

Tania and the Mystery Smoker



By Kanika G

Tania and the Mystery Smoker

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First Edition, 2021.

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Sonia is burned by a cigarette butt that falls in to the balcony of her home. Tania is enraged. She is determined to find the person who hurt her little sister and put a stop to their barbaric behavior by publicly humiliating them. But how will she catch the culprit? Read on to find out.

This thrilling story peppered with humor explores complex issues like addiction and privacy from various perspectives, and arms preteens with information and ideas that will prepare them for some of the challenges of teenage life.

Burned!

It was a peaceful Saturday morning during the summer holidays. Tania was working on a painting, while Mama sat nearby sipping her tea whilst enjoying a book. Sonia was out in the balcony talking to her plants, praising their pretty flowers and fresh green leaves, encouraging them to grow taller than the balcony railing.

Suddenly a piercing scream rent the air. "What was that?" Tania asked, startled out of her skin.

Mama recognized the scream at once and dashed off to the balcony. Tania followed. There they found Sonia sobbing next to her plants. "What happened, Baby?" Mama asked, hugging Sonia to comfort her.

"Ouch!" Sonia screamed, as she pulled away from Mama. She was too overcome to speak, so she pointed at a spot on her arm. That's when Tania and Mama noticed the burn mark.

Tania dashed off to fetch the burn cream from the medicine cabinet. When she returned, Mama had managed to calm Sonia down a little. At least, she was no longer sobbing.

Tania gently applied the burn cream on the burn mark while Sonia sat on Mama's lap. "How did this happen, Baby?" Mama asked.

Still sniffing, Sonia pointed at a little space between two flower pots, and her eyes welled up again. Tania bent down and peered at the spot where Sonia had been pointing. There, she found a cigarette butt. She picked it up and showed it to Mama.

Mama grimaced and shook her head. She hugged Sonia. "It'll be alright, Baby," she consoled.

Tania was puzzled. "How come a cigarette just happened to land on Sonia while she was out here with the plants for a few minutes. What are the odds?"

"Not too surprising." Mama mumbled. "I should not have let Sonia come here in the morning."

"What do you mean Mama?" Tania asked, and Sonia too looked at her in confusion.

"I have been finding cigarette butts almost every day in the balcony in the morning and at night for the last month." Mama explained.

"Who throws them here?" Sonia demanded.

"I don't know." Mama replied, frustration creeping into her voice. "The flat directly above us has been empty for months. So it could be coming from any of the flats above it."

"There has to be a way to tell." Tania insisted. "Can't we ask the society secretary for CCTV camera footage?" Tania asked, and Sonia nodded along.

In spite of the situation, Mama smiled. "Tania, CCTV cameras are not magic. They are set up at entry and exit points of the society and in the elevators, to monitor the activity of outsiders for the security of those who live here."

"Oh, okay." Sonia shrugged, as the medicine mitigated the sting from the burn. She bounded off to play with her Legos.

But Tania wasn't going to give up so easily. "That seems like a waste of useful and expensive technology, Mama." She protested.

"Whatever do you mean?" Mama asked, puzzled.

A Private Life

"I mean, if we are going to have the CCTV camera infrastructure set up anyway, why not use it everywhere?"

"Everywhere? Why?" Mama stared at Tania.

"Just the other day, someone was complaining that the flowers from their private garden are being plucked. There was another complaint about people leaving garbage on the stairwell. That's a fire hazard. And now, this person is hurting babies with burning cigarettes. Why doesn't the society use CCTV cameras to figure out who is misbehaving, so they can be stopped?" Tania was indignant.

"But Tania that's a terrible invasion of privacy." Mama objected.

"People who behave this way do not deserve privacy." Hot tears welled up in Tania's eyes, as she thought of the burn on Sonia's arm.

"Tania, I understand you are angry, and so am I, but you must think about the effect of what your suggesting, beyond the immediate problem."

"What do you mean? What effect?" Tania asked, confused.

Mama scrunched up her face wondering how best to explain things to Tania. "Are you the same person when you are by yourself in your room, and when you're at a party?" She asked

"What do you mean? Who else would I be?" Tania asked, even more perplexed.

"I mean, why do you sing in the shower or when you are by yourself in your room, but refuse to do so at parties."

"Because no one is listening Mama, so I don't feel shy." Tania's eyes widened as realization dawned.

"Now you see what I mean, don't you?" Mama smiled. "We are a much more carefree version of ourselves when we are not being watched. We can be silly, make faces, sing, dance, make rude noises, vent our frustrations and experiment with ideas without the fear or stress of judgment, or worrying about offending someone. We need spaces where can relax, let our hair down, not have to be on our best behavior, and still face the world with what we consider dignity and sensitivity."

"I hadn't thought of it that way. People often tell you that if you feel the need to hide what you are doing, it must be wrong. Only guilt can make one want privacy, but now I see that it's not true. Privacy is important for it's own sake, so people can be comfortable as they experiment and grow. There is nothing wrong with it, so long as they don't harm anyone else."

"Exactly Tania, and curbing bad behavior is not a good enough excuse to intrude on people's private lives. That is why for example, the police need a warrant to search your house. They have to provide evidence showing you are involved in wrong doing, before they can invade your privacy."

"Mama, your argument makes sense for not having CCTV cameras aimed at balconies, but it still does not explain why the society grounds cannot be monitored. That's a public space, isn't it?"

"In a way yes, but suppose you are walking on the grounds and your bum feels itchy. You look around and note that no one can see you. Then this is effectively privacy of sorts. You quickly scratch your bum, and then relieved of the sensation, continue your walk. But now imagine how you would feel about all this being watched by a security guard on camera?" Mama asked.

Tania bit her lip, but she said nothing.

"Worse, what if someone posted a video of this, or of something embarrassing like you picking your nose or falling into a swimming pool on YouTube or Facebook and made fun of you in the commentary?"

Mama continued. "And then suppose this video became viral, and your teachers and friends all saw it."

Tania stared at Mama wide-eyed in horror.

"Such videos could also be used to blackmail people." Mama pressed on.

The word blackmail drew Tania out of her shock. "Mama that's just silly. People could be sued for blackmail and for posting such videos." She argued, recovering.

"Sure, but the damage would already be done. And how many people would want to attract more attention to an embarrassing incident, by filing a law suit? Besides, the law proceeds very slowly here."

Tania gaped at Mama. *Could people really be so horrible*, she wondered.

"Before CCTV cameras and cell phone cameras, even public places could be considered reasonably private, when they were deserted. Even if someone saw you do something embarrassing, it ended there. There was no danger of it becoming a global viral sensation, haunting you for a very long time, reaching people like school authorities and employers."

"That does sound scary. It would make us tense all the time." Tania realized.

"It's important Tania, that people are not be made to feel uncomfortable being themselves, in the very place they live." Mama continued. "Many in the society have suggested aggressive monitoring of all the common areas. Thankfully, it has not come to pass, yet. Technology poses a serious threat to the right to privacy, and it is up to us to protect it before it is too late, because it's impossible to put the toothpaste back in the tube."

"What toothpaste, what tube?" Tania asked puzzled.

Mama laughed. "It's just an expression. You know how easy it is to squeeze toothpaste out of a tube, but putting it back in there is considerably more difficult, and no one would bother with it. Similarly, extreme caution should be exercised before implementing certain actions which are very difficult to reverse, like surveillance."

Tania was quiet for a couple of minutes, and Mama waited while she processed the information. When she looked up at Mama, her eyes flashed. "So you are saying that people can get away with anything, by misusing their right to privacy?"

"No Tania. But monitoring people all the time, hoping to catch them in wrong doing is not the way to go. Implementing surveillance to catch a few people flouting rules or making a nuisance of themselves, would compromise everyone's privacy, even those who are completely innocent, and additionally, make them susceptible to blackmail." Mama reiterated.

"People must be considered innocent until proven guilty or everyone must live in fear." She added, gently pushing away a stray curl from Tania's face. "I know this is frustrating, but sometimes a cure can be more damaging than the disease itself. When it comes to privacy violation, we must tread with care, or we may come to realize its value only when it's too late."

As Mama hugged Tania, she could tell from her taut muscles, that Tania wasn't convinced. "It's okay Tania. You don't have to agree with me. Take your time, and think about it. Feel free to ask me any questions."

"But Mama then how can evidence ever be obtained to prosecute a criminal?" Tania asked pulling away from the hug. "I mean how can you figure out who is responsible for the crime without questioning everyone who may be associated with it." There had to be some sense to the workings of this bizarre world, she hoped.

"Once a crime is committed, and until it is solved, everyone with any connection with the crime can be investigated, under these special cir-

cumstances, without threatening the privacy of the general public." Mama explained.

"Oh. I see." Tania smiled, as she began to work on a plan of action. As far as Tania was concerned, burning a baby with a cigarette was most certainly a crime. Under such circumstances, she had the right to do some targeted snooping and surveillance, she rationalized.

The Plan

That evening, when Tania met her friends in the society play area and told them about the offending cigarette butt, many of them very fond of Sonia, expressed concern for her.

"Sharma aunty was at our house last week for tea, and she too was complaining about cigarette butts. On some days she finds six or seven in her balcony. It's disgusting." Karishma added.

"But Karishma, Sharma Aunty lives in B wing, right?" Tanisha asked.

"Yes." Karishma replied. "So what?"

"I mean, since Tania lives in A wing, there must be more than one person chucking cigarette butts out of their balcony." Tansiha elaborated.

"More than one!" Nikhil snorted. "There must be at least five. Complaints have been popping up from various people from different sides of each wing. My mom showed me the pictures posted on the society WhatsApp groups. It's all quite horrible. One poor lady has to pick cigarette butts out of her plant pots almost everyday. But no one can figure out who the offenders are, and they continue this disgusting behavior with impunity."

"They need to be taught a lesson." Rajiv blurted out angrily.

"But who should be taught a lesson?" Karishma asked. "We don't know who is doing it."

"But we could find out." Tania's eyes glinted.

"What do you have in mind?" Nikhil asked, amused.

"From what Mama said, I gathered that the cigarettes fall into our balcony overlooking the swimming pool, between 9:00 and 10:00 am. So if we sit near the pool and monitor the balconies of the few floors

above my apartment during that hour, we can find the culprit. Let me see, there are six of us, right?" she asked, after pointing at Tanisha, Karishma, Nikhil, Sonali and Rajiv in turn and counting each of them. Her friends nodded.

"So we can each pick one floor to watch, and figure out who the culprit is, if it is anyone from one of the six floors above your flat, Tania." Tanisha suggested.

"Yes, and I think we should bring along our binoculars." Nikhil added.

"I just remembered, Vivek too will be back tomorrow from his *nani's* house, so we can watch seven floors instead of six." Rajiv pointed out.

"Great then we can cover all the floors above Tania's flat in a day. Tania's mom already ruled out the fourth floor, right because no one lives there?" Sonali chimed in.

"That's right." Tania nodded.

"It's a plan." Karishma declared. "I'll have to search for my binoculars this evening though," she sighed.

The next morning at a half past eight, seven amateur detectives armed with binoculars and snacks, assembled near the swimming pool, where they had a clear view of Tania's balcony, and those of the apartments above it.

"Hey Vivek, how was your holiday?" Tania asked, clapping Vivek on his back.

"Not too good. Raju Mama, my mother's brother, was unusually grumpy and kept shouting," Vivek complained, "but at least I had fun with my cousins," he added, cheering up. "I missed you all, though. Whatever are we up to, today? Rajiv mentioned some secret spy mission, and that I should bring my binoculars." His eyes gleamed.

Rajiv and Tanisha took turns in explaining the plan and brought Vivek up to speed. *He doesn't seem to happy about it*, Tania thought, noticing a transient grimace on his face. Perhaps, he was just squinting at the sun Tania decided, as he enthusiastically joined in the plan.

"Tania, since you're on the third floor, and your mom says the fourth floor flat directly above you is unoccupied, I am going to keep a watch on the fifth floor balcony." Sonali declared, adjusting her binoculars.

Tania sat down a little behind Sonali and chose the sixth floor. "I'll watch seven." Nikhil announced, making himself cozy a couple of feet behind Tania.

"Eight for me," Karishma called out, moving even further back. "It's a good thing the person smokes in the balcony that faces the pool, so there is enough space for us to move back." Otherwise, we couldn't have watched the higher floors.

"Nine's mine." Rajiv rhymed, making them giggle. "Don't give the guy any ideas. He's quite a nuisance as it is."

"I'll take ten, since I live on that floor. I know the family whose balcony faces this way. I hope it's not them." Tanisha sounded distressed. "They are really nice people. Auntie often sends caramel custard or chocolate cake." She added, trying to convince herself that such nice people could never do anything so barbaric.

"I guess that leaves me with eleven. I'll watch out, but I can barely see what's going on in the balcony there. It's so high up." Vivek fretted.

"Yeah, I mean even ten is tough." Tanisha agreed. "Just do your best."

For sometime silence reigned, as everyone adjusted their binoculars and shifted around trying to get comfortable. Some of them munched on *chocos* or *chaklis* while they watched intently through their binoculars.

"If we spot the trouble maker, what are we going to do? We can't just barge into their house and accuse them. They'll flat out deny it." Rajiv pointed out.

"I've been wondering about that too. But remember Tania, how we caught those car thieves a few years ago, by capturing the video on your mom's cellphone?"

"Oh yeah!" Karishma recalled. "You saved our Bentley. Dad was so relieved."

"I see someone at the balcony!" Sonali shouted, interrupting the conversation.

"Oh my gosh! Is it the smoker?" Tania asked, excited.

"No. It's just someone putting clothes to dry on a clothes horse." Sonali replied, and everyone groaned in disappointment.

"You're right, Tanisha." Rajiv returned to their earlier conversation. "We are going to need to prove who it is. So how do we do that?"

"I guess, once we know which floor the cigarette butts are coming from, we can focus a camera on the balcony and make a video of the person smoking and dropping the cigarette." Karishma suggested.

"But a cellphone camera won't be powerful enough for that, will it?" Vivek objected.

"That's true." Tania brooded.

"I can get my dad's camera. He taught me how to use it, when we went bird watching together." Nikhil offered. "I can bring it tomorrow."

"Your dad won't mind?" Rajiv asked, enviously.

"He's out of town." Nikhil winked. "Besides, I'll be really careful. He taught me well. I know how to zoom and focus and everything. I can also ..."

"Hey, I see someone smoking." Tania cut him short. "I'm going to see if he is the one dropping the cigarette butts." Tania watched intently for the next few minutes, and the others too kept sneaking glances at the sixth floor balcony, for nothing was happening on the other balconies.

"Yes, he has dropped the cigarette butt!" Tania exclaimed, triumphantly. "So now we know. Nikhil, if you can capture a video, I'll ask my mom to post it on the society Whatsapp group. That should take care of him."

"Yes boss." Nikhil saluted, and all of them laughed. Tania frowned.

"We'll all meet tomorrow morning at 8:30, then?" Tanisha asked.

"Yes." Karishma nodded. "I hope this scares off the other smokers too. Then Sharma Aunty will be happy."

The friends returned to their respective homes, excited about their plan. They were going to catch bad guys and set them straight, just like the superheroes of the Justice League.

Tania returned home whistling. "What are you so thrilled about?" Mama asked, when she opened the door to let Tania in.

"Just had fun hanging out with my friends." Tania replied, truthfully. Mama narrowed her eyes, but did not say anything.

Tania pranced off to the balcony where Sonia had been burned. She searched around and found a cigarette butt. It was still warm. "I'm coming for you, Mister." Tania declared, holding the cigarette butt up in front of her face. She wondered who lived on the sixth floor. She hadn't recognized the man, but what if Mama knew him or his wife? Would she be comfortable posting the video. *Well, I'll know soon enough*, she mused.

Villain or Victim?

The next morning, the seven friends assembled downstairs again, excited at the prospect of catching the villain and teaching him a lesson. Vivek somehow seemed subdued, Tania noted.

"What's the matter Vivek? Are you unwell?" Rajiv asked, concerned.

"No. I'm fine." Vivek nodded, not meeting his eyes. When Rajiv did not look convinced, Vivek added, "Just didn't sleep too well last night. Too many mosquitoes." He turned away to help Nikhil, who was adjusting the settings on the camera to get a clear picture of the sixth floor balcony, while Tania watched the balcony through her binoculars, waiting for the smoker to show up.

"Yeah, the mosquitoes are really annoying." Sonali grumbled. "Tania, you need to think of a way to solve that problem next."

"Only if cigarette smoke attracted mosquitoes, we'd have fewer smokers and fewer mosquitoes in houses where nobody smokes." Karishma sighed.

"Karishma, you silly goose, you're such a dreamer." Tanisha giggled.

"He's arrived at the balcony!" Tania exclaimed. "Nikhil are you ready?"

"Yes, I am." Nikhil replied, concentrating on the camera. All was quiet for the next few minutes. Everyone watched with bated breath, as Nikhil filmed the man smoking, and then chucking the cigarette butt out of the balcony.

"What are you guys up to?" An excited little boy squeaked, just as Nikhil stopped recording.

"Oh, hi Arnav. You startled us." Vivek smiled.

"What's this all about?" Arnav asked, reaching for the camera with eager fingers.

"Arnav, no!" Nikhil shouted, pushing him away. "This is a very expensive camera. My dad will kill me, if anything happens to it. Tania, do you have the phone? Let's transfer the video right now, so I can pack this up, safely." He snapped.

"S-so-sorry Nikhil." Arnav apologized, his hands shaking.

Nikhil felt ashamed of his outburst, once he calmed down after stowing away the camera. "It's alright, little buddy. I shouldn't have shouted like that. I'm just nervous about this." Nikhil pointed at the camera bag.

"So what's all this about?" Arnav asked, his curiosity overcoming his timidity.

"We are trying to catch the criminal in the building, who is burning little kids with cigarette butts." Tanisha declared.

"What? Someone is going around burning little kids with cigarette butts? That's horrible!" Arnav's eyes were wide as saucers.

"Way to be dramatic, Tanisha." Rajiv rolled his eyes. "You're evil to frighten him like that."

"Heh heh heh." Tanisha cackled like a witch. "Sorry Arnav, I couldn't resist," she added, noticing the terrified expression on Arnav's face.

"I'll tell him." Sonali, shook her head, and explained what they were doing.

"Do you want to see the video Arnav? We have the bad guy." Tania asked, hoping to cheer him up.

"Yes." Arnav replied looking more frightened than eager. Tania was puzzled by his reaction, but she looked through the files on the cell-

phone and set up the video. Once Arnav had the phone in his hand, she hit play.

To everyone's utter horror, Arnav burst out crying. "P-pl-please don't post this on the s-so-society Whatsapp group, p-pl-lease." He begged between sobs.

The kids goggled at him, speechless. Karishma was the first to recover. "Why not Arnav? What's the matter?"

"That's my dad. He'll be so angry, if he sees it. Please don't do it." He begged.

The kids were all stunned. They had no idea what to say to the miserable little boy. Tania felt very sorry for him, and gave him a hug. *It isn't his fault, if his dad is evil*, she reasoned. "Arnav, can you tell me something?" She asked, as gently as she could.

Still sobbing, Arnav nodded. "Why does your dad throw the cigarette butt without even putting it out? Doesn't he know it could hurt people?" Tania asked.

"My dad feels very angry with himself after smoking, so he just throws the butt in frustration. I don't think he realized it would fall into another balcony and hurt someone." Arnav explained.

"But if smoking makes him so angry, why does he do it? Doesn't he know it's bad for him?" Sonali was bewildered.

"Of course, he does. He's not stupid. He knows, he is the reason my grandma has lung cancer." Arnav's eyes flashed.

"What? I'm so sorry Arnav. I did not know." Tania was horrified.

"What kind of monster is your dad, that he still won't quit smoking?" Karishma asked, enraged.

"Don't say that, Karishma. He tried to quit for grandma's sake, and it was horrible."

"So what? Loads of things are difficult. But peopl .." Nikhil began, but Arnav interrupted him.

"No, I mean it was horrible for us. He went through awful withdrawal symptoms, and he was always angry and shouting. He even hit me. My daddy loves me. He never hurt me before. But when he was trying to quit, he was a different person, a horrible horrible person." Arnav howled, tears streaming down his cheeks.

Now that the floodgates had opened, Arnav could no longer contain himself. He narrated all his woes to a dumbstruck audience. "Dad could not bear who he was becoming. So he started smoking again. He blames himself for being weak willed. Also, smoking is not allowed on the premises, so he does it in the balcony, and he loathes himself for every puff."

Nikhil could not help feeling sorry for the poor Arnav and patted him on the back, but Karishma looked at him with revulsion. "It's his own fault for getting addicted in the first place. He deserves this, especially if he is too weak to quit, even after he is responsible for his mother having lung cancer." She said, without the slightest sympathy.

"You don't know what you are talking about. Addiction is a disease. Some people just can't quit, as easily as others. That's what some doctors told my mother. My dad had started smoking in college because of peer pressure, and because at that time the dangers of cigarette smoking were not as well known."

"Oh please, the dangers have been known for a long time. You dad chose to do it." Rajiv snorted.

"No, I mean, he did not know how difficult it would be for him to quit. He tried to quit soon after college, but relapsed within a few months. He tried to quit a two more times when a couple of his friends did, but even though they succeeded, he did not. Some people are more prone to addiction, especially those who started smoking early. Did you know that cigarette companies spend loads of money on getting teenagers addicted to cigarettes? Most long term hopelessly ad-

dicted smokers, are those who started smoking before they turned eighteen. Cigarette companies target them."

"What a load of tosh!" Rajiv grunted.

"No, he's right." Vivek piped in. "I was at my *nani's* house last week as you know. My mother's brother, Raju Mama is trying to quit. My mom took him to see a doctor. The doctor explained that the changes in the brain which helps us develop in our teenage years, also make the teenage brain more susceptible to addiction. That's why tobacco companies use devise cunning, indirect ways of targeting kids in their advertisement campaigns."

In the awkward silence that followed, Vivek hesitated for a moment, and then blurted out, "Shaming Arnav's dad publicly will only make matters worse for his family. I don't think it's the right thing to do."

Tania stared at Vivek, appalled by his information about cigarette companies deliberately targeting minors. She suddenly recalled Vivek's subdued attitude earlier in the morning. "That's why you seemed unhappy this morning." She concluded. "You think we should feel sympathy, rather than anger towards smokers?" She asked, tentatively.

Vivek nodded, and everyone looked confused. Arnav looked terrified and turned to Vivek. "So what now?" Sonali asked. "Tania, what are you going to do with that video?"

Tania shrugged, and looked around at everyone else. "Mama was right." She sighed. "Right and wrong is more complicated than it seems."

"I have an idea." Tanisha raised her hand.

"This is not school Tanisha." Nikhil laughed. "You don't have to raise your hand. What's your idea?" Everyone was giggling.

"Sorry, force of habit." Tanisha blushed. "Now that we know who is chucking the cigarette butts, Tania, your mom could just approach Ar-

nav's dad privately, couldn't he?" Tanisha ploughed on. "She could tell him how he hurt Sonia, and that he needs to find a safer way to dispose off his cigarette ends."

"And if he denies it?" Tania asked, skeptically.

"Then your mom could show him the video for proof. Perhaps, she could tell him she would go public, if it happens again?" Tanisha offered.

"Yes, Tania, please could you ask your mom to do that?" Arnav asked, considerably relieved.

Tania nodded, and Vivek smiled. "Perhaps you could also ask your mom to suggest to Arnav's dad that he should get some counseling. My uncle says talking to someone helps, and the counselor suggests techniques that make it easier to deal with the withdrawal symptoms. The doctor also told my uncle there is some medication available to help with extreme cases," he added.

"So addiction really is a disease that doctors and therapists can treat?" Rajiv asked, skeptically.

"Treat, but not cure. One has to be very careful, and some join support groups to prevent relapses. Some people fight it off with will power, and others need help, is what my mom said." Vivek replied.

"Sort of like an infection? Sometimes, your body can fight it off on its own, and sometimes you need medicine." Nikhil observed. "Could make sense, I guess."

"Even if this stops Arnav's dad, it won't stop the rest of the smokers." Karishma objected.

"That's true, but we could tackle them all one at a time." Nikhil suggested.

Rajiv looked thoughtful and then shrugged. Tania was reminded of something Mama had said to her a couple of days ago, *Sometimes the*

cure is more damaging than the disease.

Everyone looked at Karishma. Finally, she nodded and gave Arnav a hug. "Sounds like there may be more to a smoking addiction than I was aware of. It's best we know as much as possible, so we don't get caught unaware like your dad. I hope he is able to quit with a doctor's help. Best of luck Arnav. I'm sorry, I was so harsh."

"That's okay Karishma. Thanks for understanding." Arnav looked so happy, Tania smiled.

She couldn't believe she had come to feel sorry for the evil smoker. *That's twice in three days, I have had to reconsider my strong opinions when presented with another perspective, Tania mused. I'll try harder to see the other side of the story next time I am angry, she resolved.*