

## The Last Cigarette

I smoked for 31 years. I hated cigarettes. I knew they would kill me if I kept smoking them. My problem wasn't that I was stupid. My problem was that I was addicted to nicotine. People call cigarette smoking a *habit*. That's because cigarette smokers don't want to put themselves on the same plane as alcohol, heroin, or cocaine addicts. Playing with words doesn't change the facts, though. Nicotine is an extremely powerful drug and smokers are addicted to that drug. I smoked cigarettes because I was a drug addict and my drug of choice was nicotine. That's true for all cigarette smokers who inhale. The first step in getting better is to be absolutely honest, particularly with ourselves. If I'm an addict, I must admit it. Calling my nicotine addiction a habit makes it way too benign.

During the two weeks I spent trying to detox from alcohol at home, I smoked a lot of cigarettes. I mean a *whole lot* of cigarettes. Probably close to five packs a day. My smoking returned to normal after I started the day program at the treatment center. Normal was two packs a day and that became the standard shortly after my first cigarette. Early in my career, when I was a teacher, I could smoke in my classroom as I taught my sixth and seventh graders. When I became a counselor, I smoked in my office when students weren't there. But, the smell of dead smoke began to be putrid even to me, so I moved my smoking to the bathroom of the teacher's workroom.

As time went by, and as society's rules about smoking changed, the opportunity to smoke at work diminished. At the time of my last drink of alcohol, I could only smoke in what we smokers called "the Mall." I have no idea where the name came from. The Mall was a screened mop room just outside the cafeteria kitchen's back door. The lunchroom ladies turned some milk crates upside down and placed vinyl covered pads on top of them for seats. A large empty tin can half filled with a gallon of water sat in the middle of the Mall and served as our ashtray. I went to the mall about every ninety minutes on most days. I smoked the long cigarettes and would smoke one, then light another and smoke about half of it. I made up for the limited smoking I could do at school during my morning and afternoon commute. I'd light five on the way to work to get stoked up for the long lapses to come between smokes, and do five more on the way home to make up for the deficit. I always rolled down my window some because I couldn't stand smoke staying in the car. Both in the mall, basically a screened porch, and in my car, winter was a bitch. Didn't matter, though. I had to have my nicotine.

After I was released from the day program at the treatment center, Mariah and I were back in our routine. We arrived at school each morning around 7:45 and she'd sit in my office, reading for the thirty minutes before classes began. School was out at 3:15 and she'd sit until we left at 4:00. At least once a week, we'd stop at the Discount Depot so I could buy a carton of the cheapest cigarettes I could find. Back then, I could usually find generics for twelve dollars. A carton lasted five days as long as I didn't have some anxiety provoking deal going on.. That was six cartons a month, or about seventy-two dollars a month. I wasn't buying alcohol now, so I had cut my spending on addiction in half, but that didn't alleviate my guilt. Every cigarette purchase was agonizing. The money was bad enough, but I knew cigarettes were killing me. I had begun recovering from my alcohol addiction. I knew at some point I needed to kick the nicotine addiction, too.

As time passed, it became harder and harder to buy the cartons of cigarettes. I don't remember a flash of light time when I knew it was time to quit. With the alcohol, I clearly remember the moment when I'd decided I'd had enough. I was about to take a swallow, but put the bottle down instead. Cigarettes weren't like that.

I had quit smoking once before by accident. That was some time in the mid nineties. I had a sore throat that exceeded any pain I'd experienced before. I went out to the 24-hour grocery store in the middle of the night in desperate search for something that would relieve the pain. Nothing did. The only relief I could find was to drink enough alcohol to keep me sedated. By then, I'd been smoking for nearly 25 years and had never been sick enough not to smoke. Now, I couldn't do it. The throat pain was intense any time I was conscious. Smoking wasn't a choice. Adding smoke was flat impossible. When I finally began to get better, I'd been four days without a cigarette. I wasn't feeling crazy, so I just didn't have another one. As the days went by, I was truly excited about being cigarette free.

Summer came. The cafeteria didn't operate during summer, so I had to leave school to get lunch. I have no memory of what happened, except somehow I decided it'd be OK to have a cigarette at lunch time. If I just smoked away from school, one cigarette after lunch, I'd be fine and I'd be able to enjoy the cigarettes again. One cigarette a day wouldn't kill me. I stopped at the AMVETS building and sat at a picnic table and had my cigarette. A few days later, I decided that two cigarettes a day wouldn't kill me either.

Within a couple of weeks I was back to two packs a day.

Now, it was seven years later. I had been reading about quitting cigarettes throughout my six weeks in the evening program at the Commencement Center. Setting a quit date was the first suggestion in all references. As graduation time from the treatment center was approaching, I began thinking about a quit date for cigarettes. I wrestled with whether it should be on a weekend or a day when I was at work. Being at work meant I'd be busy and I was used to smoking being limited there anyway. On the other hand, based on what I'd read about the difficulties people face during nicotine withdrawal, I thought it might be better to be at home to see how I was going to react. I didn't want to kill a kid during withdrawal. I decided it would be on a weekend. I picked Sunday, October 19 for no particular reason. It would have made more sense to start stopping on a Saturday to have more time before going to work. Maybe I wanted to put it off as long as possible. I just don't remember.

The day came. I awoke, had coffee, and didn't have a cigarette. It was immediately god-awful. Just knowing I wasn't going to smoke again hurt, even way before the nicotine withdrawal symptoms began. I used the one day at a time idea, except made it one hour at a time. Sometimes one half hour at a time. Sometimes one minute at a time. Instead of thinking that I could never smoke a cigarette again, I'd think I just won't smoke for the next half hour. That's what I'd learned at the treatment center when alcohol cravings hit. Ought to work with cigarettes, too. I was watching television, reading, trying to distract my craving mind. Minutes would go by without thinking about a cigarette, but the obsession would come roaring back.

Heather, our oldest daughter, was attending the University of Georgia and lived in a house across town here in Athens. But, she'd been in Atlanta that weekend visiting her former roommate. She was supposed to be back in Athens Sunday afternoon about two.

When she went out of town, she would call us when she began her return trip and call again when she'd arrived home. By three on that Sunday, we hadn't heard from her. I received no answer when I called her cell phone. I called the friend Heather was visiting in Atlanta. The friend said Heather had left at noon.

Her trip should have taken ninety minutes. She was approaching two hours late. I tried her phone again and again.

No answer.

Cigarettes were shouting at me.

An hour later and still no contact with Heather.

Cigarettes were screaming at me.

I gave up.

A quick trip to the Golden Pantry convenience store brought relief. Less than sixteen hours since my last cigarette and now I was sucking in the smoke and nicotine. An hour later, Heather called. She had tickets to the Vagina Chronicles and had forgotten to tell us. She turned off her phone during the production. She was fine.

I was irritated. I'd been planning this "stop smoking" day for weeks. And now it was all for naught.

Damn her.

Of course, now that I must be rigorously honest, the truth is that I was grateful to not be miserable any more. And, I could have put the cigarette out once I knew Heather was safe and continued my plan. I didn't do that. But, my dread of the cigarette didn't go away. Smoking for the rest of that day satisfied my nicotine craving, but it wasn't enjoyable. Every time I lit one I felt a sense of loss. I still had to quit.

Maybe the quit day needed to be a work day after all. Maybe it should be a day when I didn't have time to sit around and worry over things going wrong. I decided my new quit day would be the next day—a work day. I also bought some nicotine gum. I had decided against that when contemplating quitting, but my experience that day changed my mind. I clipped a coupon from the Sunday paper and went to the drug store.

I awoke at six the next morning. Normally, I would fill my travel mug with coffee, go to the front yard, retrieve the newspaper, and then sit on the front porch smoking, drinking coffee, and reading. This time I just drank coffee and chewed some nicotine. An hour later Mariah and I were in the car. I popped some gum and headed out. There is a spot next to some cell towers about five minutes from home where I always lit my first cigarette for the thirty minute trip to work. When I got there, I automatically reached for my pocket.

Nothing there.

Deep, deep discontent when I remembered why.

I was still chewing the gum. I reached for another piece, but stopped.

Deep sigh.

Do I really want to keep being addicted to nicotine?

It was October 20. Exactly three months since my first sober day. I hadn't thought about that before. August 20 my first day without alcohol. October 20 my first day without nicotine. But, I was about to change that. My first day without cigarettes was more accurate. I was still feeding my nicotine addiction with gum.

I had learned some stuff about addiction in the last three months. One thing I knew for sure was that if I took even a sip of alcohol, the obsession would return. I would feel

the feeling and not want to lose it. I might be able to drink one drink the first time. But, soon, I wouldn't be able to stop. I'd be right back where I'd been.

As I drove past the cell towers, I realized cigarettes would be no different. If I were going to quit, I needed to quit. If I didn't, or couldn't, maybe I'd try the gum. But, everything I'd learned during the past six weeks told me I was better off to just get it over with. I didn't want to hurt any longer than I had to. I removed the gum from my mouth and threw it hard into the weeds next to the road. Littering, I know. I would work on littering later, I decided.

As the day progressed, it got awfuller and awfuller. I'd get involved in something and be distracted from the pain, but every free moment brought discomfort. I told my office mates what I was doing. They were full of praise. I told them that they needed to be kind to me. They were. That must have helped, but I have to presume that on faith. Mostly, I was miserable.

My withdrawal from alcohol was horrible. I was incredibly sick both physically and psychically for more than two weeks. But, from the moment I brought the bottle to my lips and didn't drink, the obsession to drink alcohol left me. Occasionally I'd have thoughts of alcohol, but I never had the white knuckle overwhelming desire to drink alcohol that I've heard other alcoholics describe. I believe my absolutely unshakable belief that alcohol had given me cirrhosis overwhelmed my obsession to drink alcohol.

Cigarettes were different. Now I knew what the other alcoholics had meant about the craving.

Now, I understood.

Making my mind focus on other things was excruciatingly difficult. And when I was able to escape for a few minutes, the sudden awareness of the loss I was feeling made the pain worse. All day, time after time, I'd go through the trauma of remembering again, hurting all the while.

This nicotine withdrawal was not even close to being purely mental. This was not just a psychological obsession, nor a bad habit. I couldn't fake smoking a cigarette by sucking on a straw and get better. My body was rebelling. My face burned. My hands sweated. My muscles twitched.

I was a mess.

Somehow, I made it through the day. The drive home was interminable. For thirty years I'd alleviated the boredom of driving with cigarettes. It was automatic. When my mind drifted to something else, in a minute or two I'd find myself reaching for my pocket to grab a cigarette. Then, I'd go through all the disappointment and panic again.

I have no memory of that evening. But, I remember clearly waking up in the middle of that night. My insides were burning. My head was hurting. I lay there, staring at the sliver of light shining through the curtain from the street lamp. A massive sense of panic overwhelmed me. I cried out.

Pat startled. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's OK."

It wasn't.

Then it happened again.

I can't do this anymore, I thought.

Another middle of the night trip to the convenience store.

I was about to get out of bed when, out of nowhere, I saw Uncle Hoke in my mind's eye. This was Pat's Uncle Hoke. He had died in 1996 and he hadn't crossed my mind in a while. Uncle Hoke was tall and thin. He was in his eighties when he died. He smoked Winstons. But, that wasn't what I was thinking about now. I was thinking about his march.

His death march.

During World War II, Uncle Hoke was stationed in the Philippines. In 1942, the Japanese invaded the islands and the Americans and Filipinos surrendered to them. The Japanese forced nearly 100,000 men to march from the Bataan peninsula to prison camps ninety miles away. It is estimated that up to 25,000 men died during the march from exhaustion, lack of food and water, and wanton, random execution by the Japanese soldiers. To fall to the ground meant death from bayonets or being run over by vehicles. The march lasted for a week.

Uncle Hoke was among the men. He had survived the death march.

I had read all about nicotine withdrawal. The description of the physical pain didn't do justice to what I was feeling. But, by all accounts the pain lasted for no more than five to seven days. That information was from websites as well as from personal stories people had posted in forums.

A week. Just as long as Uncle Hoke has spent on that desperate walk in 1942.

My mind cleared. If Uncle Hoke could survive the Bataan death march for a week, surely I could survive nicotine withdrawal for a week.

I thought of others.

One of my favorite books was Victor Frankl's *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*. Frankl was a Holocaust survivor. Five months after Uncle Hoke's march, Frankl, his new wife, his mother, father, and brother were arrested in Germany and sent to concentration camps. His father died of starvation and his mother and brother were executed. Frankl remained in concentration camps for almost exactly three years. His camp was liberated by the Allies in 1945.

Three years in a concentration camp.

If Victor Frankl survived three years in a Nazi concentration camp, and survived the death and murder of his family members such that he could write a book filled with optimism like *MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING*, surely I could survive a week of nicotine withdrawal.

I said out loud, "Quit whining, you sorry-assed son-of-a-bitch."

As I lay there, I kept thinking of those two men and finally drifted off to sleep.

The next day was no easier on my body, but my mind was different. I used all the tools I'd learned in treatment, and was still learning in after care, with a new sense of vigor. One minute at a time became one hour at a time. I carried it through to the end, as the counselors told us to do with alcohol. When hit with cravings, imagine smoking a cigarette. Remember that if I did that, I'd smoke another, and another, and another. Put myself in a chair with a doctor before me telling me I had lung cancer. Imagine sitting in front of my children telling them that. I still might get lung cancer. When you've been smoking for thirty years, the risk decreases when you quit, but never returns to a never-smoker's risk. But, if I've quit at least my kids would know I tried. I wouldn't be embarrassed to go to my funeral.

But mostly, I thought of Uncle Hoke and Victor Frankl.

By Wednesday afternoon, I was doing a little better. Up until then, any hope I had came by reading accounts of others on the Internet forums. Those who had quit kept saying it got better. Now, I could sense that I wasn't as crazy as I had been and my body was beginning to settle down.

At five p.m. on that Wednesday, I lost all that. The hour from five until six was among the worst I've experienced in dealing with addiction. It was an hour I spent in the after care meeting at the treatment center.

The meeting began, as always, with all of us going around the circle introducing ourselves and admitting our addiction – "I'm Ed, and I'm an alcoholic." After that, we went around the circle and reported how we were doing. If something was going on that might affect our sobriety, the group would discuss it

I was first in line. I said, "Y'all need to be nice to me. I've closing in on 72 hours without a cigarette."

And the onslaught began. "Wrong," they shouted. Never make big changes in the first year of sobriety. Not drinking alcohol must be your only focus during the first year. You're taking a huge risk.

I said, "Smoking's going to kill me as much as alcohol. In fact, probably quicker." Didn't matter to them.

I could *feel* my nicotine addiction on my shoulder. I'm not being metaphorical here. There it was whispering in my ear:

"Yes! Now you can smoke.

You can ease your pain.

It's OK.

*You're not supposed to be doing this.*

It's *bad* to quit smoking now."

After a few minutes of that I shook my shoulder, knocking the addiction away. I was committed. To hell with these guys. I quit responding and answered questions with one word answers or grunts. Anything to make them happy and get this over with.

One said, "If you're going to do this, you better be taking antabuse. You're taking your antabuse, aren't you?"

"Yes," I said. That was a lie. I'd stopped taking antabuse as soon as the center's staff allowed me to. That was some time during the six weeks I was in the evening program when taking antabuse became optional. I had no cravings for alcohol and didn't want to take a medicine that required having my liver checked every few months.

So, I lied. And, I was OK with that. Still am. I have seldom been as angry in my life as I was during that hour. I just had to get through it.

I did and the next day was better.

The next night, it happened. It was the middle of Thursday night a little over four days since my last cigarette. I awoke with the familiar nicotine craving. By rote habit, I brought Uncle Hoke to my mind, seeing him walking down the road in Bataan. If he could do that, I can do this.

My skin began to peel. Starting from the top of my head, I could feel my skin shedding all the way down my body. It peeled in one huge piece, like when you pull dead skin away after a sunburn. The feeling was incredibly clear and real. After my whole body had peeled, all the way past my feet, the physical agony was gone.

Absolutely gone.

A peace descended over my body – enveloped me.

My body was at peace.

When I awoke the next day the peace was still there. I felt wonderful. I went to work joyfully. I reveled in time flying by, then realizing I hadn't thought about a cigarette in an hour, even two hours. My body had surrendered. My mind hadn't given up yet, though. The mental cravings continued. But, without the body's agony, using the tools to fight the cravings was easier.

I have to admit that in addition to using the tools the center taught me to fight addiction, I substituted substances for nicotine. I'd never been a candy eater. Now, I ate Snickers. Lots and lots of Snickers. But, that was OK. I wasn't smoking. I'd worry about that later.

I went to after-care session early the next week and met with the counselor before the meeting. I told her that I still wasn't smoking and intended to keep it that way. I told her about the pain leaving my body. She didn't argue, but she did warn me to be careful and not let cigarette cravings lead me to an alcohol relapse. Back then, substance abuse programs believed it was dangerous to try to quit smoking cigarettes and drinking alcohol at the same time. They've changed their minds now. Quitting both at the same time is encouraged.

I've learned in sobriety that things happen for a purpose. Or, so it seems. That horrible after-care session absolutely solidified my commitment never to smoke again. I focused my anger away from the group and the treatment center, and aimed it at my nicotine addiction.

By God, I'd annihilate it.

And, I did.