

Thirty-Six Cigarettes

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“I don’t smoke” I lie to a coworker when they offer me a cigarette. They cut their eyes at me in counter-judgment, afraid that now that they have exposed their smokey underbelly I will pick up the sermon against them where someone else left it off. *Smoking kills, you know.* I watch them physically prepare for the familiar blow of the words that a thousand well-meaning strangers have attacked them with before. It’s amazing how quickly anyone can become a pulmonologist the second they hear the hiss hiss bite of a lighter being lit, the sharp inhale of desperate lips, and the gentle exhale of sudden relief. That exhale must sound like the collective last breath breathed on every deathbed as it rings in the ears of thetruth.com crusaders. What else would prompt so many people to throw the anvil of guilt and social shaming to a drowning man who refuses to grab on and be saved by it? I’ve never known the loud mocking cough of passing strangers to be the straw that breaks a five, ten, twenty-year addiction, but I have often seen it be the straw that breaks faith in human kindness.

I look at my coworker and don’t say anything. They walk away and I am left standing alone.

“This isn’t yours, is it Ya-ya?” My little brother holds up an empty cigarette pack that lays crushed on the carpet of my car amongst all the other trash that I have let pile up. Eight years my junior, he is one of the last of my siblings who still calls me by my childhood nickname. We have never really hung out before, but today I am taking him to Galaxy Con to meet the English dub voice actor from our favorite anime and our excitement crackles in the air around us as we prepare to leave. It’s early. The morning still smells dark even though the sun has already stretched the tips of its pink and gold fingers into the corners of the quickly bluing sky. We’re armed with sour gummy worms and gas station coffee and breakfast bagels too hot to touch to get us through our three-hour drive. I’ve asked him to help me clean out the trash in my car, so he has room to sit comfortably. I’ve always been ashamed of my casual hoarding and the

trash trail in my car that trumpets my bad fast food and diet soda habits to anyone curious enough to know the depths of my unhealthy lifestyle.

But the look in his eyes when he holds up the empty pack upsets me more than my usual shame. He's afraid. Of what? That I'll become Miss Sue? Growing up, our neighbor across the street was one of those old ladies who had gravel in her throat, whose hugs choked anyone who didn't hold their breath for the duration, and whose Halloween candy always tasted like ashes. We all dodged her as often as possible, except for him. He was such a kind and gentle kid; he could love anyone. Only now it seems that his love cannot also extend to me if he finds me in her shoes. He expects more from me. I stare into his face, wondering what exactly I can say. "No, buddy. A friend left that in here." He nods. We both know I'm lying. But the lie is what he needs; he doesn't want to bear the responsibility of my choices for me. That is something I must bear alone.

"G'night. I'm not long behind you, I just have to finish writing this" I say. I sit, straining my ears for the sound of my sister's door clicking shut down the hallway. The sound is quickly echoed by the click of my laptop as I shut it and gingerly set it on the coffee table. I've indulged in too much wine while trying to study and I feel the need to be reckless. My sister, her husband, and their baby sleep soundly in the other room. They are a quaint and content family. They have found their rhythm. They don't seek to self-destruct. Feeling wild in my secret sneaking, I cram my socked feet into my sandals and wrap the red knit scarf that my brother made for me tightly around my head and neck. I'm wearing skull and crossbones pajama bottoms and a green and black striped hoodie. I look ridiculous. I pace, wobbly, back and forth on the sidewalk in front of our apartment where the landlord has scraped our sidewalk clean of the 14" of fresh snow. Whoever owns the apartment next door is not so diligent and their sidewalk is still mounded high with snow. I imagine that they are a kindred spirit of mine. I look up at my unit to make sure the living room light hasn't been cut on. It's not often anymore that my nephew needs a middle of the night bottle, but the fear of getting caught keeps my eyes pinned to the darkened window. The night is cold and empty, but somehow bright and exposing. I hate the snow.

Finally, I get up the nerve to unlock my car and pull out my secret stash. I normally only smoke while driving so the wind can whip away the cloud of my shame. But I am too drunk to drive. I know that. I also know that smoking is low class, it's trashy, it's willful self-harm, and I was raised better. But apparently that hasn't stopped me. I wasn't pressured into smoking by a delinquent artist friend who likes to lurk in dark corners and feel dangerous (of which I have a beloved many). Nor was I worn down by sheer exposure to it while working as a waitress because somehow smoking has remained a steadfast cultural pillar for restaurant industry employees. Instead, I took it up one night a year and a half ago when, while living alone in an apartment full of hostile strangers behind locked bedroom doors, I felt consumed by the depths of my emptiness. I felt out of the reach of the people I loved, even though most were a short drive away and all would drop everything if I called them. I was trapping myself in my aloneness and I didn't know how to escape it. I needed something physical, something wicked, to tether me to myself so I could be certain that I existed.

And just like that, a habit was formed. I don't particularly like to smoke; I don't even do it very often. Once or twice every few months, I guess, and I have kept an exact count of my sins: thirty-six cigarettes. I indulge in moments of isolation when I am alone and spiraling, or when I feel like my self-certainty starts to lose clarity. There is something about a concrete action that inspires self-loathing that reconnects me to a vivid understanding of myself. Not who I want to be, but who I am. In the moments when I hate myself the most, I also know myself the most, and in that, I will always be alone.

"I'm just worried, is all. I think it will be imperative to focus on lung health in order to treat this if one of us is exposed" my mom says over the phone. I mmm-hmm along in agreement. It's 3AM back home but my mom can't sleep. She's been on a fevered research craze, desperately trying to understand the course of this virus and what measures can be taken to keep it from turning fatal in the airways of her immunocompromised children. My mom has had my little sister on total lockdown for weeks now. At seventeen, she bemoans the death of her social life and her mall job that mom forced her to quit. It took months of rejection to get that job. No one was hiring. She only had babysitting experience. She turned down the chance to return to her au

pair job in England (this time for a year instead of for the summer) because she wants to attend college in the fall. She's trying to save up, but that dream is busted. Maybe college plans are now too. Who knows what the coming months will hold? We try to sympathize with her because it's hard to not be able to leave the house. Where others have cut down on going out, she has been bound and shackled. She got life with no parole even before the rest of the country started taking this virus seriously. We try to remind her that her chains are not born out of malice, they are there for her protection. They are chains that stretch back through time and are anchored to the nebulizer machine she has used almost daily since she was eight. The mask that she used to wear during the treatments had a purple dinosaur on it. I think my mom still sees that purple dinosaur wrapped around the mouth and nose of her panicked eight-year-old, crying and fighting for breath, when she hears the word "coronavirus." What will happen to her baby, now a young woman, if the air is stolen from her already weakened lungs? Will she become just another number in an ever-rising death toll?

Will I?

I wonder about my mortality as my mom continues to spout everything that she has learned about the disease to me. I called her to tell her that I lost my job, that the restaurant I work in has put us on "temporary suspension until further notice." She is sorry for my loss of work, but grateful that I'll be kept home. I guess I am too. I think about the inhaler sitting in the bottom drawer of my bedside table. I should have gotten the prescription refilled months ago, but without insurance, I have come to fear the inevitable cash hemorrhage that follows any time I cross the threshold of a medical facility. A kidney infection brought me to my knees a year ago (both physically and financially. I avoided going to urgent care until finally, laying on the floor in blinding pain, I wailed into the phone and begged my ex fiancé to come pick me up). Strep throat almost broke me again last fall. My tonsils, so swollen with festering disease that they nearly blocked my throat and left me with a constant sensation of choking, finally sent me to the MinuteClinic (that, and the fact that I wept with the agonizing effort of trying to swallow yogurt). But because I can usually get by without my inhaler, I've let it slide into the ever-growing pile of peripheral problems. Like the trash in my car, I like to pretend I won't have to

deal with it if I don't look directly at it. But it's the cigarette pack all over again; my empty inhaler has now been plucked from the pile and I am being forced to confront it.

Suddenly my chest feels tight. I think it's just panic causing my breaths to come in short bursts, but what if it's not? I think about the hacking residual cough I have had since I got what I assume was whooping cough in 2013 (we never went to the doctor for it. Not having insurance can make a potential brush with death a long, slow, caress instead. Time crawls by when you are stuck weighing your chances of outliving illness against outliving financial ruin). As a result, I have spent the last seven years coughing and wheezing myself purple, often gagging with the effort to quell the ragged barks of air that burst out of me if I laugh too hard, choke on water, or get out of breath. I think about all of the times I have sat with my shirt pulled up around my mouth, apologizing to friends through watering, bulging eyes because I can't make it stop and I have drowned everything else out with my thunderous coughing. I think about the time at summer camp when, overwhelmed by the constant heat, my lungs gave up on "the breathing thing" and I had to be rushed to the nurse's office. I arrived woozy and crying, my mouth gaping open and shut with futile attempts to inhale. My breathing problems were never as bad as my little sister's though, and they've only mildly impeded on my life because (though vicious when evoked), they are infrequent.

My mom and I hang up. I feel myself being swallowed by the weight of solitude in the void that the phone call leaves behind. My fingers itch with the desire to pick up a cigarette. I want to reground myself. But I can suddenly feel each of the thirty-six cigarettes I have smoked in the last year and a half etched deeply into myself. They feel like gaping wounds ripped into my chances of survival. And I put them there. I think about all the videos I've seen about what just one cigarette can do to human lungs. What about thirty-six? Would they stack the odds against me? Are the odds already stacked?

My thoughts spiral more.

When was the last time I disinfected my car door handle? My keys? My phone? Do I already have coronavirus and I'm just a ticking time bomb waiting to show symptoms? Maybe I should

have called out of work before it was cancelled. Maybe I shouldn't have gone to the grocery store this morning. It wasn't essential. Is a craving for oranges really worth dying for? Am I overreacting? I want a cigarette. Instead I clean out my car and throw the rest of my remaining pack away to restrain myself. I feel the loose string of my consciousness being tugged, tempting me to unravel. Who am I? I am alone and the quarantine stretches out before me like an eternity. In it, I spend every moment craving a familiar tool of death and isolation to make me feel alive and certain, while simultaneously being crushed with worry about my vulnerability to an inevitable sickness that I have already opened and unlocked myself to. But no one knows. My panic, my secret sins, my empty inhaler -- they are my own. I stuff them in the empty cavity in my chest and hold them there tightly. Alone.