

Smoking: A Cheater's Story

A closet
puffer
fesses up

By Corinne Garcia

As I get home after work, my husband calls. He's going to be an hour late. The countdown begins: I whip together a turkey sandwich for my two preschoolers, pop in Cars, pour a glass of wine, and slip outside. It's dark and snowing lightly, and I have a perfect view through the kitchen window—I can see my kids, but their backs are to me. I light up: Inhale. Exhale. Sip of wine. With each car door slam, I jump. Is he home? One more drag, then I add the butt to the pile under the porch.

An outdoorsy 37-year-old, I take great care of myself—I live in Montana, where I hike, bike, ski, and run. I eat well, opting for quinoa and kale over fast food. But when no one's watching, this ol' pillar of health goes up in flames. I might smoke a cigarette a day, or five; I might go days without one. But I'm a closet smoker.

Kicking snow over my ashes, I head inside, washing my hands at the kitchen sink. In the bathroom, I spritz some lavender body spray and walk through the mist. I eat a little toothpaste, rinse, and spit. Back in the kitchen, I scoop some peanut butter into my mouth so the fumes mask the smoke. Ready for my husband's hello kiss, I settle in next to my kids on the couch.

I understand the laundry list of ailments linked to cigarettes—heart disease, emphysema, cancer of everything. It's not the '60s, and I'm glad the *Mad Men* days of constant lighting up are gone. Smoking is stupid. But that doesn't stop the approximately 21.1 million U.S. women who smoke regularly, according to the National Center for Health Statistics. And it doesn't stop me.

My history with smoking is a long one. I grew up in New York City, spending hours perfecting the art of the French inhalation and sneaking smokes on rooftops. I'd deliver forged notes from my "invalid" mother to the store to score Merit Light 100's. At boarding school in Connecticut, I perfected my technique. Dressed in workout clothes, I'd run slowly around the school's track, duck behind the equipment shed, and light up. A shared cigarette with a girlfriend in the bathroom always ended abruptly when someone walked in. I'd immediately drop it, run into a stall, and hide. And I'm still sneaking smokes today, ducking out of parties to light up in subzero temperatures or taking shelter from judgmental acquaintances in side alleys. I even lie on medical forms.

Dr. Reuven Dar, a professor at Israel's Tel Aviv University, recently published a study in the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* that found that the intensity of cigarette cravings was more psychosocial than physiological. "Research on intermittent



smokers contradicts the idea that people smoke to supply regular nicotine to the brain," Dar says. He found that anxiety or stress can trigger cravings more than nicotine addiction itself.

"The image of the smoker used to be someone who smokes at every opportunity," Dar continues. "But legal restrictions have led to an increasing number of people who smoke just a few times a day"—or even a week. For me, smoking is a psychological addiction. I'm hooked on the escape, not the nicotine. When I've had a hard day, cigarettes are a coping mechanism. I love the rush I get from sneaking around, and the cover-up I've mastered.

The hardest person to hide it from is my husband. He grew up with smoker parents, the fumes wafting into his attic bedroom. Disgusted, he's never even taken a drag; when I try to talk about why I smoke, he won't engage. He knew I was a sometime smoker when we met. Now he just pretends I don't.

I imagined quitting at different milestones: when I got married, when I turned 30, and when I had babies. I stopped while I was pregnant, but started again after breast-feeding. Now I'm 37, and as my kids—2 and 4—grow up, my habit has greater consequences. Do I bid cigarettes farewell—or become a poor role model?

I don't feel good the day after I've indulged: I have a gross taste in my mouth and a headache.

"After I've indulged, I curse my lack of self-control and 'quit'—until the next time."

I curse my lack of self-control and mentally "quit" until the craving reappears again—after a stressful day or over drinks with friends. But I don't want my kids to think smoking's OK. So my days of sneaking cigarettes are numbered. This is one milestone I have to stick to for the health of my family—not to mention my own. I'd like to be able to watch my kids grow up. **mc**

PHOTO: GUY