

My Habit



Getting Started...

As a 13 year-old growing up in the Catskill Mountains, I can remember smoking my first cigarette as if it were yesterday. Joel, Bobby, Donna, Rissa and I had concocted a plan to smoke our first cigarette. My friends and I thought it was cool to smoke. When do you get a chance to share hits with a pretty girl? We snuck into a rock formation called “Dead Man’s Canyon” to smoke our parents’ pilfered Newports, Marlboros, and Camels. The canyon consisted of two thirteen-foot-high by ten-foot-wide, thirty-thousand-pound boulders situated approximately eight feet apart. These boulders had been moved in place during the last great ice-age. Legend has it that either some Iroquois Indians carrying tomahawks and bows and arrows or a large brown bear was chasing a fur capped frontiersman who attempted to escape by leaping across the eight-foot gap. Slipping, he fell into the crevasse, hit his head, and broke his neck. Needless to say he died.

Dead Man’s Canyon was the perfect place to hide and smoke a few cigarettes. Parents or police would hardly ever venture into this part of the wilderness. The first time we went there and every time after, we felt like adults as we inhaled the white menthol-flavored smoke. Even these filtered cigarettes caused us to cough as we felt the burning smoke enter our lungs.

Tobacco was our forbidden fruit. In those days my parents smoked up to two packs a day. As a teenager, I distinctly remember my father, who was a medical doctor, waking up in the morning and going to the bathroom in his boxers to hack-up his lungs. The tobacco companies never offered my dad royalties for a TV commercial showing the

phlegm dripping out of his mouth. You would think this memory alone would have taught me to not smoke. However, we were continually bombarded with advertisements of beautiful young models sitting next to flowing streams with the look of love in their eyes as they lit up. My other favorite was the ultra-macho Marlboro Cowboys riding stallions in red stone canyons and then resting with a Marlboro hanging off their lips. How could we simple teenagers not want to be these lucky people? And it was cheap. A pack cost as little as thirty-five cents; vices were so much cheaper in the good ole' days.

These were the days:

A twelve year old could go into the corner grocery and buy a pack, no questions asked.

Cigarettes were rarely called cancer sticks or nails in one's coffin.

No one had even thought of the Great American Smokeout.

The tobacco companies did not want us to know that smoking was the cause of approximately 80% of lung cancer deaths.

The surgeon general was not warning us that, "Cigarette smoking may injure your health."

Tobacco companies lied to us; never thinking they would get caught.

Every media outlet made millions of dollars advertising cigarettes. Who could blame them for not telling the truth?

Doctors in advertisements would recommend a particular brand of cigarettes.

On a flight to Miami on Eastern Airlines, every passenger would get a cute-looking-mini- five-pack as a gratuity and of course for the industry to hook the unsuspecting with their poison. Hard to believe that people used to smoke on airplanes.

Pregnant women were not warned of the dangers of smoking.

Getting hooked...

My habit through high school and college was limited to a few cigarettes a week. However by law school, with the pressure on, a half a pack-a-day was not unusual. By the time I was a lawyer with the Department of Health and Rehabilitative Services my office was filled with smoke to the point that my non-smoking secretary would cough every time she took dictation. Today, I feel guilty for my thoughtless behavior. I did not know the dangers of second-hand smoke.

By the early eighties, my boss, Dr. Richard Morgan, Director of the Miami-Dade County Health Department, was a key player in the Dade County Medical Association Anti-Tobacco drive. Doctors campaigned against smoking in the work place, smoking in health facilities, and the advertisement of tobacco products.

These were the days when:

My dad had an 8 inch Goodyear rubber tire ashtray on his medical office desk which almost always was stuffed with Camel butts.

Kick-Your-Habit nicotine chewing gum and sucking candy did not exist.

Many smokers collected Zippo lighters. My most treasured was the one with Joe Camel riding a motor cycle through New York City near the World Trade Center.

I also collected sterling-silver-cigarette cases and when I removed a cigarette from the shiny case I felt like a Hollywood silent film star in the nineteen twenties.

My next door neighbor, who was so addicted to the toxic weed, smoked even after he was diagnosed with emphysema. He would remove his oxygen mask light up even to the day he died.

Kicking the Habit....

One of the hardest things to do in my life was kicking my twenty year habit. One a.m. would find me in my closet with my hands in my sports-coat pockets scrounging for a cigarette to feed my habit.

I bummed cigarettes in the hopes of smoking less than a pack a day. My smoking friends now thought I was a pain in the butt. Quitting was made more difficult because my wife-- with a one cigarette a day habit-- always kept a pack in the house.

I tried the reward system in which for every day that I did not smoke, I would add a few dollars to the kitty to purchase a desired gift. However my daily one-hour drive home still required five cigarettes. Even with these gimmicks, I woke up coughing my lungs out-- just like my dad—at this moment, I knew I had to quit.

I can't remember my last cigarette, I know I sucked on nicorette candy and chewed nicorette gum for over two weeks. I knew that just like an alcoholic, I had to resolve that my lips, my tongue, my lungs would never again taste tobacco because if they did I would be hooked all over again.

I haven't smoked a cigarette in over 20 years.

As I now stand in Dead Man's Canyon remembering my boyhood, my parents, and my friends as I look at the chasm between the two large boulders, I realize when I smoked I was careening between the rocks. Luckily, I grabbed on to the ledge pulling myself onto the large stone when I kicked my deadly habit. However, my habit was not as lucky -- it died like the frontiersman.