



— 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

