

Chapter 18: Breaking the HABIT

By SSG Andrew Belet

“It’s not the sale that you love it’s the sell/It’s not the price that’s gonna cost you/It’s just the weight that’s gonna bring you down”

-Dashboard Confessional “So Beautiful”

My first real, full cigarette was the summer of my 8th Grade year. My buddies Thilo and Chris, as well as myself, operated a concession stand at the local softball fields. Though it was a ton of responsibility for three 14 year-olds, with Dad’s help we ran it pretty smoothly, giving hungry softballers their requisite servings of nachos, hot dogs, soda and sunflower seeds. I made enough money in the first month that I purchased a brand-new BMX bike.

I had also just started dating a sassy fireplug from the school of Hard Knocks name Ashley. We’d gone out for a few months at the beginning of the school year, but had recently reconciled. As was befitting of her wrong side of the tracks upbringing, she enjoyed making out, swiping liquor from her Mom’s cabinet, shoplifting and very loudly, very publicly declaring me as “her man.”

Her best friend was another rough around the edges lass named Misty. She lived in the rough, North Side of Missoula, only a stones throw away from the ballpark. Misty was well-known for “going all the way” and having an 18 year-old boyfriend, who apparently was attracted to short, acne faced young girls who dressed in denim jackets and reeked of Marlboro Reds.

Though Misty and I didn’t get along, she and Ashley would routinely come down

to visit us (with Misty trying, unsuccessfully, to pick up Thilo and Chris.) On one particularly slow day, Thilo and Chris assured me that they could close while I bugged out early to hang out with Ashley (and, to my dismay, Misty.)

Ashley rode on the back pegs of my bike as I pedaled down to Jacob's Island Park, a common, yet out of the way hangout for young folks. When we arrived, Misty produced a battered pack of Cowboy Killers and a Zippo lighter that she undoubtedly lifted from a local shop.

"You smoke?" Misty asked, lighting up hers and Ashley's smokes.

"Um, not regularly," I said, taking the offered cigarette.

"Yeah, me neither," said Ashley, who took a deep drag that proved she was lying.

We smoked in silence. I dared not inhale, which would surely have lead to a coughing fit that would reveal my inexperience. Nervous at first, I began to enjoy the rebellious freedom of the cancer stick. I let the smoke curl up around my head, enjoying the smell and taste.

Just then, Chris rode by on his Magna Mountain Bike (he also bought a bike with his wages.) He slammed on his much hyped cantilever brakes, skidding to a halt. He stared at me, sitting there smoking, and sped off.

"Shit!" I cursed, crushing out the Marlboro Red. "If he tells my Dad, I'm dead meat!"

"Relax," Misty said, blowing a smoke ring. "My mom lets me smoke."

"Yeah, well, my family is a little different."

I sped home and called Chris. Under pain of death, he kept his mouth shut. I wouldn't touch for another six years.

#

Well, this is it, I think as we pull back into the OSB. My last go 'round in the 'Stan and thank the Lord for that! Can't wait to be out of this fuckin' place!

Of course, they can't give us the dates we're flying out for sure. I could be here anywhere from a week to 27 days. I'm part of the "lucky 12" who are part of the left seat/right seat detail; that is, the guys who show 1/3 (the final Marine Battalion in Afghanistan) around our AO, which is roughly the size of New Hampshire. Shitbag Smeagol flies home January 3rd because his wife finally left him and he has "stuff to take care of."

As the band The Descendants said: "I don't believe in unity, it's just one more abandoned dream." I shouldn't be shocked, all this stupid company has tried to do is break up my gun team. This deployment certainly hasn't lived up to my expectations, and I'm bitter. My last three weeks in country will be nothing but standing post, and, sadly, that sums it all up perfectly.

"Yo, B!" hollers Tilley as I pull up and jump from the turret. "Come check out this video, man!"

Every time that 2nd Platoon inhabits the OSB, things get fucked up. The first time, it was no big deal-a little messy, a few stray dog corpses littered around the wire. The second time was phenomenally worse: they left bottle of urine in the towers, the pantry and gym were a shambles, they caught (and subsequently killed) a cobra, and had inexplicably purchased a donkey from out in town.

Ssgt had flown into a rage at the blatant desecration of his holy OSB. We'd spent three months working our asses off turning it into a decent place. In five days, 2nd Platoon

had destroyed it. Taking a look around (and noticing trash blowing around in the faint breeze) I can tell this time is no different.

“You guys just don’t give a fuck, do you?” I ask Tilley.

“Hell no,” he says with an impish grin. “I’M never coming back out to this place.”

“You’re about to pick up Corporal,” I chide. “That ain’t the right attitude, bro.”

“You should know by now that I don’t give a shit about anything Marine Corps related.”

“Yeah, that’s obvious. So what’s this video?”

“Remember that shitty ass donkey?” he says, whipping out his camera. “Well this is how we got rid of him!”

He presses play. At first, it just shows the donkey, grazing up against a hill. It pans out to reveal four Marines standing in a line. Two are holding SMAWs, two are holding AT-4 shoulder-fired rockets. You don’t need to be able to split atoms to figure out what happened next. The following series of pictures on the camera show the donkey, or rather, gooey donkey chunks.

“Jesus H. Christ,” I sigh. “A little overkill, eh?”

“Hey, the CO ordered us to dump the rockets,” chimes in Ramon, who was in charge of the launching.

“Might as well have some fun with it,” shrugs Tilley with no remorse in his body.

“I guess,” I bemoan, much less abrasive. “But it’s your cheeky hijinx that make MY platoon stay out here weeks at a time.”

“I’ll have some cold beer for ya,” Tilley replies, laying a meaty arm across my shoulders while slinging his pack over the other arm. “Hell, I’ll even be there at the

Commissary Parking Lot when you pull on in. Cool?”

“Thanks,” I say; then, as an afterthought as he loads into his Hummer: “Bring a pizza! Papa John’s Supreme!”

He throws me a thumbs up then jumps (almost gracefully, for a big dude, that is) in back of the Hummer. I watch, melancholy, as the convoy pulls away to spend their remaining time at JAF. Even over the revving diesel engines I hear raucous shouts of “fuck the OSB!” “kiss my ass Khogiyani!” and, most biting, “sayonara suckers!” Every Marine is, after all, an asshole at heart.

Ignoring Smeagol’s request for a game of Risk, I mix up a serving of my foul-tasting pre-workout drink. Thirty minutes later, ‘Sky and I hit the cramped, freezing cold gym. Our digits recoil as we grasp the frosty weights. Our muscles howl in protest with each bicep curl. Still, the Lumberjacks (as we have dubbed ourselves, due to the bright orange knit caps we wear while lifting) forge on.

After a post workout smoke and protein shake, I go up in the tower with the ever cheerful Black Whale, the wind slicing through my government issued warming layers, and chilling me down to my bones.

#

The summer warmth was starting to wane when I stepped into Belle Pipe and Tobacco Shoppe on Broadway. The smells of a whole new world accosted me. The ten bucks in my back pocket was going to buy me a fat cigar. Not the crappy Swisher Sweets that Squirrel and I had wrangled from our older friends, but a smooth, woody cee-gar that would more than likely leave my mouth dry and throat sore for hours after football practice.

“Hold up there son,” said the aged tobacconist behind the counter. “How old’re ya?”

“Eighteen,” I said, pitching my voice a bit lower.

“Sure, sure. Don’t get offended now, but I gotta see y’all’s drivers liscense.”

With some typical teenage attitude, I rolled my eyes and produced my beaten-up license. It read that I five foot seven and 160 pounds. The picture showed my hair cropped close. That was three years prior. The eager young man who was now looking to buy a fine smokable was quite a bit larger, with long, shaggy hair, sideburns and a wisp of ratty blonde chin beard.

“Well shee-it,” laughed the old man, handing it back. “Shoulda said today’s your birthday!”

“I just want a cigar, sir,” I mumbled.

“A’course, a’course! Y’all need a good ol’ birthday cigar, I reckon! Ha!”

“Well, uh, I only got a ten spot.”

“Oh pish posh! Follow me, son.”

He led me into the Belle’s large, walk-in humidor and began espousing the virtues of various cigars. The smell was intoxicating; heady, yet utterly pleasant. I checked my silver Swiss Army watch (I bought in Zurich, mere miles from the factory.) I still had half an hour before lunch was over. Not enough time to smoke, but I could do that after practice.

“Here we are,” the man declared, opening a finely crafted wooden box. “Exotic, flavorful, and straight from the Dominican Republic. Only the best for ya.”

“I can’t afford that!” I gasped, gazing at the price tag.

“Don’t worry ‘bout I,” he chuckled, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s punch that for ya, and get ya on your way.”

“Cool,” I said, wondering if this guy was giving me a helluva discount or an out and out freebie.

He pulled out a long, sharp pipe and plunged it through the cigar. He placed it in a clear tube and slid me a lighter. He had a wide grin on his face, knowing full well he had just scored himself a lifetime customer. The 40 dollar loss was small compared to what I would spend there over the years.

“Y’all smoke before?” he asked, raising an eyebrow.

“I had a few Swisher Sweets and a cigarette when I was younger.”

“Hmm,” he huffed knowingly. “Tell ya what. Give me that ten and I’ll throw in a pack a’ wood-tipped Swishers.”

“Never had wood tip,” I mused.

“They’re quite good,” he replied, pulling out the cigarillos and stuffing all my birthday goodies in a brown paper bag.

I gave him the money, feeling like the proverbial kid in a candy store. I thanked him for his help and generosity and walked out to my Honda, parked a half block down, over by the old post office. The tobacconist waved to me as I pulled off, the Get-Up Kids blaring from my shoddy speakers.

At the first red light, I light up a Swisher Sweet. Sure enough, it was faintly sweet with a distinct aftertaste of tree bark. I rolled down the window, letting the smoke waft out. I pulled into the parking lot of school, acting cooler than Sinatra. Squirrel approached.

“I’ve been looking for you,” he said. “Wanted to buy you a nice birthday lunch.”

“No worries,” I replied through a smoke cloud. “Had to make me a cigar run, y’know?”

“Sweet dude! Bet that feels nice.”

“Yeah, the guy hooked me up too. We’ll have to smoke this cigar after practice today.”

“Awesome! Count me in!”

The bell rang and I crushed out the remains of the cigarillo. I strutted to class, thoroughly tempted and corrupted by Mother Tobacco and Sister Nicotine.

#

Christmas morning!

Skeezix, Smeagol, Black Whale, Lcpl. Andrew “A1” Laurent (a former Navy man who made the horrible mistake of signing up with the Marines after his sea tour was up) and myself were on watch at 04:00. All I want to do is bury my head in my sleeping bag and try not to picture the awesome Christmas that my family is surely enjoying. I want to forget missing my daughter’s first Christmas.

Fat chance. Ssgt, bouncing around merrily, has us wake up the platoon. Late last night, 1st Sgt and the CO showed up as a Christmas surprise. Woopee. Now they’ve started cooking a sumptuous breakfast of stale, pre-made French Toast and two month old sausage. The Marines come lurching out slowly, not excited whatsoever.

1stSgt hooks up a speaker to his iPod and starts blaring holiday tunes. I light up a Pine, puffing away contently, shaking the night’s cold from my weary frame. Unlike all the other smokers, who stocked up with several cartons before leaving JAF, I purposely

didn't bring out many smoke. By this point, I figure the only way to quit is not to have them available. Hopefully my peers don't offer me any.

After Breakfast, HQ Platoon pulls out, going to spend the rest of the Savior's birthday in the relative comfort of JAF. SSgt calls everyone from the guard towers and we gather around the plastic Christmas tree that Lassiter's mom sent us. Ssgt plays Santa, passing out small gifts that he had people send from the States.

The boots obviously get preferential treatment. Some of the junior Marines haul includes Leathermans, Surefire Flashlights, Magazine Pouches and one lucky one, the heavily-tattooed Lcpl. Chauvie, gets a brand new pair of Danner combat boots. Skeezi receives two pairs of winter socks, and Under Armour shirt and some hand warmers. For my part, I get three books: two Louis L'Mour westerns and a personally autographed copy of "Gunners Glory" by former Marine (and Silver Star recipient) Johnnie M. Clark.

Smeagol gets his present, which is quite a bit smaller than most of the guys, even though he really looks to be in need of some holiday cheer. He tears into the packaging, pulling out several books of Sudoku puzzles, his favorite brainteasers. His face brightens slightly.

"Sorry," LT says. "We couldn't afford to buy you a new life."

The dig silences the assembled Marines. I try not laugh, but it bursts out, doing more mental damage to poor old Smeagol. No one wants to correct LT, so 'Sky steps up with his usual bluntness.

"Fuckin'-A sir," he comments. "That was damn harsh."

"Aw, I'm just kidding, Eytcheson," LT replies with a shrug.

The platoon breaks up and we get back to our jobs, trying hard to forget this shitty

Christmas ever happened.

#

By the time we got to Okie, only three months into my time in the Fleet, I hated the Marine Corps and was really feeling the pressure of my dual girlfriend situation. I quickly escalated beyond smoking the casual Swisher Sweet to smoking three or more daily, often migrating to the smoke deck with Mikey and Clodfelter, still smoking long after they crushed out their Marlboros or Camels and went back inside.

The Package Store (or Pakie as we called it) started carrying small Swisher Cigarillos that resembled cigarettes. I bought a pack, mainly so I could keep the same pack as my two smoking partners. I debuted them that night at our usual time and usual spot.

“Why don’t you just smoke real cigarettes?” jabbed Mikey.

“Dunno, I just think they’re gross,” I replied through puffs.

“You don’t have a problem with those Swishers.”

“True, but I don’t inhale these things.”

“But you could if you wanted to,” winked Clodfelter.

“But I don’t.”

“Don’t be a pussy,” Clodfelter with his typical lack of tact.

“What’s your run time again? 23? 23:30? Yet you’re taller and skinnier than I am?”

“Point?”

“Belet’s run time is 20:15,” Mikey chimed in.

“And I’d damn sure like to keep it that way,” I concluded.

“Fine, but I still think you’re a pussy,” Clodfelter huffed.

“Tortoise,” I insulted.

“Vagina,” he countered.

“Gasbag.”

“Hatchet wound.”

“Snail!”

“Infected pussy!”

“That’s fucking horrid,” Mikey said, walking inside.

“Sun-dried fucking road kill blowing down the breeze!” I snorted.

“Crusty, dried up, beef-curtained old cunt!” Clodfelter screamed.

These exchanges were common the next few months until, finally, on a cold Korean evening, I got caught in Nicotine’s sticky web.

#

By New Year’s Eve, I was down to one or two cigarettes a day, and that was only on watch. I had set my mind fiercely on quitting and I was slowly but surely winning the battle. That was well over a week ago, and now my moderate smoking left me with only one pack of Pine Light Menthols. Half the platoon has gone back to JAF to fly to K-Bay, including Smeagol. Another 17 leave today, giving us only 11 Marines and 30-something fresh Army dogs here at the OSB.

Myself and Skeezix have been stuck in the tower for four hours now. I’m out of moto speeches, which is convenient, because he’s sick to death of hearing them anyway. We sit in the quiet, absent-mindedly gazing out our observation ports, trying to ignore the jubilant Devil Dogs below us, who are ready to head back to the US of A.

“Here they come,” announces SkeeziX as the four-vehicle convoy pours up the road to the OSB. “Looks like three Army trucks.”

“Good, less watch for us,” I mumble, absolutely miserable.

They pull up and LT (who went to JAF with the first group) hops out. He says something to one of the boots who, in turn, runs up to our tower. I roll my eyes, assuming our idiot commander wants us to do one last patrol together or some such shit. I think about lighting up but decide not to.

“LT wants everyone downstairs for a meeting,” says the boot as he opens the door. “He says it’s important so just leave the towers unmanned for right now.”

I see SkeeziX is perplexed by this unorthodox move but I’m too jaded to give a shit. I groan as my stiff, cold joints creak. I figured I could handle the Afghanistan cold, being a tough mountain man and all. I was wrong. Even my super-heavy black fleece jacket can’t keep out the cold.

LT is already talking when we get downstairs, reading off the names of those leaving today. “And some good slash bad news. Those of us who are being left behind, our numbers just got thinner. Debroka, Young, Martinez and Belet: you four are going back tomorrow, flying out the 11th.”

We cheer. I smile. SkeeziX, Lim and the other rear party Marines scowl with rage and frustration.

“The rest of us will remain here. For a few days to show 1/3 the ropes. We fly out between the 15th and the 17th, which is good because we get one more tax-free paycheck.”

“Yea,” grips a sarcastic Lim.

“I know most of the platoon is already gone and all, but I just want everyone to

know that you did an outstanding job this deployment. I really mean that, gents. I can't think of a better group of Marines, or a better group of guys to spend eight months in hell with."

"We love you sir!" catcalls Wernke, eager to get to JAF.

"Okay, smartass, get on the trucks and get out of here!"

The Humvees tear off with a vengeance. Our relief heads to the towers and I stop to share a cigarette with the newly-promoted Cpl. Laurent. It tastes sweet, tastes like America. Home! I only get through half of it before crushing it out and flicking the rest of the pack to A1 with a flourish.

"What's this?" he asks.

"Goin' away present from me to you," I say over my shoulder.

"Gee thanks, a pack of Pine Lights. It's what I've always wanted."

"I'm in a giving mood."

I pack up all my junk and survey the near-empty room that is my home. This time next week, I'll be back in K-Bay, living in a barracks room, waiting to check into my base housing. Then leave. Then...who the hell knows?

Re-enlist?

Go back to school?

Get a job?

Collect unemployment?

My future's so bright, I almost have to wear shades. Almost.

#

It wasn't too cold, not too warm out. A comfortable Hawaii luke warm, really. My

pregnant wife slept soundly inside, my baby daughter kicking occasionally in her womb. I leaned on the edge of the balcony, smelling the salty sea air, my back still stinging slightly from my most recent tattoo, three crosses connected by thorns, representing the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. My previous tat (“KiLL!” on the inside of my lip) had just healed.

I flicked out my third Marlboro Light and ignited my BBQ starter lighter. It was well past midnight and sleep was impossible. My hand shook as I took a drag. I coughed quietly, hoping not to wake Lilika. After all, she had a big day of flying back to Montana ahead of her.

I was so scared I could have pissed my USMC issue sweatpants right then and there. *Jesus, I'm going to war! Is it normal to be this freaked out, or am I just a big pussy? Is this what WW II Marines felt, leaving the farm to go kill Japs? Is this what WWI Marines felt before heading off to slay the Hun? Is this what my bros at Pendleton felt before heading off to take down Fallujah?*

“You okay, hon?”

My wife scared me so bad I dropped my cigarette. It hit my arm, burned a little, then fell harmlessly to the wet grass below. I watched it fizzle out before turning to my baby-bloated spouse.

“I'm fine, just couldn't sleep is all,” I said quietly.

“Whatcha doing?”

“Thinking.”

“About what?”

“War.”

She pondered that for a moment. She folded her arms over her belly and chewed her lower lip. “Hmm,” she said finally. “Why don’t you come inside and lay down, I’ll make you feel all better.”

Never one to argue with suck talk, I followed her inside. She started to get nude, revealing her body in all it’s slightly-tanned, smooth, hairless glory. She stopped halfway, lips pursed.

“Go brush your teeth first. And use mouthwash! You smell like a Goddamn ashtray.”

#

The C-130 idles on the runway as our seabags and packs are loaded aboard. The sun’s hidden by clouds, but I still wear shades. They’re expensive, saved my eyes once (*Damn, seems so long ago...*) but they wouldn’t survive getting packed up. Those Chair Force hair jockeys throw our shit around like the opening scene in “Ace Ventura.” Dicks.

My weapon feels disturbingly light without a mag in it. I fiddle nervously with the sling, trying to take my mind of the cigarette I so long for. It’s funny that I had one goal when I came over here, and it took my eight months to do it (*But won’t Lil be proud of me?*)

I try to think of something poetic.

No one will ever understand what we went through over here. (Bullshit. All we did was hump up mountains and drive out to bumfuck nowhere on a weekly basis.)

I’ll never be closer to anyone than I am to these guys. (Bullshit. In six months, when we all go our separate ways I won’t speak to 90 percent of these fuckers.)

I’ll never forget what happened over here. (Bullshit. In twenty years, I either

won't remember the 'Stan or I'll have made up stories about how rough it was.)

The screams will never fade. (Bullshit. The only screams I heard were wussy little girly-men in the gym.)

I guess that's what get me the most. Three years (36 months; 13,140 days; 315,360 hours; 18,921,600 minutes) in the Corps and I've accomplished jack shit. 16 months on deployment, and I've done nothing but glorified training ops. Seven countries with nothing to show for it but a few bootleg movies and a piece of paper with "Welcome To Thailand, Andy" written on it that was written by a Thai stripper with a marker jammed up her cunt.

Everyone who joins the military wants to fight, to kill. We all want to be John Wayne, Audie Murphy, Chest Puller or even Arnold Schwarzenegger. Some of us might go down in a blaze of glory. Some of us may earn medals (Purple Heart, Good Conduct Medal, Afghanistan Campaign Medal, Global War On Terrorism Medal.) Some of us might make a difference. Instead, the majority of us get buried in a pile of shit and are told to eat our way out, all the while getting moto speeches from our fathers, sergeants, lieutenants and commanders. When we finally make it out of the pile, the civilian world tells us that we smell too bad.

But they DON'T understand and truly never will.

Because something deep inside me WANTS to do another four years, WANTS to go to SOI, WANTS to teach the new Marines to be Grunts. Sadism? Masochism? No, just another bad habit, I reckon.

And there it is: something poetic.