

# AFTER THE FALL

*After her conviction in John Belushi's death, Cathy Smith became a legal secretary. She finds dating more stressful than prison. By Karen Moline*

She laughs about it now, being incarcerated in the Big House for the celebration. "They put up this huge sign: Happy Birthday Cathy...Life Begins at 40," she says. "And I said, 'Well, yes, it does and I feel great,' and then I turned around and there was Susan Atkins of the Manson murders with these great big acrylic nails and this look in her eyes, and she's in there forever. Susan's like someone who's been conjured by a Ouija board—she's not all there. They call it 51-50. You're just over the edge."

Not so very long ago, Catherine Evelyn Smith was a twenty-year veteran of the 51-50 Club. Just over the edge. Her decline—culminating in the track marks on John Belushi's arms—was chronicled vividly in Bob Woodward's *Wired: The Short Life & Fast Times of John Belushi* and the

SMITH AND ATTORNEY AT HER TRIAL

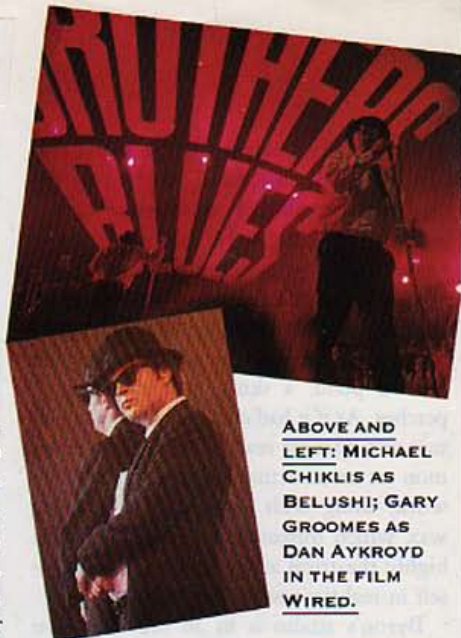


hallucinatory film version out this month. It finally stopped with a five-week stay in what she refers to as "Camp Turn-around," a psychiatric hospital in Tarzana, California where she was able to kick heroin. This followed an indictment on thirteen counts of furnishing and administering controlled drugs and one count of second-degree murder, a no-contest plea, a three-year sentence in the California Institute for Women in Frontera, and an unsuccessful fight against extradition to Canada.

"The first time I ever stood in front of that judge straight was when I was sentenced," she said about her eighteen-month-long trial, held in Los Angeles. "I didn't want to go to prison addicted. When I got there, this big butch girl dragged me into her room and said, 'We've got what you want,' and showed me a syringe full of heroin, I guess it was—it could have been bleach. She didn't stop harassing me for six months."

What's most surprising about Cathy Smith is how much and how infectiously she laughs. Her self-effacing humor does not match the Jezebel image created by the press since Belushi's death in 1982, particularly with the *National Enquirer's* "I Killed John Belushi" headline. For one thing, Smith doesn't believe she was the last person to see Belushi alive. The police found a belt belonging to April Milstead, Belushi's cocaine dealer (Smith sold heroin), bags of drugs, and Milstead's phone number in her handwriting next to his hand in a bungalow of L.A.'s Chateau Marmont. "John either got awakened by April or by somebody else calling, and once he was up, that was it. He wanted cocaine."

"I didn't have the desk hold his calls when I left for lunch that day. We had just had a conversation for hours. Then he started coughing because he had asthma and I went back with a glass of water and touched him and he jumped up and said, 'What.' That's not somebody who's about to nod off into a coma or die. When I took a look at the grand jury paperwork I started putting the pieces together." By then, Milstead had skipped the country and has yet to be found.



ABOVE AND LEFT: MICHAEL CHIKLIS AS BELUSHI; GARY GROOMES AS DAN AYKROYD IN THE FILM *WIRED*.

"John was very chaotic," Smith explains. "He did exactly what he wanted to do. Nobody had the nerve to say no to him. John once told me he wanted to live to Christ's age." They both died at thirty-three. "Who knows whether John foresaw something happening to him or just decided to go flat out till something did."

"The police were very aware of his drug abuse and the way kids looked up to him, and they thought it was a bad image and he was a bad guy, period," she adds. "Judy Belushi's sister Pamela [John's sister-in-law], then an attorney in Denver, leaned on the D.A.'s office to find one person responsible for his death. So that's how it all started."

By the end of her sentence, Smith was teaching word processing to Susan Atkins. Many thought she'd been a scapegoat in a case that would have been relegated to the back pages of a newspaper had a celebrity not been involved. When Belushi died most of his entourage just disappeared, mouths shut, reputations unbesmirched. Cathy Smith's circumstances—and luck—were different. Determined to stay straight, she found prison liberating, grateful for the three square meals and freedom from supporting herself. She earned a high-school equivalency diploma plus four college credits in creative writing.

Smith had been out on her own since leaving the boredom of Aldershot, Ontario, and meeting Levon Helm of The Band, who fathered (and ignored) a baby girl Smith gave up for adoption when she was seventeen. She lived with Gordon Lightfoot for three years; sang backup with Hoyt Axton; became part of the Rolling Stones entourage and discovered heroin.

"I tried to kick it quite a few times, but it's much more than an addiction; you can't go back to the same environment," >



## FALL *continued*

she explains. "In detox centers they put you on heavy methadone, Thorazine, Valium, so you walk around like a basket case in this medicinal shuffle, then they slowly take you off methadone and kick you out on the streets." She laughs. "This disease starts out as a spider monkey and grows to King Kong size. This thing talks to you, tells you 'You're okay, stick with me, you're fine.' It's a horrendous thing to drop—you have to change *everything* in your life and environment and you *must* be educated about it. Kids always ask me why I did it in the first place. Well, it was fun in the first place. But then you *need* it. Drug *abuse* is not fun. I *knew* it wasn't fun.

I just couldn't quit."

After an early release for good behavior in March of 1988, Cathy Smith reestablished herself in Toronto and has become active on the Canadian lecture circuit, telling her tale of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll to school children and teenagers. A self-professed workaholic, she puts in long hours as a legal secretary. Like many unattached women she'd love to have a steady fella, as she puts it. "I do laundry really well," she jokes. "Where do you go to meet guys?" she wonders. A familiar lament. "People say, well, gee, you were kind of a slut weren't you, and I say no, it was just a sign of the times." She laughs. "Like everybody else I did what I wanted to do. But now, I'm really scared even to

meet somebody, go out for dinner. Dating is more stressful than prison."

So are regrets. "What a waste of time, regret," she says. "During that whole court thing everybody made my past sound so awful and I thought, Wait a minute, if anybody knows my past, *I do*, and even after all the garbage printed, I can live with myself, thank you. What would I have changed? Nothing. Do I have regrets? One. I wish I had been more aware. Doing drugs you're just not aware—you feel invincible." Like John Belushi.

Perhaps she's just a late bloomer. That booming laugh again. "Better," she says, "than being a blooming idiot."

*Karen Moline lives in New York City.*