

Body + MIND

BY ANNE BOKMA

Blowing smoke

My 30-year love affair with cigarettes

I started smoking when my best friend, Marilyn Haydenluck* offered me a Du Maurier Light in the Grade 9 schoolyard. Already suffering from “minor-niner” high school anxiety and a desperate need to fit in, I lacked the guts to just say no. As I inhaled my first drag of nicotine, praying that I wouldn’t sputter and cough and thus display my obvious inexperience, I wondered how anyone could possibly enjoy the taste of bitter tar in their mouth, the burning sensation of smoke in their lungs.

Within days I was hooked. It would be 30 years before I quit.

What made me, an educated, otherwise fit, middle-aged mom with two young daughters, a woman who has spent most of the past 20 years editing and writing for health magazines — continue to engage in something as stupid as smoking?

Well, it’s complicated.

For me, cigarettes were many things, but mostly they were elegantly slim, extra-long filtered pals I packed along for the ride of my life. They were a comforting presence that gave an added lift to good days and took the edge off bad ones. Where others might turn to food or booze in times of crisis or celebration, I had my smokes. I loved the ritual of smoking — stripping the cellophane from a fresh pack, peeling back the gold tinfoil, pinching out a tightly packed cigarette and placing the cigarette between my lips, pursed as if for a kiss.

I justified my habit by reassuring myself that I didn't smoke much — over the last decade I'd weaned myself down to five to 10 cigarettes a week. Like many women, I was mostly a social smoker. In fact, 25 per cent of all women who smoke do so less than daily, according to Dr. Roberta Ferrence, executive director of the Ontario Tobacco Research Unit at the University of Toronto. We may think we're not doing our body as much harm as a hard-core smoker is, but smoking even one or two cigarettes a day doubles the risk of lung cancer, she says. We can be both physically and mentally hooked on smokes. "You can't underestimate the powerful psychological addiction of smoking," Ferrence says. Indeed, there were times I craved my tobacco fix like a junkie does the needle.

During my teens and twenties, many of my friends smoked. In journalism school, at my first newspaper job, cigarettes were a regular fixture. I couldn't imagine meeting a deadline without a smoke in my hand. But in the late '80s, things started to change as new workplace legislation put limits on lighting up. Overnight, a smoker's world got smaller. In fact, it got squished into tiny, officially sanctioned, enclosed smoking pens filled with people desperate to feed their addiction, even if it meant being crammed together under a suffocating fog of blue haze. Soon, even the smoking sections disappeared. By the time I hit my mid-thirties, hardly anyone I knew smoked anymore. What began as a social habit had morphed into an antisocial one. I was embarrassed I smoked. It was a weakness, like having too much debt. Smoking was now an illicit pleasure, one I felt increasingly guilty about — especially once I had kids.

Twenty-five years ago, at a wedding, I walked into the women's washroom to witness a sight that has haunted me ever since — a mother smoking while she nursed her newborn.

The baby tugged at her breast while Mom pulled on a cigarette, thoughtfully turning her head to the side to exhale plumes of smoke. Then and there I swore, if I had kids, I'd never smoke.

And I did quit when I had children. For about 18 months each time. My desire to smoke was eclipsed by my body's more important agenda of gestation and breastfeeding. But soon after the babies were weaned, I'd lean longingly whenever a waft of smoke blew my way. Eventually, I caved. Why? The stress of new motherhood might have had something to

do with it. (A cigarette was a small reward after a day of potty training and temper tantrums.) And, like me, my husband was a social smoker who wasn't ready to quit, which meant that there was always a tempting stash of smokes somewhere in the house. Cigarettes were also a reminder of my former care-free life. A life of career clothes, downtown lunches and sleeping in, now replaced by stretch jeans, mac and cheese and 5 a.m. wake-up calls.

Like every good helicopter mom, I hovered close to my kids to ensure their safety and protection. I hired a professional company to baby-proof the house. I denied my daughters fast food. Yet I myself put their health at risk every time I snuck a smoke in the basement when it was too frigid to go outside, or when they'd get a whiff of the nicotine that clung to my hair and clothes like guilt.

Once I'd hidden my habit from my parents; now I was hiding it from my kids. They, like my health-conscious friends, never once saw me smoke. It was my secret shame, one that still gave me pleasure — but now every puff was tinged with regret. As much as I loved smoking, I knew I had to quit for my kids. Studies show kids are far more likely to smoke if their parents do. I couldn't bear

the thought of one of my daughters sucking nicotine into her lungs. My deeper fear was that continuing to smoke would lead to my untimely death, leaving them motherless. Over the space of a year, three people I knew got cancer. I could no longer shake the feeling I was truly playing with fire.

So I tried to quit. I'd do okay for a few weeks, then bum a smoke at a party after one glass of wine too many. I'd even go for stretches of two or three months, then break down after a visit to my husband's fun-loving and tobacco-friendly family in Montreal, where I'd be offered a smorgasbord of brands to choose from. I'd puff away on the back porch, paranoid that



"They are like dysfunctional friends who make you feel good one minute, then stab you in the back the next."

TONY HUTCHINGS/GETTY IMAGES

my kids might come out and see me.

Then last year, my dear mother-in-law, who, through 20 years of my marriage to her son has never so much as lifted an eyebrow in criticism, gently suggested that perhaps it wasn't honest to hide my habit from my daughters. I knew she was right. The thought that my kids might view me as a liar in addition to a smoker was the lightning bolt I needed to finally quit for good.

I sat my husband down, told him I couldn't live as a smoker any longer and needed his help. I couldn't quit if he still smoked and there were cigarettes in the house. He agreed in principle but it took a few weeks for him to come round to the idea (he took to taking mysterious "walks" at night). I knew he was still packing, but I also knew he didn't want to be a hypocrite. If we didn't want our kids to smoke, then we couldn't either. I finally quit for good this past January, and he followed a month later.

I coped by joining a gym and drinking less wine, which was a trigger for me. My husband took up squash again. We feel better than we have in years. That's not to say it's been a cakewalk. Every once in a while, after a lovely dinner out, say, or a stressful day at work, we'll shoot each other an intense look that can mean only one thing: We'd kill for a smoke. So far, one of us has always been able to pull the other through.

But I'd be lying if I said I didn't miss my filtered pals. According to Ferrence, I may miss them for the rest of my life. "Quitting smoking can be like losing a long-term friend," she says. "But they're like dysfunctional friends who make you feel good one minute, then stab you in the back the next."

Smoking is the leading cause of premature death among Canadian women. They say every cigarette you smoke takes seven minutes off your life. I don't want to even think about doing the math. All I know is, I can't waste a minute more. **M**

**Name changed by request*

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