

CONFESSIONS OF AN ADDICT

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"I swear, here, before God and both of you, that I will never smoke another cigarette again, after tomorrow, of course." I made that very bold and prolific statement on Monday afternoon. Tuesday afternoon, I bummed a smoke off Pete.

My first memory of cigarettes was as a small, snot-nosed toddler, running around screaming at the top of my lungs as my parents smoked. Both of my parents still smoke. I saw cigarettes in movies, on TV, and even on billboards. I wanted to be that guy with the *Air Wolf* shades, mullet and all of the poofie-haired chicks. Unfortunately, now I smoke, as do most of my scumbag friends and comrades.

I remember my parents telling me at a young age, "...cigarettes are bad for you." There were two problems with this. One, they-mommy and daddy-were sometimes smoking when they said this. Two, if I was told not to do something, I always ended up doing it just to see what all the fuss was about.

At the age of seven, my friend Tommy and I just carried out black operations against G.I. Joe forces in my backyard. Cobra struck at the heart of the G.I. Joe command, and every troop in the base was not only killed, but also burned in a mass grave. Cobra was one battle closer to total victory.

Tommy and I walked inside to drink some milk and eat cookies. Mommy was out in her flower garden rebuilding the damage done after *someone* "happened" to kick a soccer ball through the garden and then trampled through it after a very painful spanking.

I don't know why, but I grabbed a cigarette and a lighter; Tommy and I went up to my room to plan future operations. I locked the door. I lit the Winston Light 100, puffed, coughed, and passed it to Tommy. He puffed, coughed, and passed it back to me. This went on, and I remember the extreme buzz that I was feeling. I was so cool.

Then there was a knocking on the door, followed by shouting. "Marko! Marko!" It was my mother. I turned the cigarette out on the top of a can of Jolt, and dropped it inside. The room was filled with smoke, as I unlocked the door.

The rest of the smoking incident was a blur. Lots of yelling, webs of lies, intense interrogations carried out by mommy (daddy was on a business trip). We were innocent, someone else was to blame.

We kept our bearings, refraining from admitting any guilt or making self-incriminating statements, until we were together in the interrogation room (my parents room, with my mom's blue and black portrait of the Old Man looming over us, staring at us coldly).

"Well, who taught you how to do it?" I knew the gig was up, and that I had to deflect the responsibility. I answered with a bold-face lie. "Steve and John did." Steve and John were Tommy's older brothers.

If I would have said, "TV, movies, Steve and John, you, daddy, Tommy's mommy, and many of the old people (adults) that I see," I would have been toast. Reluctantly, Tommy went along. He knew that we had to be perceived as innocent. We were dead men, but we were vindicated.

The intense retaliatory beatings, torturings, and experiments that followed our ratting out Steve and John were enough to deter me from smoking. That is, until the middle school years.

Periodically, Dave's little brother Tony (a model son who at the age of 5 he managed to steal the car keys and drive the car through the garage door) would steal some of his mom's smokes, or I would from my parents. We would puff smokes (and the occasional stogie) while we waited in the field behind the Hillbillies' house for cars to pass on the road, to pelt them with rocks, acorns, tomatoes, and eggs.

It was around age twelve that my crew and I discovered the magical wonders of alcohol. In the movies, anytime people would drink, they would smoke. It was the way it was done, so if we were stealing booze from Dave's dad's collection while Barb and Dwight were upstairs, we had to go out back and smoke.

We attempted to buy cigarettes at numerous convenience stores and gas stations, with no luck. The most shameful incident occurred when Schroeder, (F)Adam, and I walked down to the gas station on Butztown, and (F)Adam knocked over a bottle of barbecue sauce, breaking it and splattering the sauce all over the floor.

This shot down the operation; no wonder that the 50-something cashier didn't believe that (F)Adam's dad gave him money and permission to buy him a pack of Marlboro Reds and Swisher Sweets due to his "broken legs."

So we had our older siblings buy the nicotine for us. Eventually, I was eighteen and legal to buy. Freedom, horrible, horrible freedom.

I was a young, dumb chain-smoker. But, since I played sports, I always stayed in shape and the smokes didn't affect me.

I knew that smokes were bad for me, and it wasn't until I was running with the other loser Poolie's getting ready for bootcamp that I seriously considered quitting smoking. There were one or two dudes that were faster than me on the 3-mile run. This was unacceptable.

So, after five years of stating "I will not smoke again," I actually stopped. Two and a half years of superiority over the weakling scum who had no self-discipline and stupid addicts, followed. I quit cold turkey, I did not need any help. I could have a few beers and not even consider one of those cancer sticks. I was born again hard, running five miles minimum per day, sparing, lifting and swimming. I was a Roman God.

At least until March of 2002. We were on active duty since January, and life was pretty, well, punishing. Every weekend, nearly all of Echo Company would go to the local filthy-holes in Jacksonville, N.C., or do a road trip to a filthy-hole somewhere else. I was not immune to numbing my mind and trying to forget my present situation. I felt the addiction

creeping back, but I fought it. I even refused to go out, and stayed in my room pretending to read.

I upped my runs to 12 miles on Saturday and Sunday. I would not succumb to the weaknesses of the mere mortals. Until I went to visit Laura in NYC. We went out for a few drinks, and, with the aid of the eclectic mix of port, sherry, Guinness, and an array of martini's, Laura broke me. "You can have one, your a Marine, you deserve it." It was a Parliament, I hate Parliaments. It tasted like crap, but I still smoked it and I felt a rush. Curse those Satan's temptresses!

After the weekend, I went back to my regular routine of running. Reluctantly, I admitted that I broke and smoked a cigarette. My roommates, Ike, Taylor, Bichito, and that disgusting pig Fish, were elated. Bichito, the self-proclaimed greatest man in all of human history, just wanted to see me fail. Grant, the crazy Jamaican, was disappointed. He didn't smoke or drink, and suggested that I should go back to my old ways. Taylor, Ike, and Fish smoked, and I would hold court about the uselessness of their shared vice. I was no longer better than they were, I was a fraud and had to keep my big, fat, stupid mouth shut.

And so the downward spiral began, I would bum a smoke or two here or there, which degenerated rapidly to the point where I would go halvesies on a pack, but I would never purchase or carry it. It was my self-denial.

Then, on a wretched Monday morning before one of our death-marches, we had a few minutes of free time. Without telling our fireteam or squad leaders, a bunch of us went to the convenience store that was a grenade throw away from the armory where we were staging gear and drawing weapons.

I filled my coffee, poured seven vanilla creamers in it, and walked up to the register. My eyes fixed onto a pack of Marlboro lights. I remembered thinking that if I bought the pack, I would officially be a worthless addict again. I could still reclaim my life and discipline.

The cashier rung up my coffee, and asked me if I wanted anything else. "Yes, I will have a pack of Marlboro lights." There was serious trouble in paradise.

And so I still battle the addiction. The worst is morning coffee, that cigarette with that coffee is so damn good. The first Guinness and a smoke is always nice after a long week of all-nighters, so nerve soothing. When will it end? Soon, hopefully.

I quit for two months in Iraq, when seven of us bet \$100 on who could hold out until our dismissal formation in Harrisburg. Two months I remained nicotine free, until the night before we boarded buses for Pennsylvania.

I think it was (Sc)Umble who gave me a Marlboro Red while I was in my drunken haze; I had no will and caved in. The worst part is that I lost \$100 along with my dignity and self-respect. But I managed to go two months without smokes when all there was to do was smoke, so there is a glimmer of hope.

I will qui, one day...one day. I'm shooting for this Monday, let's just hope I'm not shooting from the hip-again.

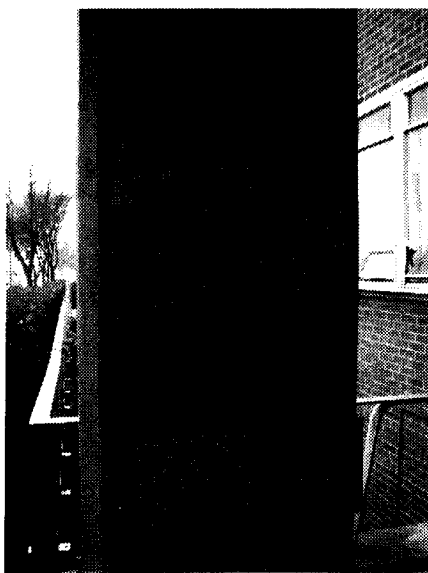
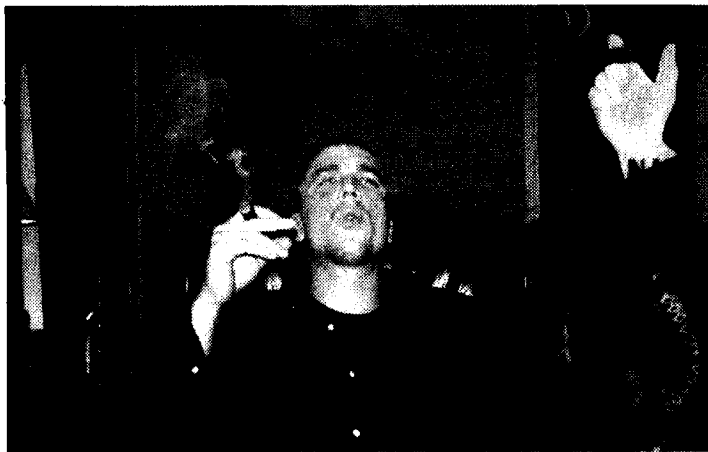


photo by Joe Ruggiero