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Footnotes

I smoke. I shouldn't. My dog eats grass. He shouldn't. But we do.

Cigarettes can kill you; so can salt.

At six years old, I had my first cigarette. It was in the bottom of a half empty can of soda. Dad had been using it to ash. I drank it by mistake, butt and all.

Vonnegut smoked Pall Mall, non-filtered cigarettes; a pack a day until he died. He often joked of suing Big Tobacco for not fulfilling their promise. He was talking about passive suicide. He died at eighty-four. He had fallen over and bumped his head. "He's up in heaven now."

Dad said, "You kids think you're so smart. You think you have secrets from me." "Like what?" I asked. "I know that you smoke." "Dad," I answered, "on a scale of 1-'I killed Kennedy', I'm not sure you can call that a secret." Ten minutes earlier, I had all but excused myself for a cigarette.

Liezel is the one who got me back into smoking. She wouldn't walk and smoke. Or drive and smoke. Wherever and whatever we were doing, she'd find a place to sit and say, "I need a break." She insisted her smoke breaks only took four and a half minutes. Exactly four and a half minutes. I never timed her. I thought that might lessen its romantic qualities. She called them "an aside from life." They were the footnotes to her chaos. I loved her dearly.

My smoking wasn't necessarily a secret I kept from the family, though I tried to be discreet about it. I never talked about it and never smoked in front of them. If I took an aside from a family dinner, I'd visit the restroom directly after; scrub my beard and hands with soap and water, finish with an alcohol, sanitizing spritz. I give them credit for smarts. They had to know. They know I have sex. I've never fucked anyone in front of them.

Dad was a long-time smoker. He had several half-hearted attempts to quit. Once he tried using Wellbutrin, the anti-depressant with the chemical side effect that induces smoking cessation. A week or so later, I asked him how the pill was going. "Oh, that?" he said, "I stopped taking them. The damned things worked too well." Then he lit a Marlboro from a fresh pack.

Last year I was living out of suitcases. My apartment was in Brooklyn and work was in Boca Raton. I was in transit when NYC passed its latest round of anti-smoking laws. Oblivious, I puffed footnote, ring circles from a bench in Washington Square. A gentleman approached: "Hey man, you can't smoke in the park." "Oh, I didn't realize that Bill went through. Thanks," squishing out the cherried butt with my All Stars. "Yea man," he went on, "you want to buy a dime?" I excused myself and took the F downtown.

Dad finally quit for good. He started with the Nicorette gum but chewed out all sorts of dental work; two bridges and numerous fillings. By and by, he switched to the lozenges. He'll take out the small cylinder of nicotine goodness, rattle it around a little and say, "I think I need a cigarette," before popping one into his mouth. He's been doing this for a decade now. It costs him a

fortune to keep the habit. I've suggested he submit himself to study, suspecting that Nicorette would pay to see the long-term effects of their product.

I've heard a comedian joke about the impossibility of quitting cigarettes if you're also a heavy drinker. He said, "Trying to have a scotch and not smoke is like trying to shit and not piss."

The last time Mom visited me in Boca she saw me smoking. Before driving home, she hugged me close and said, "Poppy loves you." Poppy was my grandfather. Poppy died from lung cancer. So it goes.

If you've ever worked in a restaurant, you know BDO. Some busboy is taking out the trash or suppliers are dropping off a new batch of freeze-dried soups and the Back Door is Open. Moths to the flame. Every smoker in the hierarchy of employment—dishwashers to managers—abandon their post; everyone trying to suck in a few choking drags. All the while, the remaining staff on the floor falls into the weeds.

Smoking discretion in my family was always for Nanny's sake, my grandmother, Poppy's widow. Her favorite thing in the world, other than smoking, was telling her eight grandchildren, "I'll kill you if you ever start smoking." But that was only her second great love, always being placed on the backburner to cigarettes. My uncle accidentally threw me under the bus one dinner, casually associating me with other smokers. Nanny looked at me from across the table, silent but piercing through my heart with guilt. I thought I would die, if not by shame than by violent aggression. Alone at breakfast the following morning, Nanny asked, "Mac, are you smoking?" I couldn't lie and I couldn't say yes. I was stuck and my maturity was reduced to juvenile smart ass-ness; I became a scared and obnoxious boy. I said, "Not. Right. Now?" My palms sweat. But worry for not! Nanny put me at ease, "I mean, do you have a pack on you? I'm dying for a cigarette." "Of course, Nanny, of course!" presenting the pack to her, my hands still shaking.

"I hate to bother you. Could I bum a cigarette?" "Certainly." "Thanks man." "No worries. We're a dying breed. We have to stick together."

Poppy smoked a pack a day. He also taught me to live with no regrets. When he developed lung cancer, doctors removed the affected lung and Poppy celebrated with a new pack of Reds. Seventeen years and one hundred twenty-four thousand, one hundred cigarettes later, his second and last lung became cancerous. He was a good man. A good teacher. The family wasn't and isn't wealthy by any great means. But we were never in want. Poppy never hesitated to spend every moment of life exactly how he wished and even told us so on his death bed. He said, "My only regret is that that bitch is going to out-live me." A pun aimed at his mother-in-law. Honest humor in the face of death. Not many can make the same claim.

I'm not foolish by any means. I know that if Poppy could come back to life for just five minutes, he'd ask to see his wife and children and scores of grand and great-grandchildren. But you can be damned sure he'd ask one of us for a cigarette.