

Growing Pains

I fumbled for cash, returning my debit card to my wallet. That way my parents wouldn't see this purchase among the other charges on my online checking account. They wouldn't approve.

The shaded ridge that Jacob led us to overlooked a pond. Around it, parents beamed as their toddlers waddled after the ducks on the shore. I clutched my water bottle with both tense hands, uncomfortable in this new setting, and remembered long ago waddling through an endless mosaic of orange, green, and soil, latching my arms around a pumpkin the size of the crib I'd left not long ago. Dad had chuckled and come to my aid as I wrestled with the gourd, beads of sweat forming on my tiny forehead.

Now, I couldn't tell if the sweat trickling into my unkempt beard was the result of the afternoon sun or the papery package between my pursed lips that I'd just purchased. Only a year ago, smoking would have been a treasonous act for the clean-shaven, college-bound Catholic boy I'd become. Yet here I was now, on a rare day off from my job as a counselor at Camp Lutherhaven, a cigar protruding from my mouth. My parents had been cautiously excited for me when I told them of my employment plans a few months earlier. They had played off their unease as "wanting me home" for the season, but I could tell that a summer submerged in the waters of Lake Coeur d'Alene made them less uneasy than a summer submerged in the "less rich" teachings of Lutheran theology. The cigar wagged as profanities leapt abundantly from my tongue. I wasn't proud of my foul mouth, but on days off, swearing helps you remember who you really are, away from the incessant optimism and suffocating Bible-speak of camp. Phrases like "working to glorify Christ" and "searching for God's hand in our lives" become stale and meaningless by Week 3, and we were well beyond that point by now.

Smoking the thing was harder than I'd thought. The goal is to bring the smoke into your mouth, let its robust burn soak in for a few seconds, and then expel the smoke into the air. You don't want it to seep into your lungs, get inside you, become a part of you. With caution I sipped on it, unable to produce the heavy clouds that my friends achieved. They coached me on "proper form" until I gasped as a swirling column of smoke emerged from my lips. I felt a thrill then that nearly matched the pride I used to feel when I showed my middle school math tests to my parents, "100%" emblazoned across the top of the page in red ink.

I overzealously consumed the remainder of the thing in minutes. I didn't feel anything until nothing but a shallow coin of cigar remained clenched between my thumb and first finger. The tranquility seeped through my body like the soothing burn of whiskey, and I smirked at the sheltered upbringing I'd finally overcome. That tranquility didn't last long, though, as my indulgent grin was obliterated by half-digested hamburger and strawberry lemonade flooding into and out of my mouth. I managed to duck behind the rock I'd been sitting on, away from the other parkgoers, but in full view of the rest of my camp group. As I dizzily tried to recompose myself, I reassured my friends that I was fine and silenced the motherly "told you so's" that reverberated within my head.

I threw up again half an hour later, this time seated in the passenger seat of Jacob's car while moving at 70 mph. I had ripped the bandana from my head and tried to cover my mouth, which succeeded only in spraying mucous in multiple directions as it burst from the edges of the cloth. Jacob, a scowl etched upon his face, sailed down the off-ramp and parked at a Shell station. The three girls in the backseat, among them the girl from Nebraska I'd been trying for weeks to impress, had opened the doors and scurried inside the store almost before the car had stopped moving, trying to escape the wretched smell. Standing awkwardly in the parking lot as customers passed and tried not to notice the kid drenched in vomit, I began dousing myself with irrigation water from a rubber

hose and trying in vain to dry myself with a stack of paper towels. My fingers became sore as I tried to wipe the vile liquid from the cracks and crannies of Jacob's car, knowing full well that I would have to bleach the entire front seat when we made it back to camp. I shook my head as my mind flooded with feelings of disbelief and embarrassment. It was then that I recalled the sensation of Mom's hand stroking my bare back as I kneeled beside the toilet, waiting for the inevitable vomiting caused by my childhood migraines. When I had finally cleaned myself enough to convince my co-workers to get back in the car, we drove the remaining half hour to camp in silence.