

REFLECTIONS

LETTING GO

By David Sedaris

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ZOHAR LAZAR



When I was in fourth grade, my class took a field trip to the American Tobacco plant in nearby Durham, North Carolina.

There we witnessed the making of cigarettes and were given free packs to take home to our parents. I tell people this and they ask me how old I am, thinking, I guess, that I went to the world's first elementary school, one where we wrote on cave walls and hunted our lunch with clubs. Then I mention the smoking lounge at my high school. It was outdoors, but, still, you'd never find anything like that now, not even if the school was in a prison.

I recall seeing ashtrays in movie theatres and grocery stores, but they didn't make me want to smoke. In fact, it was just the opposite. Once, I drove an embroidery needle into my mother's carton of Winstons, over and over, as if it were a voodoo doll. She then beat me for twenty seconds, at which point she ran out of breath and stood there panting, "That's . . . not . . . funny."

A few years later, we were sitting around the breakfast table and she invited me to take a puff. I did. Then I ran to the kitchen and drained a carton of orange juice, drinking so furiously that half of it ran down my chin and onto my shirt. How could she, or anyone, really, make a habit of something so fundamentally unpleasant? When my sister Lisa started smoking, I forbade her to enter my bedroom with a lit cigarette. She could talk to me, but only from the other side of the threshold, and she had to avert her head when she exhaled. I did the same when my sister Gretchen started.

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It wasn't the smoke but the smell of it that bothered me. In later years, I didn't care so much, but at the time I found it depressing: the scent of neglect. It wasn't so noticeable in the rest of the house, but then again the rest of the house was neglected. My room was clean and orderly, and if I'd had my way it would have smelled like an album jacket the moment you remove the plastic. That is to say, it would have smelled like anticipation.

When I started smoking myself, I realized that a lit cigarette acted as a kind of beacon, drawing in any freeloader who happened to see or smell it. It was like standing on a street corner and jiggling a palmful of quarters. "Spare change?" someone might ask. And what could you say?

The first time I was hit on, I was twenty years old and had been smoking for all of two days. This was in Vancouver, British Columbia. My best friend, Ronnie, and I had spent the previous month picking apples in Oregon, and this trip to Canada was our way of rewarding ourselves. We stayed that week in a cheap residence hotel, and I remember being enchanted by the Murphy bed, which was something I had heard about but never seen in person. During the time we were there, my greatest pleasure came in folding it away and then looking at the empty spot where it had been. Pull it out, fold it away, pull it out, fold it away. Over and over until my arm got tired.

It was in a little store a block from our hotel that I bought my first pack of cigarettes. The ones I'd smoked earlier had been Ronnie's—Pall Malls, I think—and though they tasted no better or worse than I thought they would, I felt that in the name of individuality I should find my own brand, something separate. Something me. Carltons, Kents, Alpines: it was like choosing a religion, for weren't Vantage people fundamentally different from those who'd taken to Larks or Newports? What I didn't realize was that you could convert, that you were allowed to. The Kent person could, with very little effort, *become* a Vantage person, though it was harder to go from menthol to regular, or from regular-sized to ultra-long. All rules had their exceptions, but the way I came to see things they generally went like this: Kools and Newports were for black people and lower-class whites. Camels were for procrastinators, those who wrote bad poetry, and those who put off writing bad poetry. Merits were for sex addicts, Salems for alcoholics, and Mores for people who considered themselves to be outrageous but really weren't. One should never lend money to a Marlboro-menthol smoker, though you could usually count on a regular-Marlboro person to pay you back. The eventual subclasses of milds, lights, and ultra-lights not only threw a wrench in the works but made it nearly impossible for anyone to keep your brand straight. All that, however, came later, along with warning labels and American Spirits.

The cigarettes I bought that day in Vancouver were Viceroy's. I'd often noticed them in the shirt pockets of gas-station attendants and, no doubt, thought that they'd make me appear masculine, or at least as masculine as one *could* look in a beret and a pair of gabardine pants that buttoned at the ankle. Throw in Ronnie's white silk scarf and I needed all the Viceroy I could get, especially in the neighborhood where this residence hotel was.

It was odd. I'd always heard how clean Canada was, how peaceful, but

perhaps people had been talking about a different part, the middle, maybe, or those rocky islands off the eastern coast. Here it was just one creepy drunk after another. The ones who were passed out I didn't mind so much, but those on their way to passing out—those who could still totter and flail their arms—made me fear for my life.

Take this guy who approached me after I left the store, this guy with a long black braid. It wasn't the gentle, ropy kind you'd have if you played the flute but something more akin to a bullwhip: a prison braid, I told myself. A month earlier, I might have simply cowered, but now I put a cigarette in my mouth—the way you might if you were about to be executed. This man was going to rob me, then lash me with his braid and set me on fire—but no. “Give me one of those,” he said, and he pointed to the pack I was holding. I handed him a Viceroy, and when he thanked me I smiled and thanked him back.

It was, I later thought, as if I'd been carrying a bouquet and he'd asked me for a single daisy. He loved flowers, I loved flowers, and wasn't it beautiful that our mutual appreciation could transcend our various differences, and somehow bring us together? I must have thought, too, that had the situation been reversed he would have been happy to give *me* a cigarette, though my theory was never tested. I may have been a Boy Scout for only two years, but the motto stuck with me forever: “Be Prepared.” This does not mean “Be Prepared to Ask People for Shit”; it means “Think Ahead and Plan Accordingly, Especially in Regard to Your Vices.”

Given my reputation as a strident non-smoker, it was funny how quickly I took to cigarettes. It was as if my life were a play, and the prop mistress had finally showed up. Suddenly there were packs to unwrap, matches to strike, ashtrays to fill and then empty. My hands were at one with their

labor, the way a cook's might be, or a knitter's.

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“Well, that’s a hell of a reason to poison yourself,” my father said.

My mother, however, looked at the bright side. “Now I’ll know what to put in your Christmas stocking!” She put them in my Easter basket as well, entire cartons. Today, it might seem trashy to see a young man accepting a light from his mom, but a cigarette wasn’t always a statement. Back when I started, you could still smoke at work, even if you worked in a hospital where kids with no legs were hooked up to machines. If a character smoked on a TV show, it did not necessarily mean that he was weak or evil. It was like seeing someone who wore a striped tie or parted his hair on the left—a detail, but not a telling one.

I didn’t much notice my fellow-smokers until the mid-eighties, when we began to be cordoned off. Now there were separate sections in waiting rooms and restaurants, and I’d often look around and evaluate what I’d come to think of as “my team.” At first, they seemed normal enough—regular people, but with cigarettes in their hands. Then the campaign began in earnest, and it seemed that if there were ten adults on my side of the room at least one of them was smoking through a hole in his throat.

“Still think it’s so cool?” the other side said. But coolness, for most of us, had nothing to do with it. It’s popular to believe that every smoker was brainwashed, sucked in by product placement and subliminal print ads. This argument comes in handy when you want to assign blame, but it discounts the fact that smoking is often wonderful. For people like me, people who twitched and jerked and cried out in tiny voices, cigarettes were a godsend. Not only that; they tasted good, especially the first one in the morning and the seven or eight that came immediately after it. By late afternoon, after a pack or so, I’d generally feel a heaviness in my lungs, especially in the nineteen-eighties, when I worked with hazardous chemicals. I should have worn a respirator, but it interfered with my smoking.

I once admitted this to a forensic pathologist. We were in the autopsy suite of a medical examiner’s office, and he responded by handing me a lung. It had belonged to an obese, light-skinned black man, an obvious heavy smoker, who was lying on a table not three feet away. His sternum had been sawed through, and the way his chest cavity was opened, the unearthed fat like so much sour cream, made me think of a baked potato. “So,” the pathologist sniffed. “What do you say to *this*?”

He’d obviously hoped to create a moment, the kind that leads you to change your life, but it didn’t quite work. If you are a doctor and someone hands you a diseased lung, you might very well examine it, and consequently make some very radical changes. If, on the other hand, you are *not* a doctor, you’re liable to do what I did, which was to stand there thinking, *Damn, this lung is heavy*.

When New York banned smoking in the workplace, I quit working. When it was banned in restaurants, I stopped eating out and

when the price of cigarettes hit seven dollars a pack I gathered all my stuff together and went to France. It was hard to find my brand there, but no matter. At least twice a year, I returned to the States. Duty-free cartons were only twenty dollars each, and I'd buy fifteen of them before boarding the plane back to Paris. Added to these were the cigarettes brought by visiting friends, who acted as mules, and the ones I continued to receive for Christmas and Easter, even after my mom died. Ever prepared for the possibility of fire or theft, at my peak I had thirty-four cartons stockpiled in three different locations. "My inventory," I called it, as in "The only thing standing between me and a complete nervous breakdown is my inventory."

It is here that I'll identify myself as a Kool Mild smoker. This, to some, is like reading the confessions of a wine enthusiast and discovering midway through that his drink of choice is Lancers, but so be it. It was my sister Gretchen who introduced me to menthol cigarettes. She'd worked in a cafeteria throughout high school, and had come to Kools by way of a line cook named Dewberry. I never met the guy, but, in those first few years, whenever I found myself short of breath, I'd think of him and wonder what my life would be like had he smoked Tareytons. People were saying that Kools had fibreglass in them, but surely that was just a rumor, started, most likely, by the Salem or Newport people. I'd heard, too, that menthols were worse for you than regular cigarettes, but that also seemed suspect. Just after my mom started chemotherapy, she sent me three cartons of Kool Milds. "They were on sale," she croaked. Dying or not, she should have known that I smoked full-strength Filter Kings, but then I looked at them and thought, Well, they *are* free.



A light cigarette is like a regular one with a pinhole in it. With Kools, it's the difference between being kicked by a donkey and being kicked by a donkey that has socks on. It took some getting used to, but by the time my mother was cremated I'd switched over.

"After everything that's happened, how can you put that thing in your mouth?" my father asked. He started smoking when he was eighteen, but quit when my sister Lisa and I were young. "It's a filthy, stinking habit." He said this fifty times a day, not that it did any good. Even before the warnings were printed, anyone could see that smoking was bad for you. My mother's sister, Joyce, was married to a surgeon, and every time I stayed at their house I was awakened at dawn by my uncle's hacking, which was mucky and painful-sounding, and suggested imminent death. Later, at the breakfast table, I'd see him with a cigarette in his hand and think, Well, *he's* the doctor.

Uncle Dick died of lung cancer, and a few years later my mother developed a nearly identical cough. You'd think that, being a woman, hers would be softer, a delicate lady's hack. I remember lying in bed and thinking, with shame, *My mom coughs like a man.*

By the time my embarrassment ripened to concern, I knew there was no

point in lecturing her. I had become a smoker myself, so what could I say, really? Eventually, she dropped her Winstons in favor of something light and then ultra-light. “It’s like sucking on a straw,” she’d complain. “Give me one of yours, why don’t you?”

My mother visited twice when I lived in Chicago. The first time was when I graduated from college and the second was a few years later. She had just turned sixty, and I remember having to slow down when walking with her. Climbing to the elevated train meant stopping every fifth step or so, while she wheezed and sputtered and pounded her chest with her fist. *Come on*, I remember thinking. *Hurry it up*.

Toward the end of her life, she managed two weeks without a cigarette. “That’s half a month, practically,” she said to me on the phone. “Can you believe it?”

I was living in New York then, and tried to imagine her going about her business: driving to the bank, putting in a load of laundry, watching the portable TV in the kitchen, nothing in her mouth besides her tongue and her teeth. At that time, my mother had a part-time job at a consignment shop. Easy Elegance, the place was called, and she was quick to remind me that they didn’t take just anything: “It has to be classy.”

The owner didn’t allow smoking, so once every hour my mother would step out the back door. I think it was there, standing on gravel in the hot parking lot, that she came to think of smoking as unsophisticated. I’d never heard her talk about quitting, but when she called after two weeks without a cigarette I could hear a tone of accomplishment in her voice. “It’s hardest in the mornings,” she said. “And then, of course, later on, when you’re having your drink.”



I don't know what got her started again: stress, force of habit, or perhaps she decided that, at sixty-one, she was too old to quit. I'd probably have agreed with her, though now, sixty-one, that's nothing.

There were other attempts to stop smoking, but none of them lasted more than a few days. Lisa would tell me that Mom hadn't had a cigarette in eighteen hours. Then, when my mother called, I'd hear the click of her lighter, followed by a ragged intake of breath: "What's new, pussycat?"

My last cigarette was smoked in a bar at Charles de Gaulle airport. It was January 3, 2007, a Wednesday morning, and though Hugh and I would be changing planes in London and had a layover of close to two hours, I thought it best to quit while I was still ahead.

"All right," I said to him, "this is it, my final one." Six minutes later, I pulled out my pack and said the same thing. Then I did it one more time. "This is it. I mean it." All around me, people were enjoying cigarettes: the ruddy Irish couple, the Spaniards with their glasses of beer. There were the Russians, the Italians, even some Chinese. Together we formed a foul little congress: the United Tarnations, the Fellowship of the Smoke Ring. These were my people, and now I would be betraying them, turning my back just when they needed me most. Though I wish it were otherwise,

I'm actually a very intolerant person. When I see a drunk or a drug addict begging for money, I don't think, *There but for the grace of God go I*, but, rather, *I quit, and so can you. Now get that cup of nickels out of my face.*

It's one thing to give up smoking, and another to become a former smoker. That's what I would be the moment I left the bar, and so I lingered awhile, looking at my garish disposable lighter and the crudded-up aluminum ashtray. When I eventually got up to leave, Hugh pointed out that I had five cigarettes left in my pack.

"Are you just going to leave them there on the table?"

I answered with a line I'd got years ago from a German woman. Her name was Tini Haffmans, and though she often apologized for the state of her English, I wouldn't have wanted it to be any better. When it came to verb conjugation, she was beyond reproach, but every so often she'd get a word wrong. The effect was not a loss of meaning but a heightening of it. I once asked if her neighbor smoked, and she thought for a moment before saying, "Karl has . . . finished with his smoking."

She meant, of course, that he had quit, but I much preferred her mistaken version. "Finished" made it sound as if he'd been allotted a certain number of cigarettes, three hundred thousand, say, delivered at the time of his birth. If he'd started a year later or smoked more slowly, he might still be at it, but, as it stood, he had worked his way to the last one, and then moved on with his life. This, I thought, was how I would look at it. Yes, there were five more Kool Milds in that particular pack, and twenty-six cartons stashed away at home, but those were extra—an accounting error. In terms of my smoking, I had just finished with it. ♦

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