

## Butting Out

I stumble in the door and kick off my shoes. They ricochet off the wall and leave small scuffmarks. It's too late to care. I pull my jacket off and wince at the smell of cold smoke rising from it. My head buzzes with snippets of conversations from the night and flashes of events just passed. My eyes droop, heavy with sleep. Two thoughts bang around in my head. "I ... need ... sleep." The second thought, one hundred times as loud, screams through: "I ... need ... cigarettes." It's chilly outside – a typical late August day in 1995.

I've been smoking for four years already. I started sometime in grade 7 in the midst of rough times with my girlfriend, Tracey. I still can't understand why I started smoking, but the habit stuck. My mind drifts back to a lazy recess in Grade 5. I am with my best friend, Shaun, and we find a pack of cigarettes on a bench in the school's playground. We decide to give them a try. I pick the pack up and let my hands contemplate taking a cigarette out. To even think about smoking is a surprise, though. I am an avid anti-smoker. When my Dad first started smoking, I remember spending most of my waking time making anti-smoking signs for my bedroom door. One was a self-portrait with a gas mask over my mouth and nose. Above my head were the words, "Do we have to?" I can also remember the couple of weeks when packs of smokes would mysteriously disappear from around the house. I was probably just trying to rile my dad up, but the feelings slowly settled to become values. I slide the jacket down to uncover the uneven rows of cigarettes. A small, red, well-used Bic lighter is nestled inside. Shaun's eyes gleam with forbidden interest, as do mine. I slide the tightly packed stick of tobacco between my fingers and place it between my lips. Never having done this

before, I put too much of the cigarette in my mouth and immediately soak the end of the filter. I spark the lighter. I cautiously bring it to the end of the cigarette. I take a deep draw of the smoke and watch the tip glow a mighty red. Thick smoke rushes down my throat. It hits my lungs with a burning, searing, suffocating pain. I double over, and my whole body contributes to the most vicious set of coughs I have ever known. My head spins from the lack of oxygen as I watch my breakfast splash onto the ground in front of me.

My mind now drifts to an early November day in Grade 7. I have been seeing Tracy, for a few months now. Unfortunately, our relationship is full of the troubles common to all teenage couples. Insecurity, overactive hormones, a fragile self-image – all are common factors in every teenage breakup. In a sudden bout of bad judgment, I decide that a cigarette will help me deal with my situation. I open my bedroom door, walk to the living room, open a pouch of tobacco sitting on the table, and take a large pinch. I pull a few pieces of rolling paper from a small booklet lying half-open beside the pouch and return to my room. I roll the tobacco into a lumpy, uneven mess but somehow manage to light it. The first drag, similar to my first ever, chews the whole inside of my throat up. This time, though, the pain is a delightful break from the much worse emotional pain I am trying to escape from. I find myself feeling more and more relaxed as the cigarette dwindles.

In the days following, the call of the tobacco becomes stronger as my body's opposition to it wanes.

The lure of a warm bed upstairs calls again, awakening me from my reverie. I trudge up the stairs and prepare for the even stronger call of nicotine. Three steps later, a

long, sleek, pristine, and beautiful cigarette dangles from the corner of my mouth. I open my bedroom door and head over to the bed. Rather than trying to sleep like any sane person would, I pull the comforter from the bed and wrap it about me. Like most smokers, I have figured out many, many ways to escape the cold while smoking. I've seen people cut the tips off of their gloves in order to smoke; I've seen people use tweezers in order to smoke without taking their gloves off; I've seen people stand outside in -30 degree weather in order to smoke. My window has a panel near the floor, and I open it. Before the frigid air can rush in, I plug the hole with my blanket-wrapped body. This way, most of my body stays inside (or wrapped in the blanket) while just my face and fingers need to be exposed to the frigid air while smoking. I light the smoke just as I have done countless times before. Before I can delight in the instant gratification of the chemical soup, though, I pause for a short series of wet coughs. As I smoke, I contemplate the day just past and become increasingly disturbed. I notice that smoking is becoming increasingly associated with trauma in my life. The first time I smoked I despised it. The second time I smoked I despised life. I am smoking right now, even though I despise the cold. I also realize that this trite habit has taken over my life. Somehow, I have convinced myself that I like smoking enough to ignore its effects on my health. The slow buildup of tar on my lungs, the increasing severity of my coughing spells, my decreasing supply of energy – is it really worth it? Most of all, I have convinced myself that I like smoking enough to deal with the fact that I have no choice whether to smoke or not. I realize that I am hopelessly addicted.

I take a glance at my half-finished cigarette and realize what a moron I have become. After a short pause, I give my cigarette an experienced toss to the ground and enjoy my first breath as a non-smoker.