

health

EDITOR: RANI SHEEN



LIGHTS OUT

*Quit Smoking,
Lose Weight:
A Seven-Point
Plan. By LYNN
CROSBIE*

WHAT A DRAG
THE ONE THING
COCO COULDN'T
MAKE LOOK CHIC

“Why don’t you take your dog for a walk?”

These nine words, typed seven months ago by a smoking-cessation counsellor on the National Cancer Institute’s online Live Help chat desk, may have saved my life. If he had added “Fatso,” he would have been a psychic as well.

I was three days into quitting and had just written: “I wish to go to the store and buy and _eat_ several packages of cigarettes.”

His mild advice was excellent: Pretty well all cravings, even the ferocious oral kind, are as short-lived and easy to duck as lightning storms—and, of course, feel just as powerful at the time.

I remain a non-smoker, and I walk my dog a great deal (he has begun to feign small injuries and a delicate cough when I get the leash out). But this is not a story about how wonderful I feel, or about how all of you smokers (full-on, social or very occasional) should really stop because of all the wonder-

ful power walks and spinning classes that await you. I am not a born-again non-smoker who stamps around in Texas and a no-nonsense tennis dress, angrily fanning the air when someone lights up.

Smoking is often referred to as a seductive and dangerous “cool” practice, and until very recently, it was: Other than Doris Day and Michael Jackson, I cannot think of a great film or rock star who did not work the sexy outlaw cigarette angle. Even Olivia Newton-John completed her tramp-goddess makeover in *Grease* by lighting—then stamping out with a cherry-red Candie—a lipstick-stained cigarette.

When I quit in the past, I was continuously tormented by the image of smoking—by the way it defined me and lent me a dark, intriguing edge.

These days, thanks to its virtual invisibility (banned almost everywhere, it is rarely seen in movies or on tv anymore), smoking feels like a strange thing to »

PHOTOGRAPHY: COCO CHANEL BY DOUGLAS KIRKLAND/CORBIS

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do—not badass strange, but wearing-a-toga-in-public strange. And as I reached my late 30s, it occurred to me that smoking only looks good—debatable in and of itself—on the very young. If you are older than 21, you are already forming those vulgar facial creases, that ashen pallor and, frankly, the gauche aspect of a woman adhered to a wall, sucking away like a demented infant with a mouth that is starting to shrivel.

Of course, you know all about cancer, emphysema and heart disease. Or do you? Dr. Melissa Nutik of Mount Sinai Hospital's Granovsky Gluskin Family Medicine Centre in Toronto told me that heart disease is the number one cause of death for Canadians, and that the "greatest modifiable risk factor" is smoking. "Yes, yes," I said to her, impatiently. I've been bombarded with similar, if not worse, information—pictures of abscessed lungs, tobacco-rimmed stomachs and withered Grinch hearts—my whole life. Like most smokers, I've developed a habit of ignoring such dire news. To be a smoker is to be a blinkered horse, seeing nothing but the path to that lung-searing first drag of a well-earned cigarette.

What about the weight gain? I asked. I had read Allen Carr, the brusque self-helper nonpareil, on the subject. That should not be a problem, he insists in his books. And if it is, simply purchase Carr's *Easyweigh to Lose Weight!* Your newfound confidence, he insists, will melt pounds. Of the innumerable books, tracts and pamphlets I've read, my favourite is Dr. David Brizer's *Quitting Smoking for Dummies*, which states that weight gain occurs because quitters tend to use food as a replacement for cigarettes.

Nutik agrees. There is some metabolic change, she noted, because cigarettes are stimulants, but the switch from a cigarette to, say, a three-layer cake in one's mouth is the main culprit.

How many women avoid quitting because of the possible weight gain? "One hundred per cent," she said. "Close to."

I will not go on and on about how sad this statistic is; that so many of us would rather gas ourselves with cyanide and carbon monoxide than have a muffin top in our skinny jeans. But I will say this: I was a whale before I quit smoking. A fearsome, fire-breathing dragon. A fuming chunk. A fiery elephant. I am hardly lithe or lissome now, but I have lost at least 40 pounds and on I go. My face is no longer a swollen moon; nor is its surface red and leaden. My hair is quite a bit longer, and my teeth are, if not gleaming white pickets, clean and smooth.

I will tell you how this happened.

One: I went on a quitting rampage and forsook meat, coffee and alcohol all at once. You would be surprised how easy it is to lasso all the addictions together—each little calf urges the other on.

Two: I started drinking coffee again because, well, it's coffee. After two months, I no longer associated it with an early-morning cigarette (delicious hot breakfast!).

Three: Months before I quit, I began to break such habits as smoking while working on my computer, talking on the phone, out in public and so on. It was very nice not to duck out of a dinner date to smoke and return cured in tobacco.

Four: I read everything I could find on the subject. I highlighted parts, and wrote mawkish marginalia like "So true!" and "I DO smoke because I hurt!"

Five: I allowed myself to indulge fully in such thoughts, as well as 7,000 lollipops, and any other sweet thing I wished. Double entendre: meant! Quitting meat and booze and having oxygen suddenly flowing through my veins ramped my metabolism: I now eat far more than I ever did. If you are the sort who eats for comfort—like Judith Moore, author of the beautiful memoir *The Fat Girl*, who

cries "Mama" while eating a pint of ice cream—you will want to eat fattening things here and there, as rewards, while standing, because you can, because they don't cause The Big Casino.

Six: I realized that my lungs were afraid of me. On day four, I absent-mindedly touched my ribs and my chest contracted in horror. My God, they are like crack babies, I realized. Addicted against their will to something they despise. Poor little crack babies.

Seven: I sought the assistance of non-smoking friends. One, a painter and filmmaker, made me swim at least twice, and walk with her until I was doubled over, yelling "Hateful sadist!" Another, a businesswoman, had me write up a schedule and organize my time better so that I can make it to an aquafit class now and then. Still another friend, a musician and yogi, showed me his best deep-breathing exercises and explained how to treat cravings as if they are fractious children.

It is no small thing, turning your life around. But there is no downside. Within eight hours of quitting, one's oxygen levels return to normal: Good news for your face, better news for your lungs and their paralyzed cilia. Within one year, your chances of heart disease have decreased by 50 per cent, and your cells are working very hard to regenerate themselves, doing a powder-pink makeover on those ebony lungs.

As to weight and appearance: Once I was not dragged down by carbon monoxide and all-around bad health (have you ever noticed how many colds and flus smokers get?), I felt more active. I began running around my house singing Nina Simone's "Feeling Good," pausing only to stare at my living, breathing skin.

To get there, I recommend the Brizer and the Carr, and I recommend staring deeply at smokers on the streets. I recommend that you think of the cheerful words of my friend Dawn, a waitress who has never smoked: "I like my lungs."

Finally, for those of you not persuaded by my strange joy and strategy, those of you who like being sexy, louche rebels, perhaps this will help: A fashion-industry acquaintance of mine—who is, truly, more chic than most—drawled to me recently: "Smoking. That is so played."

I'm surprised she didn't add: "Pink lungs are the new black." □