Tobacco—The Lesser Evil

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My mother has always referred to smoking cigarettes as “the lesser of the evils.” Hearing that statement from someone who has been in and out of drug and alcohol rehabilitation programs her whole life, I suppose you could sympathize with it. In fact, most rehabilitation centers dedicate certain times of the day just to allow their patients to smoke. Although my mother considers smoking not to be an “evil” worth sweating over, it will most likely ultimately result in her demise.

“Well Sammy, at least I’m not smoking crack…”

Regardless of her reasoning about why this is justified, she is literally dying to smoke.

As a child I was always surrounded by smoking. My mother was an occasional smoker in her earlier years, generally just smoking socially (usually associated with drinking or other drug use). I remember coming home from my first D.A.R.E. class crying because I was convinced she would get emphysema. My D.A.R.E. instructor had us breathing through those small cocktail straws while blocking our noses to help us get an idea about what it would feel like to be a smoker. After showing us an actual lung that had been removed from an emphysema patient, I was convinced it would happen to my mother. She promised me that she would be fine and that she didn’t smoke enough for that to happen to her.

“Sammy, I’m not some kinda dragon lady or something.”

This obviously didn’t ease my persistent young mind, so I made it my goal to stop her from smoking at all costs. Any time she lit up in the car or around me I would scream at her and try to make her feel guilty for risking both her life and mine. At one point I actually sprayed her cigarettes with Windex, just to be a jerk. She smoked them anyway. Even the fact that I had childhood asthma and chronic pneumonia didn’t seem to curb her desire to smoke. It was my father’s fault I was always sick. He shouldn’t have brought me over to my Aunt’s house where they just sat and smoked cigarette after cigarette while holding young me in their arms.
“You always come back from your father’s reeking like smoke!”

She would complain that I smelled like smoke, but she was a smoker too! My young mind could not comprehend this. It terrified me. I had dreams in which I smoked and woke up feeling guilty and disgusted by myself.

Ironically these experiences did not stop me from lighting up in my teen years. The first time I had a cigarette I was sixteen. I stole one of my mother’s Marlboro lights and snuck it into the basement with one of my best friends. We puffed on it, coughed a bit, and decided it wasn’t what all the hype made it to be. As I got older I smoked occasionally, mostly while drinking at parties. A cigarette was like a drug enhancer, making whatever else I was on just that much more pleasurable. As I have gotten older my smoking has progressed to car rides, after large meals, pretty much any time I feel the need. It’s okay though; I am just a light smoker. I only go through about a pack a week and I can put them down at any point for months at a time. I smoke when I want to. I’m not some sort of dragon lady or anything, I don’t smoke enough for anything to happen to me.

My mother’s best friend from high school died recently at the age of 43 from a brain aneurysm. It was a very sudden and tragic death. The aneurysm was later found out to be caused by numerous cancerous tumors that had started in her lungs and spread to her brain as well as the rest of her body. After the aneurysm, she was hospitalized and remained there in a state of half consciousness for about a week before she died. My mother was able to visit her in this state, knowing full well that Debbie had smoked two packs a day every single day since they were teens.

“That girl would literally go north and buy them by the carton,” my mother explained to me after Debbie’s passing. She expressed her grief for Debbie’s husband and son, who is my age. But she still smokes.

My mother was diagnosed with emphysema about a year ago. She knew she had it when she visited Debbie in the hospital. She knows she has it every time she lights a cigarette. She knows she has it and was afraid to tell my sister because she is “too young to have to worry about her motha.” This is a complete crock because my sister and I both have been worried about her since childhood. My sister knows it when she scrapes together her lunch money from the week to get herself a pack. I know she has it when my mother tells me not to smoke because I “have her lungs.” Yes mom, it was your lungs that caused it, not the cigarettes. Even after nebulizer treatments every night before bed due to her chronic case of pneumonia, she still continues to bang through at least a pack a day. This “evil” kills you slowly, eating you alive. So I guess that makes it lesser than the other ones…