

Coffee and Cigarettes

Caroline, you know my two things: no cigarettes, and no tattoos.
This was her mother's mantra.

She sat there thinking to herself, *Oops*. Her mind raced thinking about the pack of Marlboro Lights hiding in the center console of her car parked in the drive way, completely vulnerable to search and seizure by her mother.

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Whenever any of her guy friends saw her puffing away, they would always say to her, *Caroline, you're too pretty to smoke*. The terribly clichéd phrase rang through her ears time and time again, striking not so much as a nerve. She needed them. No one understood. She didn't smoke cigarettes because she thought they looked "cool", or because she even liked the taste. She was addicted, obviously, that's not a myth. They're incredibly addicting. She felt that she needed them. As much as she despised the smell, or the way they made her mouth taste, she remembered and stayed loyal to that pack.

Cigarettes were there when it seemed like no one and nothing else was.

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Walking out into the threatening morning sun, her eyes take a minute to adjust. The bright light is quite a startling change from the cavern-like light she is used to in her messy, cubicle-sized dorm. She squints, pauses for a moment, then steps down onto the cracked cement on the ground with apprehension, reluctant to start her day. The sun struggles to shine as brightly as it is up-staged by a threatening cloud. Rain? She stops as she scales the path that serves as a moat to the many entrances to her dormitory. Marlboro Lights. Twenty skinny soldiers, packed to the brim, standing at attention, ready to be chosen. She raises the freshly bought box to her moist lips. One cigarette sticks to her lips and she pulls it from the barracks. Placed between her lips, held momentarily between her top and bottom teeth. The white lighter sits tightly in between

fingers, screaming in contrast to her black cracked nail polish. Click. The flame struggles to burn to its highest stature as the wind continues to shut it down. She covers the light with her other hand. The flame touches the tip of her nicotine companion, engulfing it in flames, burning up for her. She pulls in. Breathing deep, the smoke fills her dark lungs. She smiles and the smoke leaks out from between her perched lips.

I really should quit, she says to herself as she pulls her middle and index fingers to her mouth. Pulling in hard, feeling every chemical smoothly penetrating her.

She remembers the pains of the night before. Marveling at how she is standing right now, nonetheless functioning. He broke her spirit. Broke her down until she lie lifeless on her bed, all the life drawn out of her big brown eyes. His anger flashed like lightening through her mind; *bitch, hate, never*. Slamming doors, punching walls, threatening, loveless words. How is it that such a love grew into such hate so quickly? Looking into his eyes, she no longer felt love, but blame, hatred, resentment. He felt similar, and even more terrible emotions, she was sure.

Walking, she passed his dorm window. Looking at herself in the reflection, wondering, was he there? Is he awake? Is he asleep? Surpassing the foundation of the old brick building she stood there in his room remembering it all. Remembering all the love, the kisses, the arguments, the tears, the screaming matches. That was long gone. Still staring at the window, she watched herself lift the cigarette for a long awaited drag, completely out of body.

Feeling fire. Feeling heat.

Her friend was just a butt now.

9:32 a.m., second of the day.

She looked down at her freshly lit cigarette. She knew how fast she became reliant on them. One, or two here and there on a night out with her friends quickly escalated into a trip to Sunoco every other day. She knew how unattractive they were, she saw the anti-smoking ads about the man in the hospital with the hole in his throat. It didn't matter. Those five-minute walks to class, puffing it

down to the filter, helped her deal. Helped her to cope with all that had happened.

What turned this young, blonde college co-ed into the Marlboro man?

It wasn't just one event, she thought to herself. But, it seemed that this entire year had just been one disaster after another. Deaths, break-ups, family issues, hospitalization. It was a lot for one person to take.

Cigarettes, it seemed, were just the tip of the iceberg of the demons that plagued her. She picked up the habit in a desperate time, a time when she swapped meals for menthols and coffee. That's how she dealt with her bi-polar ex boyfriend, her father's cancer, and her brother and sister's constant bad blood. Skipping meals. Losing weight. Her own body was the only thing she could control, or so she thought.

It was a coping mechanism. Albeit, not a very good one. She knew that, people never ceased to remind her. But it worked for her.

Things are better now. I'm over him, Daddy's healthy...I don't need these anymore. I won't be a smoker my whole life. It's just a "right now" kind of thing.

A "right now" kind of thing? Yes, she intended to quit time and time again. It was her failed New Year's resolution. It was what she "gave up" for Lent. Yet, there she was walking to class smoking, smoking again and smoking some more, until the pack was empty and no longer served a purpose.

It was okay for now. It was just because she was at school. She knew she would never get away with chain-smoking at home. It was too complicated. Spraying herself with cheap perfume, using antibacterial hand lotion to get rid of that burnt, musty smell that settled on her fingers, all before she got home, hugged her father and listened to him time and time again ask, *Are you smoking?* Scrambling time and time again to refute his "ridiculous" claims with some fabricated story about her "smoker" friends.

She should stop. She knew that, she even thought she wanted to from time to time.

There are better ways to cope...