



— CONFESSIONS OF A —

# JAVA JUNKIE

Giving up the dark roast is harder than coming off heroin,  
discovers long-term coffee addict Mat Smith

I WAS EIGHT years old when I had my first caffeine hit. It was in a cubicle in the girls' toilets at primary school. I remember the comforting smell as my older sister poured the brown liquid from the tartan Thermos. Looking back, the illicitness of the surroundings — which would set the scene for more noxious encounters in subsequent years — seems entirely appropriate.

I can still recall the taste as it hit the back of my throat, the feeling of wellbeing that started in my tummy and jangled my innocent synapses — then untouched by anything more tart than the jam filling of an Arctic Roll. Dennis, my guitar teacher, said I played perfectly that afternoon. I floated home and told Mum I wanted to get my hair cut like David Bowie's.

Aside from the odd coffee-flavoured Quality Street at Christmas and a mocha ice cream in the summer, it stayed there. But then I became a music journalist.

Pre office-smoking bans, the tequila-

drinking, scalpel-dodging, cricket-playing, standing-on-desks-and-singing, nine-hour-lunching, copy-burning and séance-holding that constituted an honest afternoon's work all took place within a mephitic fog of cigarette smoke.

Thinking ciggies were a retarded addiction to pick up post-teens, I needed a safe daytime habit to go with the more injurious ones I was working on by night. Hence coffee. Nescafé, Maxwell House — anything would do. This was the Eighties — we all still took speed for heaven's sake.

When we were on deadline there would be a battle with the news editor to see who could make the most foul insult of a brew — an ultraviolet, super-leaded six-spoon-strong sludge that looked, tasted and behaved like it had been drawn from a Chernobyl well. If it didn't make us jump round the desk attempting to push our eyeballs back into their sockets while yelling the C word, the maker would,

most certainly, be deemed a wuss.

The first indication that you didn't have to run on caffeine to work was when a friend told me he was giving up as he hated needing it to get going in the morning. This was a man who believed the government should subsidise his drug consumption as it was the inspiration for his music. He once walked naked into the Kings Road, emptied an ATM and sat on the pavement handing out twenties. Now he was giving up coffee. Was it really that bad?

"If you wanted to get caffeine past regulators now, it wouldn't be a legal substance," Corinne Sweet, psychologist and author of *Overcoming Addiction*, tells me. "As a nation, we're drinking more than is healthy. We're living at such a pace our bodies can't keep up, so we're battering them with this upper and downer mentality."

Nick Gully, former director of addictions services at the Priory and now

a psychotherapist at Sanctuary Therapy Services in Surrey, puts it into sharper relief: "If you injected a single espresso, you'd be dead within four minutes," he tells me.

I've been looking for a reason to cut down my consumption, but no one's ever come up with a good one — though they all express horror at the fact that I sink around nine cups a day. Every health check I've ever been for has told me my body runs on caffeine. Significantly though, no one has told me it's going to turn me into something worse than I already am. And anyway, Voltaire survived until the age of 84 drinking up to 80 cups a day.

It's not exactly crack, and to overdose you'd have to get involved with brewing up buckets of the stuff and sticking pipes up your bum. You don't need to be David Carradine to know there's more fun to be had out there than that. Still, giving up for a month seemed like a good experiment.

I discover that quitting overnight is not at all recommended. Reducing caffeine too quickly causes a dramatic drop in blood pressure due to the body becoming over sensitive to adenosine, an inhibitory neurotransmitter that causes blood to gather in the head. This sounds mildly interesting, so this is how I decide to do it.

On day one I stagger downstairs and make coffee — a nutty Santos mocha — for my girlfriend and decaf South African tea for me. Easy. As I exit London's Oxford Circus Tube and walk towards work however, the smell of Caffè Nero's seven-bean blend pulls me up sharp. As I stop briefly to savour the caffeinated air I think I know how Ozzy feels. No wonder he tried to strangle Sharon.

The problem with being addicted to coffee is that it's everywhere. Where I live the pavements are offset by one degree so that the residents can walk perfectly upright, unable as they are to perambulate without a Starbucks cup in one hand.

"In some ways, caffeine is harder to give up than heroin," says Sweet. "Not everyone is offering you heroin on street corners or walking around with cups of the stuff everywhere they go."

At 10.14am I instinctively walk round to Fernandez & Wells, a violently expensive artisan coffee shop where I like to fritter away my children's inheritance. As I walk in, I immediately remember the exclusion order on me and buy a croissant instead. In the lift at work, I check the mirror to see if the black rings round my eyes have faded yet. There's got to be some win in this.

By midday, caffeine withdrawal is kicking in. I feel like I've been whacked on

the back of the head with a baseball bat and break off my plans to see a friend that night as I've forgotten how to speak. By 4.26pm, I feel like I'm caught in a SpongeBob SquarePants cartoon, hallucinating a Fernandez & Wells coffee cup onto the computer desktop. I find my way home in a daze, get the kids ready for bed, and fall into a coma at 9pm.

The next morning at 5am, I wake up with the usual to-do list writing itself accusatorially. But something's different. I actually feel pretty good. More like fantastic. Later that day, Sweet tells me this is to do with my liver flushing out the toxins and my over-stimulated adrenal glands beginning their journey back towards normality.

I bash away at a bit of the book I'm working on before the kids get up at 7am. I fairly bounce into a friend's place on the way to work. She offers me coffee. I have tea. I feel offensively sanctimonious all the way to the office — where, come 9.47am, I'm really, really needing the brown.

## If you were to inject a single espresso, you'd be dead within four minutes

### FOUR WAYS TO DITCH YOUR LATTE HABIT

Don't go cold turkey — instead, reduce your intake gradually by going half and half with decaffeinated.

Take your time — if you drink, say, eight cups a day, cut down over eight weeks by cutting out one cup a week.

Substitute coffee with a fruit juice — make sure your new habit is a healthy one.

Never drink coffee after 6pm. If you can sleep soundly after a coffee you've built up a tolerance and are drinking too much.

"That craving is to do with how you feel about your job," says Sweet. "I can't face my job, I'm tired.' So deal with the feeling, go for a walk or talk to a friend."

At 9.47am the next morning, I call my best mate. He puts me on speakerphone and makes cappuccino machine noises. "Seriously mate, harden the fuck up!" he says, quoting our favourite Chopper line.

The following couple of days pass in a steadily growing display of willpower. Just as I think I've got it licked, my daughter's school sports day comes around. I get off the bus one stop early. I've spotted a row of dilapidated shops and a sudden blood rush to my head says there's bound to be a café there. Bouncing up the road, Styrofoam cup of lukewarm slop in hand, I feel ecstatic, like a self-denying junkie who's cunningly fizzed up 20 Solpadeines to keep his smack craving in check.

Within minutes though, the guilt sets in. I feel like I failed the task, betraying five days of self-control for such a low cup of piss. My little girl wins three races and comes off the field covered in WINNER! stickers. We go to Pizza Express where I feel like a LOSER! — and have three macchiatos to cement the fact.

"What happened on the bus," says Gully, "is that the impulsive part of your brain, the amygdala, kicked in and switched off the rational part. The minute you enter a situation where you're exposed to triggers — smells, images — it starts a chemical reaction in the brain that tells your body to get ready to receive whatever it is you're addicted to. And before you knew it, you'd bought a coffee."

And so it goes on, each day slightly easier than the one before. I never feel as great as I did that first morning, and when the month is up there's no party with gallons of civet coffee served by Tera Patrick looky-likeys, just a gentle crawl back to four or five cups a day.

But then I have a chat with Simon Leigh, an accredited addictions counsellor specialising in addictive disorders. Simon says I could have an addictive personality.

"When a negative feeling comes up — sadness, anger, feeling low — the addict doesn't have the tools to deal it, so he suppresses it with some mood-altering substance or behaviour."

He reels off a list of addictions that go hand in hand and my mental Rolodex whirs and clicks annoyingly as it pauses at a few of them. So I endeavour to cut down. Maybe I don't really need to supersize every feeling life throws up anymore. Maybe it's time to give up the final vice. **3**