



## I'd Die For A Smoke

Ned Handlehoff led me behind the barn. I was twelve years old and this would be my first encounter with tobacco. This would be that first glorious step into manhood.

Ned took a page from an old Sear's catalog and wrapped it around a hunk of corn silk. This odd combination was set afire and Ned took a gigantic puff from the end that wasn't in flame. Smoke billowed from his eyes, his nose, his ears, and he registered upon his face a look of total satisfaction. He handed me this homemade firebomb and I took a puff big enough to impress Ned with the fact that I was as big a man as he was. Maybe even a little bit bigger.

The smoke went swooshing into my lungs and strange things happened. My eyes bulged and my nose started bleeding. Smoke poured from every opening in my head and a small trickle escaped from my navel. I staggered around in circles with Ned beating on my back and my face turning blue. When the strangling had subsided there came to me the realization that all the smoke had not escaped. There was a mass of it, a rumbling whirl of it, grabbing joyfully at the lining of my stomach. My face was swiftly turning from strangling blue to nauseous green and I lay in the meadow hoping that I would be struck by lightning or gored by a bull.

The next day when Ned suggested we

repeat this attempted suicide I could hardly wait. We went behind the barn and in a matter of minutes I was lying in the meadow desperately hoping that I would be gored by lightning or struck by a bull. Perhaps, if God answered this kind of prayer, I would be knifed by an assassin.

All of this happened over forty years ago and since that time I have built up a tolerance and need for the tobacco plant. I have gone from one lone cigarette a day to the grandeur of five packs a day. I start the day with a cigarette and I end the day with a cigarette. I set the alarm clock so that I can get up and have a cigarette at three o'clock in the morning. And with smoke oozing from my nose, with my lungs constantly crying in despair, with my fingers having turned a permanent yellow, I am the happiest man on the face of this earth.

Or, rather, I would be the happiest man on the face of this earth if people would only leave me alone. My children are on me constantly to stop smoking. They have tacked "No Smoking" signs in my bathroom and in my den. My wife keeps showing me huge medical pictures of lungs blasted by cancer and emphysema. I am having trouble with my grandchildren who either hide, or eat, my cigarettes.

To top it all off, my doctor said, "Amos, if you smoke one more cigarette I cannot be held responsible for your continued existence."

So I decided to quit. If I couldn't smoke in peace then there wasn't much sense in smoking. I wasn't worried about breaking the habit. It was stupid to listen as people talked about addiction to nicotine. It was laughable when someone suggested withdrawal symptoms and personality changes. Hell! It was simply a matter of will power. Of mind over matter. Of showing just a small smidgeon of backbone.

On Tuesday morning I got up and flushed my pack of cigarettes down the toilet. There! I had done it! By golly . . . I felt better already. I went around tearing down the "No Smoking" signs and destroying the medical pictures. I sneared at my dejected grandchildren and in one single flash had eliminated cigarettes from my life.

Well . . . maybe not totally. After an abstinence of five minutes I did think that one cigarette . . . one lone cigarette . . . couldn't possibly do me any harm. They did smell good . . . they did taste good . . . and even though I certainly could break the habit anytime I wanted . . . still . . . one cigarette might be beneficial.

One hour went by.

I wasn't particularly worried that my right hand was shaking or that I was developing a twitch in my left leg. Surely I could control the facial spasms. It would be simply a matter of control.

Another hour elapsed.

I regret slapping my wife in the face. She really didn't mean it when she came up to me, and said, "Honey, do you know what time it is?" It was her tone of voice, it was the sneer that played around the corners of her ugly mouth.

Of course cigarettes were bad. But wouldn't a pipe suffice? A cigar? A wonderful stand of cornsilk?

I went berserk. I threw my grandchildren through the window. I got in my car and drove to the store. I pushed people through plate glass windows and lunged at the cigarettes. I tore open the pack. But the police got me before I could take that first heavenly drag.

It seems that in my dash to the store I ran over several hundred people and sent them to the happy hunting ground. I was sorry about it. Terribly, terribly sorry about it. Especially since the penalty for my crime was death by firing squad. In the morning they are going to take me out and shoot me and I'm not even worried about it because I happen to be familiar with the procedure.

When I am tied they will put a cigarette in my mouth. A glorious, wonderful cigarette. I will smell the tobacco and as the shots ring out and the bullets go thudding into my body I will feel, for one split second, the smoke caressing my lungs with tentacles of rapture.

By golly . . . I can hardly wait.