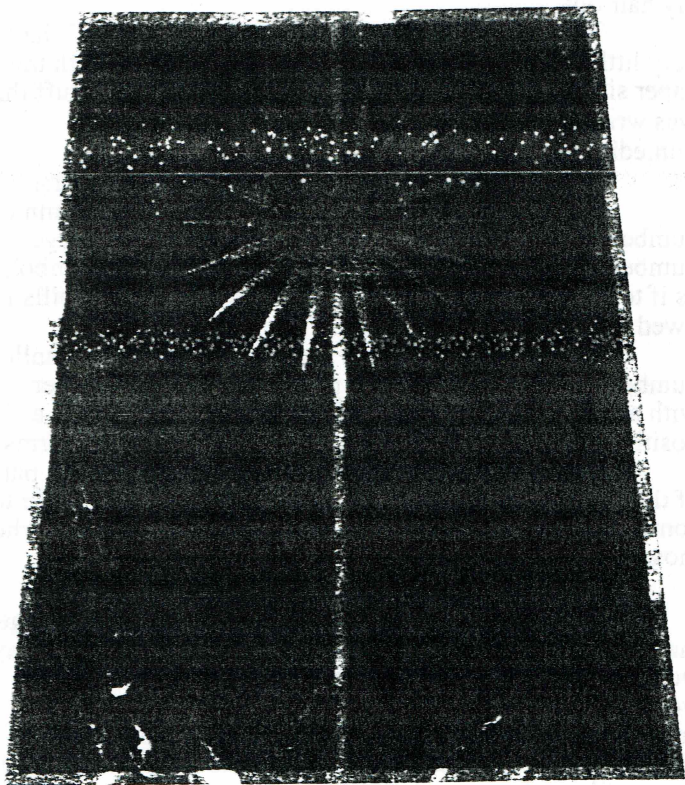


Cigarette

by Austin Rich



FULL FLAVOR

Introduction:

I was at work. I was on a break. And I was pulling my hair out.

This time, however, there was a reason, and it had very little to do with my hair and quite a lot to do with the paper sitting in front of me. More specifically, the stuff that was written on the paper was the direct source of my immediate agony.

What was on the paper was a series of numbers.

On one part of the paper was a very long column of numbers. At the bottom of this column was a very large number that was preceded by a large negative (-) symbol, as if to denote a negative sum. This represented my bills I owed.

On another part of the paper was a series of smaller numbers. They added up to a pathetically small number with a positive (+) symbol in front of it, as if to denote a positive sum. This represented my income in all it's forms.

Though more frustration was coming from this part of the paper than the previous, it did not even come close to contending to the negative sum elsewhere on the paper when those two numbers were compared.

Something had to be done.

I began trying to think of things to cut in my budget that could save me money. After all, deficient spending may work for our government, but when it comes to hard-working people like myself, they just don't allow it. The only way to win this war was to sacrifice. I would have to give up all that was dear to me in order to avoid the potential threat of homelessness, and with this in mind I began to tally up all my expenses in an attempt to find something I could cut that would make a difference.

Electricity? Nah, you kind of needed that if you didn't want to freeze to death in the winter, and besides, I had roommates and they would probably have a few words to say on the subject as well, so cutting that was out of the question. So was cutting the phone. It was time to look at things I could actually control.

Food? Well, I heard you need that to live. I'm not entirely sure, but I'd rather not try and find out. I guess I could eat cheaper food but I seriously doubted that it would taste any good. Besides, eating cheaper was just more work for me, and that was the last thing I wanted to contend with. That meant that coffee was right out too. No way in hell I was gonna cut one of the only sources of fuel my body actually got during the day.

Booze didn't even cross my mind, and music was right out for obvious reasons. There was just one thing left...

I started to cry. I wracked my brain trying to think of something else, but there was nothing left. There was no other thing that I spent my money on that I could think of that I couldn't live without, and with a shaken hand I reached for the phone and made a phone call that sealed my fate, for better or for worse:

Ring. Ring.

"Hey."

Pause.

"Yeah, it's me. Guess what?"

Pause.

"I'm quitting smoking."

Pause.

"No, really. I'm not kidding."

Pause.

"What are you laughing at?"

Day 1:

At the end of my shift that day I got on the bus, resigned to the fact that I had already smoked my last cigarette. At five P.M. on a Monday. Only 20 minutes ago. Sigh.

I still had two cigarettes left, but I figured they would be easy enough to get rid of at the Eugene Station and they were. The first person I walked past asked if I had any cigarettes and I just gave him the pack. Make a clean break. No cutting back, no switching to lights, no gum, no patch. I was gonna beat this thing through the sheer force of my own willpower. I was gonna prove, finally, that this was gonna be easy. That this is not the ordeal that everyone makes it out to be.

The first few hours were novel. "Hey, I quit smoking." "Really? How long?" "About an hour now." "Ha ha." It was funny for a while but it started to piss everyone off eventually. Some people were asking if I minded them smoking. I tried to play the straight man. "No, not at all... hey... could you blow that smoke over here when you exhale?" Then I'd laugh at my own dumb joke. Typical.

Most people were confused. I'd smoked ever since I turned 18 and I never showed any signs of adverse side effects or financial instability because of it. When I got poor the smoking got less. I never got sick from smoking and I never woke up with a "morning hack" that I then cured with a cigarette. It was just something I did to fill the time, something I'd always done and, theoretically, would always do. Why quit now?

They weren't the only ones asking that question.

Why? Money, yes, but why else? This went against everything I believed in, quitting smoking. It was one of

those habits I picked up not because it looked cool (I didn't **even look remotely graceful with a Camel in my hand**) or because my parents did it (even though they were big consumers of marijuana products), but because I actually *wanted* to smoke. I looked forward to smoking the way kids look forward to Christmas every year. I felt sorry for people who didn't have their own reassurances to look forward to every few hours. At least *I* had the cigarettes. What did *they* have, huh?

When I walked down the street, smoking a long cool one, I felt good about contributing to other people's habits when they asked me for a cigarette. "Why sure." "Thanks man." they'd say in that desperate voice of someone dependent on some chemical addiction. "No problem," I'd respond with giddy glee like a new father. Every time I got carded for buying cigarettes I proudly displayed my ID, proving that I was not only a citizen of Oregon, but that I was old enough to buy these sticks of joy.

I really, honestly liked smoking. To give it up was to go against everything I had believed in since I started five years ago. Smoking represented my ability to enjoy my life in spite of all the shortcomings and downfalls. No matter how bad things ever got, I always had smoking to fall back on. What on earth was I thinking? Was I insane?

I kept telling myself it was the money. I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for the money. And the fact that I'm seriously in debt. And the fact that it will take me quite a while, even with the added revenue from quitting smoking to get out of this debt and so I must, therefore, quit sooner. So yeah, money, that's it. That's the reason. If I was rich, I could easily start smoking again. Yeah, that's it. But not until I'm rich. Right now it was very important to just keep on quitting. I wouldn't be tempted to spend money I don't

have on cigarettes if I didn't continue to keep the quitting mindset. Don't cave in for anything. I won't be able to fix **these problems if I relapse for any reason. Just stop** completely. And stay that way. For at least a few years. Just until I get my money sorted out again. Yeah, that's it.

A few years...

I stared longingly at my friends as they carefully caressed their cigarettes and smoked seductively in the same room as me. In... Out... Pillows of smoke filled the room like a thick fog... cotton candy blankets of ecstasy. The smoke would move ever-so-slowly across my cheeks as it worked its way down my neck, across my chest... down... slowly...

Run to the bathroom. Water on the face. No one can know that it's getting to you already. You must be strong. You can do it. Laugh and tell them some joke about you needing to jerk off. It's just a cigarette. It can't control your life. You don't need it.

Do you?

SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING
Smoking Causes Lung Cancer, Heart Disease,
Emphysema, And May Complicate Pregnancy.

Day 2. 1/26/99. 10:13 P.M. Edited From My Journal:

I quit smoking yesterday. There's a million reasons why I should but the short answer is that it was getting too expensive. So now, instead, I'm paying the real price.

On the bus I was having massive hallucinations. Acid flashbacks. Hot & Cold flashes. Spots in front of my eyes. My whole body is really out of wack. I would bump into things or not hear somebody say something.

I kind of want a cigarette, too.

People don't understand how irritating it is. "How do you feel now that it's been a full day." I'd just stare at them. Stare and hope they die a horrible, painful death involving torture of the most unspeakable kind, something out of medieval times that involved lots of leeches and iron maidens and stuff like that. I'd just stare at them with the look of a deranged killer and say, "I feel like smoking a cigarette."

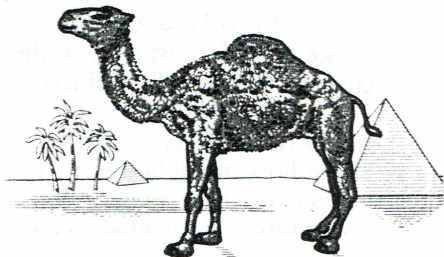
Then they'd laugh and say, "I bet you do." and they'd just go on about how much better off I'm gonna be without the health risks and dangers involved. You wanna bet? I bet it's a much more serious health risk if I don't smoke... for you!

I sat on the bus today and I thought I was going to be okay, but it started. Massive acid flashes of the most horrible kinds. The world around me spun and swirled and dived and all I could think about was that everything I touched either emitted no feeling whatsoever or didn't feel like anything at all. I was listening to *Hi, How Are You?* by Daniel Johnston and I know that album like the back of my hand, and it was completely different this time. I heard songs and lyrics like nothing I've ever heard before. Fucked up and warbled and they seemed to be constantly about good and evil and the eternal battle or something. Amazing shit.

I haven't done acid in quite a while and this was certainly some serious shit, quitting smoking. Better than Purple UFO by a long shot. I actually passed out at one point. Trying to walk home I had no sense of direction or ability to steer my body forward without swaying or swaggering around.

I must have looked like a drunk. That fixed look in my eye, the inability to coordinate a single physical movement, mouthing the words to these songs that I used to know that were now foreign to me. Absolutely fucked up. I went to bed without much trouble.

I made it. Barely.



**TURKISH & AMERICAN
BLEND**



Day 3. 1/29/99. 1:49 A.M. Edited From My Journal:

Third day of not smoking. I miss it more than sex, not that I'm getting any of that either. It would be so nice to get laid, though. To have something, anything to take my mind of the fact that I feel like I cut off one of my limbs and can't adjust to the reality of the fact that I need to learn to maneuver without it. I want to smoke more than I've ever wanted to fuck, even in the heat of the moment. I'd trade all the sex in the world for one cigarette. Just one.

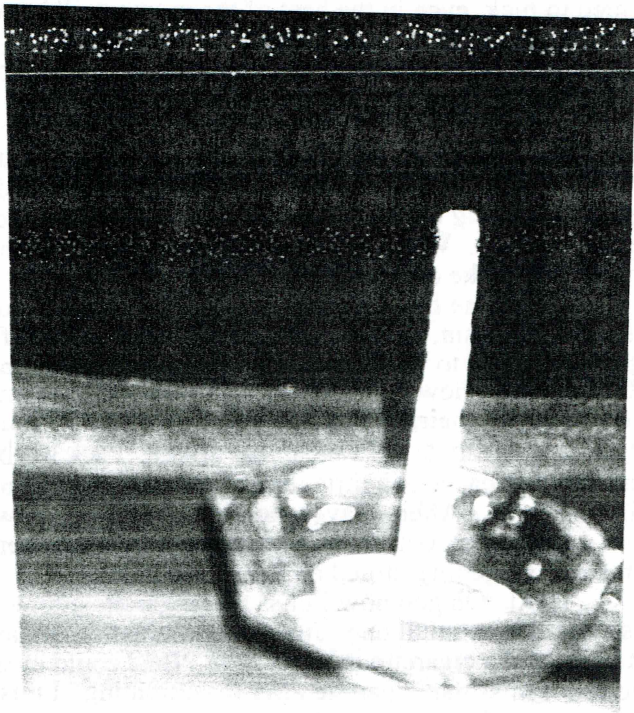
I never wanted anything this much, not even food when I was jobless and homeless. At least I could still get smokes then. I miss it so fucking much! Tobey was over tonight with his cheap-o smokes and at one point I actually thought about wrestling the cigarette from his hand and greedily hoarding the entire tube to myself while curled up in a dark corner. Why can't I get the image or the memory of what it felt like out of my head?

I miss the first cigarette of the day. Oh god, do I miss that. Orgasm, my ass. That's got nothing on the first cigarette. I used to wait to add anticipation to the moment. After I had my shower. I'd saunter into the living room and sit down in my chair, and slowly pull the cigarette out of the pack, and stare at it. Take in the aroma. Pack it a bit more so the tobacco is a little tighter. Then slip it in and light it. Inhale... Ahhh. Savor the moment. Let it draw out. Then ...exhale. In, out. Even the description is more erotic than sex. I'm getting turned on just writing this.

Food. Oh god how I miss that cigarette after a big meal. Or even a small one. Just the combination of having just eaten and a cigarette is better than PB&J could ever hope for. I miss that cigarette after masturbating. I miss it like I miss my friends when they're on a trip or gone, except I miss this more. A lot more. More than any of the friends I

have now, at least.

They don't kid about that heroin comparassion. But I am strong. I can do this. Just think about all that money. It's easier when I do. The saved money is what will keep me sane. I can do this. I JUST NEED A FUCKING CIGARETTE TO DO IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!



Day 4. 1/30/99. 10:51 A.M. Edited From My Journal:

Day 4 W/ No Smoking: It's taken up all my spare time. All I can think about is what it would be like if I smoked again. Not just to smoke again, but to be able to say that *I smoke*. If I smoked again, it would go away and afterward I'd have to quit again. But if I actually was a smoker again, it would all be gone. I could never have to think about it again. Every time I wanted a cigarette, I would just smoke one and it would be OKAY.

I try to rationalize it in my head that I can smoke if don't pay for it. If I can somehow get the cigarettes for free, then the entire reason for quitting smoking (the money) would have been bypassed, and I could then freely smoke without any fear whatsoever of having any issues with it ever again. But I know that's bullshit. If I started smoking, even if I somehow got them for free from my friends, there would be a night that I couldn't get one, and I know I'm stubborn enough to stoop to buying them.

I can do this. Mind over body. I don't need a cigarette, I'm not addicted, *I just want one more than any need I've ever had!*

Waiting for the bus yesterday was the worst experience of my entire life, and I do not use that term lightly. Normally I wait for my bus in the bar. This has been the pattern for some time now. Have a drink, wait for the bus, read. That sort of shit. When I stepped inside the bar time froze. I hadn't been in there since I'd quit, and now I remembered why. Smoke hung in the bar like a silk sheet. Everyone had a cigarette. Dogs had them, which is odd because dogs aren't allowed in the bar; babies in strollers had them, which was really odd because they couldn't even maneuver the cigarette out of their mouths to exhale, but they were still smoking; this old woman who's there every

week with her oxygen machine, she had one too. I could see the smoke being exhaled into the tubes connected to her nose. (For some reason I didn't find that odd, though.)

I panned my head across the bar. Not one patron without. Even the bartender, puffing away, ashing in the drinks, he had one too. Everyone looked at me, and scowled at me. "What, you don't have a cigarette?" they seemed to say. "Well, you suck, don't you." On the one empty table was a pack of cigarettes left behind by a patron with two left. A black snake materialized in one of the chairs. "Go ahead. Take it."

I practically ran outside. It was becoming apparent that I was nearing collapse. I was breathing heavily and all I could think about was that what I'd just seen couldn't have happened, but deep down I knew that the scary part was that I probably didn't have to hallucinate much to get to what I saw. With an hour to go before the bus showed up I was going to start shooting people unless I got a cigarette. It really wasn't too hard to decide this. I would find a gun somewhere and just start plugging people with cigarettes in their mouths. Obviously it was their fault that I wasn't smoking. If all that anti-smoking communist propaganda paid for by the "We Shot Kennedy, Too," foundation had gotten to them as well, maybe they wouldn't be smoking, which in turn wouldn't tempt me so much.

"That one would get it between the eyes," I thought, "While you would get 15 shells in the gut for each drag he takes and blows in my direction. Bam! Bam! Over and over again, like the piston you're pushing in my face with your smoke! Die fucker!" As I sat there deciding who would be go next, a beam of light from heaven shown down upon me. A random bus showed up. It wasn't even going to Eugene, but I got on anyway. I figured the longer I was on a

bus (where I couldn't smoke even if I wanted to) the better off I would be. So for that hour I rode around on buses that finally, eventually, got me to my destination. I had thwarted the demon... this time.

It's not getting any better. They told me it would. "Oh, after a few days it gets better and you don't even think about it." Bullshit. Bullshit, bullshit, bullshit, BULLSHIT!!!!!! If I ever see anyone who is thinking about quitting, I'm going to tell them the god's honest truth: "It's Not Worth It! Never, ever quit smoking. Never! No matter what they say or what they offer you, it's all a scam. It is a government ploy to keep children subdued by forcing them to concentrate on the cigarettes they aren't supposed to smoke. Just keep with it. That way, you'll be content enough to notice that they're using mind-control on us in video games! I swear!"

I'm never going to let some kid go on thinking that quitting smoking will be good for him. It's not. It's pain and torture and hell and horrible and I will never let any of my friends go through that if I have anything to do with it.

Last night Kelly was saying how she would quit smoking if she got laid every day. The point is academic for me seeing how I'm not getting laid and I've already quit smoking, but it got me thinking about how I'm not filling this smoking void with anything else. Normally, when you cut out something from your diet that's bad for you, it's replaced by something that is equally stimulating but better for you (i.e. replace real salt for a salt substitute and the like). She pointed out to me that I need to find something to replace smoking. What, I don't know. But I'll figure something out.

Day 5, 6 & 7:

~~Taking Kelly's advice proved harder than I thought~~ seeing how there was only one other thing that was weighing that heavily on my mind aside from smoking that could take my mind off of smoking, that being sex. I find it very odd, too, that in traditional American culture, the two go hand in hand (the image of the post-lovemaking couple both smoking after such intense fulfillment) and in my own life the two were somehow mentally connected even though I never gave it conscious thought. I imagine I probably picked it up due to some sort of childhood trauma caused by some schoolyard cruelty.

I never was much for smoking after sex myself but somewhere in my mind the two ideas connected and smoking was a very sexy thing to me. Even now, when I look at girls, I see the ones who smoke in a different light, as if to imply that the smoking quality in a woman is more of a turn-on. Freud would have had a field day with me, I bet.

Since the only other thing that I could think about with the zeal I had for smoking was sex, I took this as a mental cue to start (1) masturbating more than normal and (2) increasing my search for some girl to help me get through this difficult period in my life. The later would not be easy, mind you. My ability to attract the opposite sex is a skill that is not well honed, so the former ended up happening a whole lot more.

When I used to smoke, I would light up right after masturbation. I don't know why. I guess it was some sort of way to fill the oral fixation that I obviously had since I smoked in the first place. I see it like this: during sex, you're with another person, and you do a lot of kissing and touching and so all the physical sensations that get you off are filled. That's why I didn't want to smoke after sex. But

masturbation only fills the one physical need: orgasam. So, "Smoke 'em if you got 'em." became the motto.

~~It was pretty easy, in my head, to make the mental~~ leap from wanting a cigarette to wanting to jerk off because of all this. In turn it became a very odd few days because It's hard to fit something like masturbation in around your normal schedule. There's a lot of time invovled, and you have to be alone, in the mood, and so on. It takes me about a half hour or so, and that's a huge chunk out of my day to spend on something that didn't actively contribute to my income.

On top of that, I'm not a very creative guy when it comes to fantasy. Sure, I have a few scenarios that always seem to do the trick, but after the first two times in a day, as any guy will tell you, it starts to take longer and longer to get aroused and takes longer and longer to finally cum. Pretty soon, instead of thinking about stuff like, "She seductively kissed me in a moment of passion as I stared deeply into her eyes," you're thinking about stuff like, "She's fucking me! She's fucking me! I'm going to cum all over her face and tits! She's fucking me!" and shit like that. Kind of embarrassing when you're done and you realize you just played out a bad porno plot in your head.

I was, up until this point, a once-a-day kind of guy (and have since gone back). This was normally more than enough because I'm somewhat, uhm, hard on myself (no pun intended). I'm pretty rough alone. I used to wonder if it's just the nature of male masturbation, but in general it's not accepted practice for a group of guys to sit around and discuss mastubation unless they're homophobic jocks, so I never really found out. Either way, this created immediate problems. If I'm having sex with someone, I don't masturbate as much, and this was incentive enough to

continue searching for a way to get someone else to touch my dick so I didn't have to anymore. But, uhm...

To put it bluntly, I gave myself a friction burn. A rug burn, if you will. (It should be easy enough to figure out how.) This is very embarrassing, because first off this implies that not only was I doing it too much, but that I was doing it, uhm, "violently" enough to cause the skin to break. How was I going to ever have sex with a girl if she ever saw this? Try explaining to a girl that you gave yourself a friction burn without running into immediate problems:

"What's that?" grossed out look on her face.

"Don't worry. It's just a friction burn."

"What?"

"Really. I got it from masturbating too much..."

"Sure you did. Look, I've got to go..."

"Hey, what are you talking about? Honest. I don't have anything. I swear!"

"Yeah, right. See ya later, sicko."

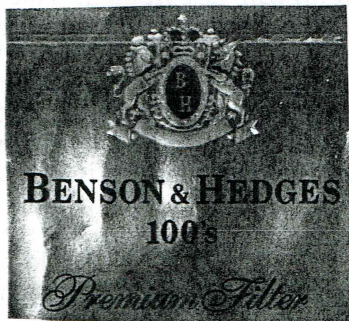
It just doesn't work. So I immediately had painted myself in a corner. I didn't want to jerk off any more for fear of making it worse, which would of course lower my chances with girls even more. I needed to let myself heal. Conclusion: no more masturbation, definitely no sex whatsoever for a while, and I still wasn't smoking. My only outlet for venting my smoking urges were now, effectively, shut off.

I started to get really philosophical at this point (I mean, wouldn't you?). My body & my mind were working against me in this battle for my eternal soul. On the one hand I had these urges that wanted to be sated. On the other hand, I had the mental determination to hold out, good or bad, until the bitter end.

Either way, I was loosing badly.

GPC

QUALITY TOBACCO



U.S. SURGEON GENERAL'S WARNING:
Quitting Smoking Now Greatly
Reduces Serious Risks to Your Health.

CAMEL

FILTERS

Day 8. 2/2/99. 11:46 A.M. Edited From My Journal:

Day 8 W/ No Smoking: I've come to accept not smoking in much the same way I've felt when girls break up with me. I really want them to come back and I secretly hold a flame of hope that maybe they will, even though I know, deep down, they won't. It's really sad, when I think about it, because my relationship with smoking was longer than my relationship with any woman. This is hitting me worse than anything ever has. I'm going through long bouts of loneliness and I really don't know how to fill the void.

The times that are the worst are when I'm alone. I'm capable of anything when I put my mind to it and I'm stubborn as all get out (Taurus, how'd you know?). I will find a way to smoke when I'm alone if I need to. In groups I'm fine, even if they all smoke. But alone... it gets scary.

All I ever think about anymore is smoking and sex. Ironic that I'm not doing either. In a world where all people pretty much have the same desires it shouldn't be this hard to fulfill them. Everyone I know complains about not getting laid. You'd think sooner or later some of them would look up and notice that they could just start having sex with each other and solve *that* problem.

Or at least light up a cigarette and not think about it.

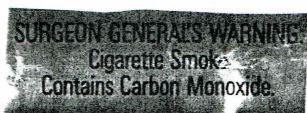
I remember my first time. It was with my high school friend Steve. He smoked and had for a while and I was probably the only one in my circle of friends that didn't. I was probably in my Junior year of school. I didn't inhale because I thought I'd cough and I wanted to impress my friends who I thought would care. I just kept smoking this cigarette and not inhaling it. I fake-smoked every once in a while for a year until my brother and I got an apartment together, and he was a pack-a-day type already. Had been for a while. I was doomed. I started smoking within the

first month. It was pretty funny, because after I was actually smoking, my friends, the ones I was trying to impress, told me they all knew I wasn't really smoking. It was all for naught.

It's so similar to the first time I had sex. I just did what I imagined you're supposed to do and hoped that I could fake doing it well enough that she wouldn't notice. She knew it was my first time, but it wasn't until afterward that she told me exactly what I was doing wrong. I died inside, knowing that she realized I wasn't doing it right. Just like with my friends and smoking.

It's so strange how both of these things are so related. Smoking and sex. I miss them both so much. And now I don't jerk off any more (long story... I'd rather not tell it). I'm about ready to pull my hair out.

I'm beginning to have doubts about my quitting. I know I want to for the money, and that alone should be enough to keep with it, but if I continue with that attitude I will probably start up again when I have enough money. And now, now that I want a cigarette so FUCKING bad, I can't even come up with another reason not to smoke. I'm going out of my mind. I know that I can do this, but I know I can't either.



Day 12. 2/6/99. 2:21 A.M. Edited From My Journal:

The night. I hate the night. It's cold & lonely & miserable. I pace around the house when the roomies are asleep & watch people walk by my apartment. They seem so purposeful. They have goals & they're looking to accomplish those goals. Meanwhile, I stay up late & drink coffee at work and drink beer at home and fantasize about girls at both. Anything to keep me awake & to keep me from thinking about those cravings for those fucking cigarettes I don't fucking smoke anymore. Anything to keep me from that. Pace pace pace. Drink drink drink. Hate hate hate.

It's so hard to find reasons to wake up in the morning. I used to just smoke to fill that void. "Why should I wake up? Oh, that morning cigarette!" But now I've quit. I say it's for the money. They say it's for my health. "Smoking is so bad for you." So is anything anyone else consumes but I don't see people harrassing them to quit the one thing that gets them out of bed in the morning. Now I have to sit & wait for each craving and fight them off one and a time. I'm ready to start the killing spree any day now.

I'm going absolutely nuts. I'm going for a walk.

Day 13 Through 'Til Four Months Later:

I didn't go for a walk, however. I was going to go and get some cigarettes, or at least I know I would have if I had gone on that walk. I backed out because I knew that *they* would know I had smoked, and I'd get no end of shit about it. On the outside, I made it sound so easy to everyone else. I told them I was doing fine or just ignored talking about it. But inside I was screaming for a cigarette every single hour. It was really strange.

The next day I stopped writing about smoking in my journal. It became pointless and repetitive and I was getting frustrated because every time I'd go to write about something not smoking related I'd see I'd written about it before and it would kick the cravings into high gear. So I stopped writing about it and I started to feel a little better.

And then one day I didn't want a cigarette when I woke up one morning. It was about the fourth week I think. A full month of thinking about it every single hour for that entire month and then, suddenly, I woke up and I wanted coffee and that was it.

At first I thought it was just that one day, and later on when I got a craving I was convinced that I had just imagined not wanting a cigarette. But the next day I woke up and again I didn't want a cigarette, just coffee. I started to get nervous.

I missed wanting a cigarette. The cravings didn't go away completely, but the urges came less frequently and it started to freak me out. I started to feel really morose about not wanting to smoke anymore because at one point I had been resigned to losing this battle, and then I came to find I was winning after all. In my head, caving back in was becoming the winning route, and now I couldn't even do that right.

Soon, the cravings came only four times a day instead of once an hour. Then they became only once a day. They've leveled off at about there and haven't gone up or down since. I started to get scared by this fact because if I had to cope with this leveled off, once a day craving for the rest of my life, eventually it would become just as nerve racking as the once an hour cravings before.

And then one day I met Tobey's dad who had also quit smoking. He said he'd quit smoking about 10 years ago. I asked him when the cravings started to go away for him. He said, "After about 10 years." I died on the inside. I may have won the immediate battle, but could I hold out in the long run?

Who knows? I started thinking I was quitting for the money, but eventually it became this battle for my soul. This was my karmic way of punishing myself for smoking in the first place. Now, it wasn't the money I was fighting for, but for the intention to stick with it. If I went back, I would lose the respect of my friends who I told I was quitting. Going back would be the biggest insult to myself, my friends and my entire life. I had to stick with it. I had no choice.

It got a tad easier to do after I got that mindset.

It never really got easy at all, though. I mean, it never got to the point where getting a craving was easier to shrug off than in the beginning. I still had to fight the urges and I would go back and forth between winning and losing from day to day. But the fight was easier to do at all when I thought about it like that. This wasn't a simple addiction I was trying to break; this was a symbol of my ability to stick with a promise, even an arbitrary one I had made to myself. If I was going to have the moral fiber or character I wanted to portray, I needed to do this.

The Final Battle:

After about four months I had gotten pretty much used to not smoking, and the gods decided to tempt me one day when I found a full pack of cigarettes on the sidewalk. I picked them up because in my head I couldn't pass up free shit (I've always been like that), and immediately began the mental battle. On the one hand, I could use these to make a lot of friends at parties. On the other hand, I didn't have to pay for these and I had been good for four months solid, so maybe I deserved a little reward (i.e. a cigarette). That weekend was pretty much destined to be hell. If I was thinking like this already, when I had pretty much already won the battle, more or less, who knows what I was going to convince myself to when I got drunk?

So the next day when I got drunk with my friends I started getting philosophical about finding the cigarettes. Obviously, I had found them for some reason, and if I couldn't give them away (I hadn't really tried yet, but that point was really moot, wasn't it?) the reason I found them must be so I can smoke them. What other reason could I have found them for?

I started asking my friends what they thought about it a few beers later. "Okay, okay... like, let's say... uhm... okay, so... I have these cigarettes... so, okay... uhm, can I not give these away and not feel guilty about it?" "What the fuck are you talking about?" and other circular conversations occurred. Eventually I had expressed the proposition to each of them that I had found these cigarettes on the street and I really wanted to smoke them and did they think, knowing what they know of me, I could do that and then not continue to smoke any more when they were all gone? They all said the same thing: "That's something you need to decide for yourself."

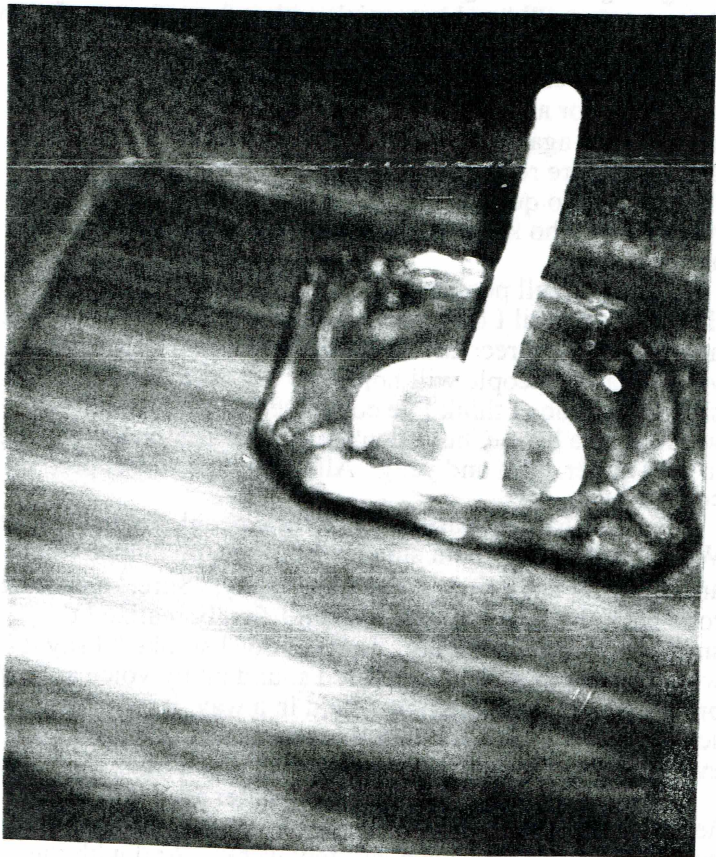
A few beers and many more conversations later I **finally got yelled at to either smoke the fucking cigarettes or** stop talking about it, and it was then that it became very apparent to me that the answer I was looking for was that one. I pulled one out of the pack. I sat down and stared at it. I hadn't even had a drag or touched a cigarette since that day I called my roommate. I put it in my mouth. Automatically all the years of smoking came back to me. The mannerisms, the repetitive actions made. Inhale. exhale. Lighting a cigarette. It all came back. I lit a match. The cigarette hung from my lips. I brought it closer. I inhaled. The fire burned. The cigarette was lit.

I coughed like you wouldn't believe. My gag reflex set in, and I hacked up what was left of my lung for a good minute. I looked at the cigarette in contempt. This was what I'd been craving all this time? This... this thing? I took another drag. Again, the cough, the gag reflex. What was happening to me? What was wrong with me?

I put the cigarette out and threw it away. In a dazed and confused state, I gave away the rest of the pack and spent a lot of the drunk time in quite contemplation. For years I'd smoked and always thought it was the greatest thing in the whole world. Then, for a seemingly arbitrary reason, I quit and spent a week in complete agony, and four months craving these cancer sticks every single day. I had gone back and forth thinking that I had and hadn't won the battle, and when I finally caved in and smoked one (a symbol of having finally won the losing battle or losing the winning battle, I'm not quite sure yet), my body rejected it quicker than warm flat beer when you've got the flu.

I felt about three inches tall. I felt betrayed and yet a betrayer at the same time. I felt like shit. I felt kind of horny. I also felt kind of good for some reason. And I now

knew for sure that this time, regardless of winning or losing, I had quit. For good, for bad, and forever.



6/26/99. 2:41 P.M. *Five Months After I Quit Smoking:*

The cravings haven't gone away yet. Nor has my desire to continue quitting. I'm now comfortable in my rut of fighting off the urges one at a time and I think that, for the most part, I'll be able to stick with it for as long as I want to. The urges are pretty much easy enough to thwart with one or two mental exercises, but every once in a while I have to go for a long walk and lecture myself. I don't see a need to start again and, at least right now, I don't see any possible future reason why I'd want to. What's the point? I'd just want to quit again someday for some other arbitrary reason, and who knows if I'll make it through that time around.

I still tell people they shouldn't quit (and will keep that mindset until I die), and I still keep ashtrays around the house, and I still recount the stories of having quit with vivid detail so people will hopefully not take the path I choose to. I don't think I've convinced anyone to quit yet, which is fine by me, but I don't think I've convinced anyone to start either. Yin and yang. All in all, that seems pretty cool to me.

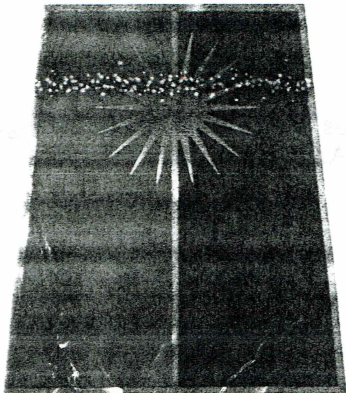
The hardest part now is telling people I don't smoke. When people try to bum smokes from me, no matter where I am and what I'm doing, I still want to say, "Sure," and reach for a pack that doesn't exist. When I finally realize I don't smoke any more and I say, "Sorry, I don't smoke," I say it with this sort of sullen, depressed sound in my voice as if it's bringing up a harsh memory. And in a way, it is. This scares me. If I can't get over this one aspect of smoking, even after this long, will I ever be over smoking completely?

Does it matter? Not really. After all, I still drink heavily and have six cups of coffee every day and go 48 hours without sleep once every few weeks. And with the

second hand smoke I've inhaled since I quit smoking. I **might as well have been smoking** the whole time. In the long run, I'm only ahead in principle, and when you think about it, I originally wanted to start up again, so I lost out that way too.

But hey, at least I've still got my sanity...

Austin



FULL FLAVOR

Right?

Surgeon General's Warning:

Quitting Smoking Greatly
Reduces Your Ability To Cope
With Reality Without Ripping
Someone's Face Off.

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A.C.R.O.N.Y.M. Publishing
P.O. Box 10502
Eugene, OR 97440