

### Smoking Guns Disguised as Pleasure to Burn

“Plagued by a firing squad of coffin nails. Death sticks beating the hell out of my body and soul. It has got to be the most God-awful habit: Smoking cigarettes” were my exact words years ago when I documented my own battle with this addiction (Ferrainola 1). Five years later I’m living proof that abstinence is possible and will continue to be my battle until the day I die, hopefully not from the effects of smoking, but natural causes after the opportunity to live a long, healthy, happy life. Unfortunately, the addictive qualities of nicotine in cigarettes and the behaviors developed by smoking make giving them up an activity in futility that plagues a large portion of society.

An urge to have a smoke happens by chance, because of curiosity and peer pressure in many cases. The quick drag in a bathroom, an innocent suck on a friend’s vice at the dinner table on girl’s night out, a cigarette unfinished in the family ashtray looks disgusting, yet offers itself to a teen home alone, the cool guy group passes a cigarette around and no one wants to be a pansy so here and there, one by one people succumb. No one seems to care if that first drag could lead to scores of smoking related diseases or even death. Had the Marlboro Man, Wayne McLaren cared he may not have died of lung cancer, “the result of [smoking] a pack and a half of Kools—not Marlboros—a day for three and a half decades. He died in the summer of 1992, at the age of fifty-one” (Burns 238).

First time smokers don’t know their skin will shrivel, their blood vessels will constrict, their interest in sex will decrease, their capacity to inhale oxygen will be compromised, their bodies and surroundings will stink from the stench of smoke, their brain function will be altered and their health insurance premiums will increase dramatically. The onset of emphysema is likely and 90% of those afflicted are smokers. It is a respiratory disease that causes irreversible

destruction to the lungs and hampers their ability to get oxygen into the blood. My mother suffered from this at the time of her death at the age of 68. She had been smoker as long as I could remember. She had spent many years smoking while she watched her favorite late night talk show host, Johnny Carson, who also died of emphysema, in 1992.

The consumption of nicotine and some 40 other known cancer causing substances are being inhaled, in most cases, into a perfectly healthy human work of art. A soft, comforting nicotine dispenser known as a tobacco cigarette, the diameter of a pencil, meets a set of lips and waits to be sucked into burnt oblivion as seductive swirls of smoke inhabit the space around the victim of what was meant to be a pleasure seeking experience. No one anticipates being hooked. Most don't know they were baited in the first place. Of course it may take a time or two, but the lure is out there for those wanting to relieve their anger, stress, or anxious tension with just a drag or two. One might wonder how members of an educated, progressive, technologically savvy population allow themselves to be entrapped in this personal prison of addiction. It is surprising in ways that scholars might question, but tobacco use existed for centuries prior to the Marlboro Man and Joe Camel coming on the scene. To offer an explanation as to why a cigarette is the preferred method of obtaining a nicotine high and perhaps so psychologically gripping Eric Burns offers a brilliant observation from his book The Smoke of the Gods: A social History of Tobacco.

Perhaps, at some level, it is not the nicotine in a cigarette that traps them [smokers], not the tars or the taste or any other combination of the leaf's more tangible enticements. Perhaps it is the fumes, the smoke, so liberated in its paths, so endless in its possibilities. There is nothing quite like it on Earth, never has

been, and to produce it from one's own body, through one's own exertions, must be, at least for some people, the most exhilarating of sensations. (244)

The delivery of nicotine into the body can take place through a variety of methods in addition to the cigarette which in past centuries has included; finely ground powdered snuff, intended to be snorted up the nose, present day smokeless tobacco in wads meant to be sucked on when placed between the cheek and gum, and of course aromatic tobaccos smoked by pipe or cigar. In recent years, methods to purposely introduce nicotine into the blood stream to help rid us of the monkey on our backs include application of the nicotine patch and nicotine chewing gum. It seems ridiculous to intentionally ingest the substance most intelligent humankind is seeking to eliminate from its system and surroundings, but it's not so outrageous to a person wanting to be free of nicotine at any cost.

The scientific name of the cultivated culprit, *nicotiana tabacum*, means little to those familiar with Virginia Slims and Winston, but the origins of this deadly plant may reach back as far as 6,000 BCE. More recent documentation of its use began mere centuries ago in South America where the native species was revered as a spiritual healer by the Mayans and other indigenous tribes. Sir Walter Raleigh introduced its calming effects to Queen Elizabeth I. As its use spread throughout the world it was erroneously thought to have curative properties for common ailments.

Fast forward to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and witness the tobacco growing industry exploding with the help of up and coming marketing mogul Edward L. Bernays who was referred to as The Father of Spin, respected public figures who themselves smoked; President Franklin Roosevelt, Hollywood personalities portraying sexy smokers; Humphrey Bogart and Bette Davis, even our valued soldiers at war touting the calming effects of cigarettes to escape from their bitter reality.

The attractiveness of smoking was enough to get people started generations ago and the need for the drug of choice, nicotine, has kept many trapped by a web-like veil of vapors.

The number of people smoking has decreased since Luther Terry, a smoker himself and former United States Surgeon General, the nation's highest ranking medical officer presented the American public with a report on January 11, 1964, forty three years ago, to document why smoking cigarettes was harmful to smokers. That decrease is not substantial enough and as recent as 2004 the National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion has reported approximately 440,000 deaths occur annually due to smoking-attributable disease (Anonymous). Despite ongoing efforts to warn people about the myriad of reasons not to start smoking and how to quit if already hooked, people continue to smoke. It's nothing short of a rope around one's neck. If the noose is ever removed, an x-smoker is always aware of the grip smoking had on them and you can ask anyone of them when they quit and they will know the date and year if not more details than you care to witness.

This type of mental documentation of an event seems ridiculous to those who have never experienced smoking, but the reason these details mean so much too so many x-smokers is because they were ultimately relieved to get the immense burden of nicotine addiction lifted off their backs. The process is never pleasant as with most addictive substances, but steps must be taken to combat this life threatening scourge that has infested the physical and mental well-being of trapped smokers.

Today, the purging of tobacco use is becoming more popular because in recent years the anti-smoking initiative and medical community have begun to convince citizens that even passive smoke is harmful to those in the vicinity of a smoker. Many would like to end their addiction to cigarettes, but the fact remains that kicking the habit is a testament to a person's

inner determination to remain smoke free, one day at a time until the time comes when they only need to recall the date and year they quit. Otherwise, only their friends and family will know their quit date because it will be the day they die, as was my mother's case on September 18, 1986, three months after her grandson was born.

#### Works Cited

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