into darker places, questioning the authenticity of just about everything in this Potemkin village of a world. Then Richard restores my spirit. He tells me of plans for a new shop in Oakridge, where the surroundings will be reassembled yet again. Then, as I make to leave, he hands me a delightful surprise: an invitation to the next meeting of the Vancouver Pipe Club.

Outside, I light up the bowl I'd packed in the shop. Slowly, I set out for home. Happy smokers in present-day Vancouver; early Christians in pagan Rome, I think as I look over the invitation. Luckily, this city is short on lions.

## PASSIONS

"Okay, Elmer, this is your stop," my wife laughs. "Will you be needing your cane tonight?" She is, of course, insinuating that as a 31-year-old, I might not fit in at a gathering of pipe smokers. Hunter S. Thompson and Hugh Hefner both smoked pipes in their youth, and I could cite them in my defence. But to me they stand as distant thirds to the likes of Twain, Faulkner and Hamsun, all of whom had heads of grey before they picked up the briar. I give her a peck and get out, sans cane.

The proprietor of City Cigar, a gregarious Greek, points me to the lounge. Inside are about thirty men in repose, all with a clump of wood dangling from fingers and lips. Ventilators ensure that I can see clearly through the plumes, and what I see is not what my wife—or, admittedly, I—had expected.

Sure there are characters with mustaches styled after Prussian cavalymen and guys who take grooming tips from Karl Marx. But among them are a few who may have recently auditioned for a boy band, a well-muscled skateboarder and a guy who fan-

## PUT THIS IN YOUR PIPE

### **Dunhill Nightcap (50g) \$28.95**

A rich blend, mild in taste, with Perique tobacco added to enhance flavour.

### **R.J. Clarke's home blends (50g) \$24.95**

A large variety of tobaccos for smokers from the novice to the connoisseur.

### **Amphora's Malt Whiskey (50g) \$19.95**

12-year-old Malt Whiskey is blended with this strong-flavoured tobacco.

### **Captain Black (Gold) (50g) \$18.95**

Matured Golden Cavendish tobaccos. Mild in strength.

### **Borkum Riff-Bourbon Whiskey (50g) \$15.95**

Riff cut blended with whiskey gives this tobacco a medium flavour.

*All are widely available at tobacconists throughout the Lower Mainland.*

cies himself a thug. Some of the pipes that hang from the mouths of these younger fellows would have made my grandfather blush.

I slide into an armchair and begin to puff. We are all puffing away, listening to another young guy who makes pipes. His wares are passed around like holy relics.

Tapped on the shoulder, I'm offered a scotch. "Can't take a bottle home," says Casey, another young guy boasting an elaborate pipe. I am beginning to like this—the match striking, the pipe tapping, the unmistakable squeak of a flask being opened.

Eventually, I talk with the man who started the club a year ago. His name is Doug. "We got all types in here, as you can see. Blue-collar, white-collar, artists, clergy, the head of the Justice Institute," says Doug, while exhaling like a dragon. "Are you thinking of joining?"

Inod. "You know," he says, "you smoke cigarettes because you have to and pipes because you want to." Having now experienced both, I am inclined to agree. ●