

Learned the Hard Way

by Rachel Masters

My childhood memories are laced with the ethereal tendrils of warm, woody smoke that stemmed from my father's cigarettes. When I think back, I can still hear the rasping snap as the lighter flared to life and glimpse the white papery stick with its glowing red eye. These are linked to the feeling of the large N64 controller in my child-sized hands. Gaming was one of the only ways he knew how to connect with me before I was old enough to hold real conversations. As my tiny character sped along the racetrack on the TV, I would watch him breathe out intricate clouds of smoke from the corner of my eye, making me think of him as a dragon. Back then, I had no idea how destructive they could be; those fragile pale coffin nails inside the sleek and fragrant packs snuggled up with nineteen of their closest friends. I made many attempts over the years to show him what could and likely would happen if he didn't stop, but he was addicted to being a dragon. Sometimes, people have to learn lessons on their own.

The first time that I confronted my dad about his smoking was when I was eleven years old. My school had a program called D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education), which taught us about the adverse effects associated with drug usage. On this particular day, the D.A.R.E. officer in his crisp Sheriff's uniform showed us a video depicting a woman who had to talk and breathe through a hole in her neck, called a stoma, because she had been a habitual smoker. A chilling shock slid down my spine at the realization that this lady was not much older than my father, yet already had nine toes in the grave. The rest of the day was spent in a state of utter panic, wondering how long my dad had before he would need a hole in his neck just to breathe or speak. That evening, I waited anxiously at the dining room window overlooking the lengthy driveway as he pulled up to the house in his sleek patrol car.

His boots crunched on the densely packed gravel, up the brick walkway, and thudded heavily across the porch to the front door. He entered surrounded by an air of exhaustion, closed the door, and began undoing his gun belt as he headed towards the bedroom he shared with my mom. He only made it a few steps before spotting me still in my spot by the window. He must've seen the distress on my face because he quickly asked what was wrong, with quite a bit of concern lacing his voice. Naturally, I immediately began sobbing uncontrollably. In the blink of an eye, he had closed the distance between us and wrapped me in one of his famous bear hugs.

"Honey, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No," I sniffed, "I'm okay. It's just...you're going to get sick! They told me at school."

"What do you mean? Who told you that?"

"The sheriff said cigarettes make people really sick, and then they might die!"

"Oh, hon, I'm sorry he scared you like that. It's true that cigarettes can make some people sick, but I'm immune, so you don't have to worry about me. Do I look sick to you? How about this: I promise that if I start to feel even a teensy bit bad, I'll throw them away and never smoke another one. How does that sound?"

"I guess that's okay."

I lay awake long after I should have been asleep that night, wondering why that little pit of worry in my stomach was still there. His words did assure me to some degree, but not completely. I don't think he noticed that my eyes had not left his throat for the whole conversation, not once. I was mesmerized by that vulnerable spot where a hole might go. It was only a few months later that the coughing started.

The spring I turned thirteen was when I decided to make a second attempt at getting him to quit. The weather was still cool, and our massive holly tree in the front yard had covered itself with small green blooms that peeked out shyly from behind the pronged leaves. In the morning, the daffodils bobbed their heads in acknowledgment as I passed, heading for my treehouse. That was where I went to plan out how to talk to my father. After climbing the rickety ladder, I sat cross-legged on the wooden floor and started writing down my ideas in my sophisticated, fluffy purple diary. I wanted to come across as more mature this time, which meant less waterworks and more facts. This felt difficult because I was young, and it was not long before I got antsy or sidetracked; however, I managed to come up with several bullet points that seemed foolproof. Armed with frightening words like Cancer and heart disease, I opted to make my move just after dinner that night.

The meal was a nervous affair on my part. I could not seem to sit still, nor could I keep my eyes from flicking anxiously towards my dad. What minuscule amount of mom's lasagna I had managed to get down sat like a lead ball in my stomach. My diary, which had never appeared more childish to me, sat next to my barely touched plate, and I kicked myself internally for bringing it. Mom started clearing the table but paused when she reached me. Her eyes searched my face as she asked if I felt all right. I shrugged and mumbled something about my stomach not feeling its best, which was true under the circumstances. She gently touched the back of her hand to my forehead, tsked, and then headed out of the room with her heavy stack of dirty dishes. Sitting alone at the table with my father, I realized my opportunity had arrived.

"Um, Dad, could I talk to you about something?"

"Sure, honey. What is it?"

"It has to do with smoking. You see, I've been researching, and I really think you should quit. It can lead to heart disease, gum disease, COPD, and all sorts of cancers. On top of that, cigarettes are expensive and don't do anything good for you. Also, you promised you would stop if you started feeling bad. These days, you're always coughing and tired, but you're still smoking. Please don't do it anymore."

I would love to say that this led to him throwing his remaining packs in the trash and never touching another cigarette. Unfortunately, he brushed off my concerns by claiming he just had springtime allergies, and then he insisted that I should not be scaring myself with worst-case scenarios. From there, the discussion devolved into an argument that ended with him shouting, "I'm the adult here, and I'll decide what I need to do! I don't want to hear another word from you, so drop it and go to your room!" I quickly obeyed, collapsing onto my bed with despair heavy in my heart. I was sobbing so hard that I almost missed the soft knock on my door, followed by my mom's whispering footsteps across my room. She held me for a long while, and just before she left, she told me that some people are just too stubborn to listen to reason.

That winter came with misery in tow, first in the form of my parents' divorce, then with my father's hospitalization. It turns out that he did not, in fact, have springtime allergies. What he did have was double-lung pneumonia accompanied by pre-COPD. I went to visit him in his hospital room the day before Christmas. My mother brought me, and if I had given this much thought, I would have realized how solemn the occasion was because she and my father could no longer stand to be within a hundred miles of each other. Another detail that made this visit odd was that up until that day, my dad had been insistent that he did not want me to see him in his antiseptic-smelling room hooked up to so many machines. He ended each of his phone calls with a promise to take me to our favorite restaurant as soon as they let him go home.

I remember entering his room and seeing him for the first time in several weeks. His usually tan face was paler and thinner than I had ever seen. His chest heaved with a viciously wet cough that caused him to grimace with pain. I went over to the side of his bed and bent down to hug him. Then, I lifted with surprise as he held out a small, wrapped box. I tore the paper away at his nod and gasped as I held up an iPod Nano. I had been asking for one since my best friend showed me hers earlier that summer. My parents had agreed that I was not old enough to be responsible for such an expensive gadget. Yet here it was in my hands. I hugged my father excitedly and said thank you. He chuckled for a moment, which led to another of his coughing fits. It seemed only a short while before we said our goodbyes as my mom ushered me into the hallway.

Looking back on that day, I am always amazed by my ignorance of what was truly taking place. I was unaware that they were starting his last course of the only antibiotic left for him, the pneumonia having become resistant to all the others. They had not told me that this would likely be my final visit with him or that the present he had given me was the closest he could get to an apology without revealing the truth. No one let me know that when we said goodbye that day, it was expected to be the final goodbye with no more goodbyes to be shared between us in this lifetime. How young and dense I was... and how lucky.

Thankfully, the antibiotics worked. Upon his discharge from the hospital, he threw away the remaining vestiges of that deadly habit and vowed never to smoke again. Seventeen years have passed since then, and I have only recently returned home from a fishing trip with my father. Watching as he tried to hold a beautiful slick trout and hearing his booming laughter as it inevitably flopped from his hands and into the rushing water brings me a deep, desperate kind of joy. I know just how close we came to never getting the chance to make these memories.

I have had many years to think about my attempts and what I would do differently. The first would be to time our discussions better. Both times that I approached him were just after he had arrived home from working long shifts, and he was undoubtedly exhausted. The next thing I would change is how I tried to persuade him. It would have been better to mention that I had concerns about smoking and ask if we could make time to talk about it on his next day off. Then, we both would have been able to prepare for a more level-headed conversation. The last thing I would change is who was having this discussion with him. I was young and did not have much, if any, understanding when it came to addiction. This conversation would have been more effective coming from a respected adult rather than his child. Overall, I believe I did the best that I could to persuade my father to quit smoking, but he needed to learn for himself.