

Smoke

I tore the plastic foil off the pack, opened it, and extracted one cigarette from the neatly aligned rows of yellow filters. From my pocket I produced a lighter, silver but battered, found on a beach in Norway more than twenty years ago. Swiftly the cigarette was lit, the lighter disappeared and I inhaled deeply, and shortly a blue plume of smoke rose towards the ceiling of the café. Deeply content but absent-mindedly I offered the packet to the man sitting opposite me.

It was totally innocent and well meaning of me, yet a grave mistake, as I realised an instant too late. The man who sat opposite me was my employer. He had a mystifying but intense hatred of smoking. It was mystifying because he did not mind anyone smoking in his presence, yet if he ever found a cigarette end, or so much as a smudge of ash anywhere on the company grounds he would fly into one of his infamous rages. When you smoked he would merely regard you with a curious interest, and something that almost bordered on satisfaction in his eyes, as if he felt you were already punishing yourself sufficiently without his intervention. He was a strange man, humourless and dry, yet universally respected for his great wisdom and unfailing justness. Many years ago he had been involved in a terrible accident, which had left his wife dead and one side of his face savagely scarred. He expected high standards from all of his employees and would invariably get them. If I had made a mistake like this related to work or a client then I could not have expected lenience. Thankfully, we were not in the office and my little slip of concentration was not in any professional context.

Nonetheless, I squirmed uncomfortably in my chair. I myself had an acute aversion to beer of any kind and was always astonished by people's total inability to remember this. How many drinks had been bought for me in good will but complete ignorance, drinks which were then subtly emptied into flower pots or something similar

I mumbled an apology and furiously stirred my coffee, imagining his eyes narrowing disapprovingly. His lips would be becoming thinner and bloodless as they always did when he was irritated by

something, but I did not look up to confirm this. Eventually he spoke with unexpected softness. "Don't worry about it."

I looked at his face to find him staring with glazed eyes over my shoulder. He seemed deep in thought and I did not interrupt him by speaking. Eventually his eyes focussed on mine and he spoke.

"I want to tell you a little story." I motioned that that was fine by me, and so he began:

I was twelve years old when I smoked my first and last cigarette. It was with my best friend, Andy.

We had found a pack of them lying under a park bench and smuggled them into Andy's bedroom, terrified but exhilarated by our crime. Andy's father worked in a coal mine and was an absolute bear of a man. He was strict and I used to be very frightened of him. He was also a dedicated churchgoer and a complete disbeliever in drink, tobacco, or drugs of any kind. They did not even have aspirin or coffee in that house.

One evening, Andy's parents were invited to somebody's house for supper, and he was left alone for the evening. Him and I immediately removed the cigarettes from their elaborate hiding place and proceeded to the kitchen. We wanted to commit the ultimate crime and smoke them there. But no sooner had we lit up and taken our first cautious drags that the absolute unthinkable, worst-case scenario came true: we heard the front door slam shut. We were so frightened that we were paralysed, and moments later our nightmares were realised when Andy's father walked into the room. I never found out why he came back; Andy had sworn that both his parents would not be home till after midnight.

His father came through the door into the kitchen, took a glance at both of us and then locked the door. After that initial withering eye contact he proceeded to ignore me entirely. He said nothing, He grabbed Andy roughly by the shoulder and dragged him to the kitchen table and forced him to sit down. I remember that his face was strangely calm yet his flushed cheeks and his eyes showed his fury. He went into the larder and came out with – I almost fainted when I saw it – a meat cleaver. Andy started crying, although it was more of an uncontrollable shaking and blubbing that took hold of

him; I was rooted to the spot, incapable of movement. Andy began to scream and I managed to screw my eyes shut. A moment later there was a dull thump and then utter silence. My eyes began to open against my own wishes and I saw Andy untouched, but his face as pale as a corpse. His father towered above him with an unflinching face, holding his right hand out for Andy to see. He had chopped off his little finger and the blood dribbled in small pulses onto the table. Andy screamed again and this time it was shrill, the sound of madness not fear. My eyes wondered to the kitchen table. The meat cleaver was still embedded there and the finger lay beside it, perfectly straight. I remember thinking that it had about the length of a cigarette, and then I fainted. Andy was never the same again and slowly but surely our friendship ended.

His narrative finished there and he got up quickly but with perfect dignity and walked out of the café. I looked down and saw his coffee, untouched and still steaming. Then I noticed the forgotten cigarette, smouldering between my fingers. Slowly and deliberately I crushed it into the ashtray and blew away the smoke.

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