



COLE THOMPSON

One Cigarette A Day

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We are bouncing over a rough ocean, on a boat packed with twenty or so fishermen, and I am breathing the smoke from my grandfather's cigarettes. In the darkness of early morning the captain collects money for a gambling pool. "First and heaviest, thirty-seventy split," he yells, and when he gets to us, my grandfather hands over a fistful of bills. As the captain moves on, my grandfather winks at me and says, "You will win."

When we finally let our baited hooks fall into the sea, I magically get the first strike of the day and pull up a fish that hardly weighs five pounds.

One fisherman says, "That's only the bait. The kid's claiming that his bait is his catch."

Other men who have money in the pool protest too. I am afraid that the captain will not count my fish, which is alive and certainly not the piece of raw flesh that my grandfather slipped onto the hook for me earlier. But the captain pats me on the head and sticks a wad of bills into my hand. My grandfather looks on proudly.

I am so excited that I begin puking over the side of the boat.

I try hard not to cry, but my eyes are burning, and I can't help it. My grandfather lays me down in the middle of the boat, and the men cover me with extra jackets until I can no longer smell the bloody bait or the cigarette smoke or the fumes from the engine. Somehow I fall asleep.

When I wake up, my grandfather is carrying me to his car. "Check your pocket," he says, and when I do, there is so much money. "You got the only fish of the day," he tells me. "You won the entire pool." With my cheek against his chest, I smell the odor of gas and sweat and fish and cigarette smoke that I will forever associate with my grandfather.

"Just like you promised," I say to him.

He laughs, and all my life I will wonder if I really caught the only fish, or if my grandfather stuffed my pockets with his own winnings.

After I became a man, a paid professional put a staple through the cartilage of my grandfather's ear and made him listen to hypnosis tapes that taught him to associate

the constant pain of the staple with cigarette smoking. A week later, in a fit of agony, my grandfather pulled out the staple. He kept the tiny but awful strip of metal — crusted over with his blood and hardened pieces of skin — in a small box, which he carried around in his breast pocket in lieu of cigarettes.

He was finally able to quit smoking, but not before being diagnosed with emphysema.

My ailing grandfather missed my wedding and lived out his last months tethered to an oxygen tank, barely able to walk from one room to the next. At the end he lay in a hospital bed attached to a horrid, hissing machine that pumped pure oxygen into his lungs. The last time I saw him alive he was unconscious, an emaciated stranger in a hospital gown with tubes running into his arms. I held his hand and heard my aunt whisper to my mother that I was taking his death "awfully hard." *Awfully hard?* I thought, but said nothing. The hospital smell had already pronounced my grandfather dead. He was an auto mechanic who'd never smelled antiseptic in his life. I let go of his hand and left the hospital. I wasn't there when they pulled the plug.

During my grandfather's long, drawn-out death, I smoked one cigarette a day. I was neither addicted to tobacco nor trying to quit. Every evening, on the second-story balcony of my apartment, I would have a cigarette and watch my stained breath slip away into the night sky like a prayer.

I had my first cigarette when I was in the sixth grade. There was a girl in my class whose mother let us smoke in her apartment, and even provided any brand we desired, free of charge. (This girl was very popular.) The first drag made me want to vomit, but I took another and another until, amazingly, I liked smoking. It felt right somehow, like breathing. Not cool or hip, but *right*.

Organized sports kept me smoke-free in high school, but I started smoking regularly when I was in college. I was an English major, and many of the authors I admired smoked. The professors who would have a cigarette with me between classes were always the best professors. To me back then, smoking was a great barometer of character.

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