



Sugar High

When the popular '90s confection, Phantom Cigarettes began to disappear from Mumbai's kirana shelves after the millennium, Kamakshi Ayyar never gave up the hope of re-encountering her favourite childhood treat. The Hong Kong-based writer reflects on how this constant search for an object from the past represents a longing in the present...

PHOTOGRAPHS BY SHRUTI JAIN

Tucked away in an industrial park in Pune's suburbs is a building that is responsible for the collective sugar rushes of a generation of '90s babies. For as long as I can remember, it has churned out the most fantastical confections that defined thousands of childhoods, including mine, making it our own Wonka chocolate factory. There were lollipops, candies, custards and jellies, and...cigarettes. You know the ones I'm talking about. Those white, chalky, narrow cylinders that turn sticky if you hold on to them for too long, the ones that are sickly sweet and contained in a red box emblazoned with the word 'Phantom'.

A few years ago I almost had a chance to visit this wonderland, officially known as the Harnik General Foods factory but forever identified in my head as the 'Phantom Factory', home to my most favourite candy growing up. The magazine I worked at then was planning a food issue and a colleague had recently told me how she knew someone who worked at the Phantom facility. As soon as my editor announced she's looking for food stories I knew what I wanted to pitch. I did my best to sell the idea and it worked. I got my Golden Ticket!

In the moments after that edit meeting, still riding high on a mix of manic joy and an I-can't-believe-this-is-happening incredulousness, I imagined seeing giant vats of sugar bubbling away with minty vapours rising from them; rows of sticky white cigarettes being pressed out of moulds; sheets of the iconic red-and-white packaging rolling off the press. I pictured loading my car with crates of Phantom Cigarettes to take back home. No more futile searching for the candy in Mumbai corner shops.

Sadly, the story didn't work out because I didn't end up getting permission from the company to visit the factory. My quest for Phantom continued.

I was born just before the '90s began and spent my prime sugar-consuming years surrounded by the most dizzying varieties of candies, chocolates and toffees. It was the happiest decade of my life and while these treats weren't the only reason for that, they were definitely a big part of it. Each trip to the local kirana store with my mother or grandmother was a test for me. Did I want a handful of Mango Bite or a couple of packets of cola-flavoured Magic Pop? Or maybe a roll of Poppins in lurid yellows, greens and reds? Or how about a mix of Coffee Bite and Boomer Bubble Gum? It was a tough decision to make as a seven-year-old. Invariably I would drift towards the big glass jar that held the Phantom Cigarettes. Even at birthday parties, when candies would rain from popped *khoi* bags, I would scramble for the packets of Phantom amidst the deluge of shiny wrappers and colourful confetti. This isn't to say that I didn't enjoy gooey Eclairs or packets of Fatafat. But Phantom was special for many reasons.

Let's start with the most important one: how it made me feel. Chocolates usually leave me pretty happy but Phantom was probably the only one that made me feel cool. Wasn't that why most of us bought it? So that for a few fleeting minutes we could pretend to be older and cooler than we were? These cigarettes, along with those giant technicolour Jewel Rings and the Push Pop lipstick candy that came in a baby-pink cover were ephemeral portkeys that temporarily transported me into adulthood. Though come to think of it, it's odd that our parents were okay with us



having easy access to them. And then one day someone told me where I might find them. There's a guy who sets up a stall outside New Yorker (a restaurant right by Mumbai's Girgaum Chowpatty) every weekend, I was told, and he should stock Phantom. I wasted no time and made a beeline for the restaurant on the following Saturday.

The man was there with his giant wicker basket, filled with an assortment of local sweet and savoury treats. Many of them seemed to be homemade judging by the simple plastic pouches that had been stapled shut. There were black-and-white bullseyes, sugar-coated fennel seeds and neon-coloured fryums, the kind you could skewer with your entire finger. Most importantly, there were packets of Phantom Cigarettes. He quickly became my go-to guy for Phantom fixes. Until he inexplicably stopped selling them.

What was going on? I put that question to Gautam Harnik, director at Harnik General Foods and grandson of N. L. Hingorani, the creator of Phantom Cigarettes. "The product is still very popular and despite all efforts, it still has a skewed demand to supply ratio," he said in an email. Harnik said that the company had stayed true to the original design, even ensuring certain flaws remained despite automation, in order to recreate the feel of the candy as it was when it was launched in the late 1960s.

It seems like everyone loved Phantom Cigarettes a little too much for their own good. I'd see them randomly popping up in places as harsh reminders of what I was missing. There were folks on Amazon and Flipkart selling large boxes of the cigarettes (I was inexplicably skeptical of ordering them online); there were Reddit threads that discussed where to buy a packet of Phantom and who the face on the cover resembles (suggestions included cricketer Harbhajan Singh, singer Sukhbir and actor Kabir Bedi). Award-winning chef Manish Mehrotra of Indian Accent tracked down a supplier in Bangalore to ensure he could have the cigarettes for a dessert in his Delhi restaurant. Bollywood got in on the act with Alia Bhatt's character in *Kapoor & Sons* (2016) hunting for Phantom Cigarettes in Ooty's kirana stores.

The more I thought about it, I realised that I missed Phantom more because of what it represented than because of its taste. I missed having a reminder of a time when I was (in my mind, at least) cool and confident, especially as I drowned in self-doubt as a teenager and continue to do so even today. It's emblematic of a time when everything was near perfect in my little universe.

The adulthood I had envisioned when I puffed on those candy cigarettes was blissfully easy to navigate and always on track. Turns out, in addition to sugar, I was also high on naivety. As most adults will testify, our lives rarely pan out the way we imagine. And as I try to navigate the curveballs of growing up every day, with the anxiety and overthinking that comes with it, I find myself wishing for quick escapes to simpler times when a single drag from a chalky sugar cigarette could set the world straight. ☹

If you'd like to order Phantom Cigarettes, get in touch with Harnik Foods or order from Amazon or Flipkart.

consuming candies that seemed to make 'cool' a practice that could kill us.

Then there was the packaging. The Phantom Cigarettes mascot on the front of the packet, a bearded man in sunglasses, was in stark contrast to the other characters trying to get our attention. But it was what was on the back of the packets that mattered the most. There were puzzles for nerds like me to solve: finding the way out through a maze, looking for words in an alphabet jumble. A sugar hit and a little mental exercise? Sign me up. These add-ons were much more satisfying than those trying-to-be-tattoos that were on the underside of Fusen Gum wrappers.

The taste was pretty unique too. Yes, there were other mint-flavoured options like Polo, but something about the cloying sweetness of Phantom Cigarettes hit the right spot for me. And so I 'puffed' my way through my early years, never thinking that Phantom could become scarce in my life. And then the 2000s arrived.

I'm not really sure when I first noticed that Phantom Cigarettes were disappearing from my usual sources. But as the millennium rolled on, it felt as though my favourite candy and other '90s-era confections were being forced to give up shelf space to newer, flashier chocolates; Cadbury Mr. Pop's Eclair lollipops made way for Chupa Chups and Chiclets for Wrigley's Spearmint.

I wasn't quite jonesing for the cigarettes but I did miss