

Myra's Cigarettes

by Doug Woodhouse

Before Pete offered me that cigarette it had been almost two years since my last one, but it was like I had spent the last two years of my life dying for a smoke without even realizing it. Suddenly my fate is once again entangled with this little cardboard box of twenty. When the box is full my life is full of possibility: I'm kind and charitable to friend and stranger alike. I befriend stray dogs and stray people. I can afford to be reckless and fickle, smoking only half before deciding I don't want any more. When the box starts getting empty I become more cautious and distrustful. I begin to ration and make plans. I delay inevitabilities.

When I go up to the register to pay for our gas, I notice the attendant is staring out the window at Myra, checking her out. There's really no reason for this to annoy me, but it does anyway. She's leaning over the hood washing the bugs off the windshield, smiling to herself. Part of me thinks she knows the attendant is watching her and that just irritates me even more. But what annoys me the most is the fact that it even bothers me to begin with.

I pay for the gas and buy a pack of Camel Lights for Myra. I still have half a pack of American Spirits left, and I'm trying to conserve them until we find another gas station that carries them. I ask the attendant if he knows where I can get some, and he just shrugs and goes back to stocking the cartons of cigarettes behind the counter. It amazes me that they don't have my brand. It's a small gas station in the middle of nowhere, but they have more cigarettes than I've ever seen in any little outpost station like this. I watch him for a minute and do some quick math in my head. Twenty cigarettes in a pack. Ten packs in a carton. Three cartons in a row stacked fifteen rows high. That's nine thousand cigarettes, and that's just one brand. There are maybe fifty columns of cartons stretching across the entire back wall of the gas station, making four hundred fifty thousand cigarettes total. Almost a half million cigarettes! Just in this one little gas station! He and I are the only two in the building,

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which means the ratio of cigarettes to people in the building is... two hundred twenty five thousand to one. Two hundred twenty five thousand to one!

I wonder if he's ever marveled at the sheer volume of cigarettes he handles daily. In a month he may personally sell over a million of those little sticks of rolled tobacco. I want to ask, to somehow strike up that conversation, but I know from the experience of too many odd sideways glances that people are seldom interested in my brand of observation. No one else seems to wonder how many semi-colons there are in the library or how many other people own the exact shirt you're wearing right now. We've been spoiled by mass production: the printing presses and the sweatshops and the lunar rovers are so commonplace now that we get to take them for granted. Our innate sense of awe has been deadened by an overabundance of awesomeness. 300 billion stars in the Milky Way? Bah, that's nothing. The night sky can't even hold a candle to how many units we shipped last quarter!

Why are we so narrow? What is it that makes us shy away from experiencing the boggling vastness of the universe around us? Is it too much to ask to want to revel in the grandeur of being with a fellow voyager?

Hmm.

Maybe it is. Maybe just because I happen to enjoy the experience of amazement and wonder doesn't mean there's anything wrong if other people don't. Who am I to judge him? Who am I to think that I'm the only one not sleepwalking? I walk back out into the sun and toss Myra's twenty cigarettes onto her seat. She doesn't thank me, but opens the pack and lights one up. She catches an ant making its way across the dashboard and carefully sets it down next to the gas pump. As the car pulls away, I turn back, squinting, and take one last glance at the attendant mindlessly stacking carton after carton of Marlboros. I dunno. Maybe I'm wrong, but I can't help but think that maybe I'm right.

