

Smoking

by Erin Zulkoski

I bought my first pack of cigarettes when I was twenty. I realized I had turned eighteen and didn't exercise my god-given right to do so.

Off to the local convenience mart to buy my first pack. I stood at the counter, gazing at the shiny, colorful boxes, all saying "pick me! pick me!" I was clueless. Eyes wide, cash and ID in hand, I asked for what I thought was the easiest: Marlboro Reds. Unfiltered. Holy shit. That's like saying you are thinking about taking up rock climbing and attempt The Matterhorn on your first day.

This was the exchange between me and the cashier:

Me: "I'd like a pack of cigarettes, please."

Clerk: "What kind?"

Me: "Uh...Marlboros, I guess...."

Clerk: "Ooookay...regulars, lights, ultra-lights....?"

Me: "Regulars. Please."

Clerk: "Filtered or non-filtered?"

Me: "...uh....non-filtered?"

Clerk: (raises eyebrows) "Box or soft pack?"

Me: "Box."

The nice lady grabbed the pack, gave me the "you're fucking stupid, kid" look, and rang up my purchase. She asked for my ID. She glanced at the birth date, at me, and back at the ID. I'm sure she was thinking I was much younger than my age since I seemed so wet behind the ears buying cigarettes, or that I was buying for my under-aged friends and was nervous I'd get caught procuring for minors. Regardless, she took my money and asked if I needed a lighter. Duh. A lighter. How the hell was I going to light these damn things? Pull a caveman in my car with sticks and a bit of flint? Nervously, I looked around the counter at the lighters. So many colors...

I spied a container of matches and asked, "how much are the matches?"

“Those are *free*, sweetheart.”

“Okay, cool. I'll take the matches.”

The nice lady handed me my matches, gave me another “you're a fucking dipwad” look, and said, “Have a good time.” I believe the smile on her face could be described as a “shit-eating grin.”

I grabbed my smokes, my FREE matches, and my new-found sense of pride at my first ever tobacco purchase and walked out the door. I sat in my car, wondering what to do next. My older brother smoked, and I saw him smack his pack of cigarettes against his hand for whatever reason, and decided to try that as well. I should have paid closer attention as I had no idea what he did it for, so instead of hitting the top of the pack in an effort to pack the tobacco down, I was just slapping the shit out of my cigarettes.

Once I felt I had accomplished the right degree of whatever-the-fuck, I ripped the cellophane off, flipped the top, and stared down at the twenty sticks of death lined up inside. I immediately regretted the unfiltered choice. I took a cigarette out and turned it around in my hands, looking for the missing filter. Maybe I had to insert it myself. I shoved one between my lips, and struck a match, carefully bringing the flame up to the smoke dangling precariously from my mouth.

I didn't realize you inhaled as you lit the goddamn thing, so the match just charred the end of the cigarette and burned my fingers. I wagged the flame out with a “sonofabitch!” and tried again. Success...or epic fail, depending on how you look at it. The end of the cigarette glowed angry orange, smoke filled the car, and I started coughing. I had little bits of tobacco stuck to my tongue, so I'm hacking, sputtering and trying to wipe loose tobacco from my mouth. The car is still filling with smoke, and it dawns on me to roll down the window, which I did furiously. Then there's the issue of how to hold the god-forsaken thing. I was pinching it between my thumb and forefinger, but I associated that with pot smoking, so I went for the more elegant jammed between my middle and forefinger approach. Regardless, I am sure I looked like a massive tool who had never smoked before.

I stopped coughing/retching/fiddling with the cigarette, and felt comfortable enough to drive without dropping it on my lap and igniting myself, I took off down the road, window down, wind in my hair, and smoke blowing in my face. I'd "smoke," or puff my cheeks full of smoke and awkwardly exhale a huge plume out the window. This went on, me driving and pretend smoking. My eyes were burning, and I had gone through about six unfiltered devils before I decided to call it quits. I was due home, and didn't want to smell like an ashtray. Which brought me to my next quandary: what was I going to do with the cigarettes? I am well past the legal age to buy cigarettes, but I had this fear of my parents finding out I smoked, even though I had moved out of the house by then.

I took them up to my apartment and was met with the same "what the fuck, kid?" look from my roommate.

"You. Bought. Cigarettes." she said smugly as I showed her the pack.

"Yep." I felt like a little kid showing her mom a pretty rock she found outside.

"How'd that go for you?" she laughed.

"Fine," I lied. As if to betray my cool exterior, I started coughing. Damn. Cover blown.

"Yeah, sounds like it. If you're going to smoke inside, open up a window. I don't want the place to reek."

This is my next recollection of smoking—standing in my bedroom, window open, screen off and laying across my bed, and hanging halfway out the window, fucking CHAIN SMOKING these sonsabitches, because I didn't want them anymore, but didn't want to throw them away, either. I paid good money for this shit, damn it. I wasn't going to waste my money! (the irony was clearly lost on me then.)

I didn't smoke much after my first experience. I would pick up occasionally over the years, mainly when I was drunk.

Stress is what brought me back into the arms of this cancerous mistress, and I started smoking full-time when my marriage went south. I came home with a pack of cigarettes and stood on the front

porch, puffing away. My husband looked at me with the all-too familiar "what the fuck, kid?" look.

"You're smoking?" he asked.

"Yep." I replied nonchalantly.

"Why?"

"Why not? *You* smoke."

And that was that. He left me on the porch, sucking my life away.

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