

HOW TO STOP SMOKING

By A. Lyn Carol

1. Notice smoking around age five, specifically the heavy, cut-glass lighter your grandmother uses and the way the etched glass throws prisms against the wall when it catches the afternoon sun. Be fascinated by the way smoke curls out of her lipsticked mouth when she talks. Mimic this at age twelve with the cigarettes you swipe from her green glass cigarette case, the one that matches her lighter. Resolve to be that elegant when you grow up. Develop a habit.
2. Continue smoking until you've accumulated twenty-odd years of tar in your lungs. This will take some resolve and steadfast denial. To help with the denial, make sure you have maximum amounts of stress and poor coping skills; that way, you can ignore how your lungs ache in the morning and the wet sound of your coughing in the evening and how you're always clearing phlegm from your throat. Also ignore the smell of smoke, which you actually hate. Carry perfume with you wherever you go, along with mints and gum, to cover up the smell.
3. Up the stakes by having a child who grows old enough to learn about cancer. Listen sympathetically as she begs you to stop smoking, remembering how you did the very same thing with your own mother. Promise her that you will quit, effective immediately. Then start insisting she go play with her neighborhood friends at their house instead of yours so you can sneak a cig. Smoke behind the shed on the mornings she sleeps in, until the day she wakes up from a bad dream and comes out into the yard looking for you. After such a close call, swear to yourself that you will quit once and for all. Go a day or two until someone in your family does another crazy thing or your boss harangues you about being two minutes late to work, and then

go ahead and smoke that well-deserved cigarette. Keep this up until the tally of years you've spent inhaling burning leaves into your lungs is equal to two-thirds, or sixty-six percent, of your life.

4. Gradually start resenting the hold the habit has on you, but not enough that you actually quit. Be annoyed at the anxiety that creeps up when you open the last pack of cigarettes you had hidden in the garage. Grow weary of worrying if your daughter catches whiffs of smoke in your hair because no amount of coconut-vanilla body spray will cover it completely. Start the stopping now, because it usually takes at least a couple years.
5. Be hard-headed and slow to learn. Have knee surgery and smoke your first night home from the hospital while still woozy from the narcotic pain medication. Ignore the warnings your husband gives you. Wait until he goes to bed and light up right there on the couch. Immediately regret it as intense dizziness and nausea bowl you over. Vomit down your nightgown because you're trussed up and can't move. Sit in the stench of bile and smoke and swear that was the last time. A few days later try again and find that you don't get sick. Get right back to it, but this time add the clumsiness of maneuvering yourself outside on crutches while holding the plastic grocery bag that carries your scented lotion, mints, water, cigarettes, and lighter. Really, really start hating it. Cut down significantly because it's not worth the hassle.
6. But don't stop just yet because you are going through a rough patch with your husband. Spend many hours in the yard soaking in self-pity. Use your angst to justify your chain-smoking, just like the old days. Start buying cigarettes by the carton again. Continue to ignore and deny.

7. The following spring, lose a favorite aunt to cancer. The next week, hear about a former coworker who has cancer now. Two days after that, get an email telling you that your sister-in-law found a lump in her breast, and she doesn't even smoke. Go through your own scare when a radiologist says your mammogram is suspicious and requires further diagnostics. Feel the fear make its final click into place when the young man who mows your lawn, the one who's closer to your daughter's age than yours, starts crying in your yard when you ask how he's doing. He just lost his mother to cancer. Hug him underneath the poplar tree he planted six months ago, when his mother was still alive and everyone thought she was coming down with a cold. Become scared—very scared—of cancer. Start accepting your stupidity. Start worrying that it's going to be too late. Recognize that you've finally arrived at the quitting point but wonder how.
8. Decide to become something else.
9. Become a birdwatcher. Do this because you realize that you need a new routine that will replace the cigarettes, because right now being outside equals smoking. Buy some binoculars and a bag of unshelled peanuts for the blue jays. Buy thistle for the finches and safflower seed for the cardinals. Tell yourself that you won't smoke a cigarette until you have seen a red-bellied woodpecker. Wait. And wait. Learn patience. Learn to delay gratification. Learn to be more excited about seeing a woodpecker than you are about f licking the lighter and taking that first drag. Learn to sit and wait and sit and wait until you've waited a day to smoke, a week, a month ... until you're at four years and counting.
10. Keep watching birds.