
The Best Revenge

by John Carney

Smoke-easy

STOP SMOKING FAST read the advertisement on the subway car, and it is probably good advice for people such as my father, who continues to smoke even after having had two stents inserted into his badly clogged arteries. I wanted the opposite, however: I wanted to *start* smoking fast.

There are no 12-step groups for would-be smokers. I assumed the tobacco industry would offer support, but I was wrong: Even they insist on warning would-be smokers about the hazards of addiction and stubbornly aim their advertising at those with preexisting habits. “If you do smoke, try . . .” In other words: *If you don’t smoke yet, you’re on your own.*

Since I recently turned 30 and had never so much as held a lit cigarette, my decision to become a smoker strikes a lot of people as bizarre. But there are, I have discovered, good reasons to smoke. Cigarettes offer real benefits for the elderly, the clumsy, the forgetful, and the easily distracted. (These benefits have been intentionally underplayed by the public-health community.) My decision to smoke was much less sound. It was based upon a phenomenon too recent to have been the subject of statistical studies or biological analysis: New York City’s ban on cigarette smoking in indoor public spaces.

I bought my first pack of cigarettes on a Monday. I knew I wasn’t going to smoke lights: There’s no point in going halfway. I also knew I wasn’t going to roll my own or smoke unfiltered: This is the 21st century, after all. But how to choose? I decided to let quality be my guide and ended up with a pack of Nat Sherman Classics, which came in a dapper crimson box and had a gold band around each filter.

I know others who have started smoking, or given up on quitting, in a fit of libertarian rebellion against the ban. But just as campaign-finance reform has not driven me to send bags of cash to the RNC, the smoking ban alone would not have driven me to smoke.

My smoking project arose from a secondary effect of the ban was: the birth of the front-door smoking scene. Immediately after the ban was imposed, all my usual drinking holes sprouted new appendages—clusters of smokers gathering

together just outside the bar. Between drinking, even during drinks, smokers step outside to mingle among their own. As time went on, I sensed the smokers bonding in their shared exile, while the crowd inside became increasingly irrelevant. The insides of bars, from dives to places people once struggled past velvet ropes to get into, were becoming superfluous. Outside is the new inside.

I planned to debut my new interest outside a bar on Avenue A that has a decent pool table, a great jukebox, and an active smoking scene. But I didn’t want to go unpracticed or risk getting caught in some *faux pas*—choking, not inhaling, or otherwise revealing my smoking innocence. So, on my way home that evening, I lit my first cigarette. It took four matches. I learned not to try to light the cigarette in the sulfur but to wait until the flames caught the cardboard match stem, and I learned to cup my hands just so against the wind.

My lungs felt as if they were being pulled apart. My eyes watered. I kept spilling ash on my lapels and had trouble not burning my jacket. I experimented with a few different grips, settling on a cupped-in-the-hand style that not only kept the flame away from my clothes but made me feel like Steve McQueen. Best of all, I didn’t cough.

I soon discovered that smoking conveys a privilege denied other New Yorkers: the privilege of littering. A nonsmoker who throws something as inconsequential as a soda-straw wrapper on the street risks invoking the furious glares of passersby, but, as a smoker, I can throw cigarette butts on the streets with licensed abandon. (Some smokers even throw empty packs on the sidewalk, but, like Antigone mourning her brother, I thought the Nat Sherman hardcase deserved a more decent final resting place.)

I smoked one cigarette that night outside the bar. Caught up in a game of pool, I almost forgot to smoke until one of the women I was with announced she was stepping outside. This was my chance. I grabbed my pack and followed her out. I lit my cigarette and hers with one match. The smoke still pulled at my lungs, and I’m afraid my eyes watered a

bit, but otherwise my initiation was without incident.

That night, I applied the patch before falling asleep. The habit of smoking takes time to acquire, and I thought an overnight dose of nicotine would speed the process. Actually, I recommend that even those who are not seeking to become smokers experiment with patched sleeping. It poured color and abstraction into my dreams—blue trees, women with square legs, skies with wood-grain patterns, and conspiratorial plotting. When I awoke, I tore off the patch, hoping the sudden nicotine deprivation would send me scurrying for a smoke. The sought-after nic fit did not arrive. In fact, the thought of smoking first thing in the morning turned my stomach.

At work, I took two smoking breaks outside my office building, but both were fake—cued by my Microsoft Outlook calendar rather than by responses to physiological cravings—and my smoking project was still far from becoming a habit.

I had drinks at a pub near work with three young men and a silver-haired sage, all employed by a local tabloid newspaper—all smokers, of course. When the moment arrived to stroll outside and light up, however, I felt a panic: I had forgotten to bring my cigarettes. Luckily, smokers are a generous breed, and one of my companions let me “bum” one. We were a fellowship of smokers. I was arriving.

I kept working at it throughout the week. Patch overnight. One smoke with my morning coffee. Two smoking breaks during the day. A cigarette after dinner. At least one trip out with the smokers in front of the bar. I didn’t have the habit, but I had the pace, the rhythm, of smoking.

Late in the week, I went with friends to a gypsy punk dance party in a small Eastern European bar in lower Manhattan. The crowd was young and smoking—not outside the bar but inside. The place was a *smoke-easy*. This posed a dilemma—without an outdoor separatist scene, my smoking impulse vanished. But the real smokers were lighting up, and I had to decide whether I was one of them or simply a poseur. I struck a match and, for the first time, enjoyed a cigarette beyond all reason. This might work out. ☺