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QUITTING TIME

A tale of two habits -- her brother's and her own

By Wendy Lichtman

Seven of us were still eating dessert when my brother excused himself from the table. As I took a bite of ice cream, the friend who sat across from me caught my eye. "What the hell are you going to do about his smoking?" she snapped.

I was a guest that evening, having flown across the country for a conference, and everyone else at dinner seemed taken aback by her rudeness. But I wasn't offended -- I'd been waiting more than 40 years for someone to ask me that question.

My brother has been smoking since he was 11 and I was 6. I found out one summer afternoon when he walked off the basketball court to ask me a favor. "I forgot to hide my cigarettes," he confided, "and Mom'll be home soon. I can't leave the game now, so could you run home and hide them under the bed?" He added, "There's an ashtray with water in it that needs to go under there, too."

My brother wore his dark hair slicked back and had a smile my mother said you could die for. Before I was big enough to ride a bike, I sat on the bar of his Schwinn and traveled sidesaddle between his strong, skinny arms. My brother taught me how to hold my cards so the faces didn't show, how to add the numbers without moving my lips and not to ask for a hit if I was holding 16 or more. Sometimes when he and his friends dealt the cards, he saved me a place. "She's in the game," he'd say.

Of course I'd run home for him.

I took the stairs two at a time, and without making a sound, I lay on my belly and pushed the contraband far out of sight. I even put a little fresh water in the bottom of the ashtray before I slipped it under the bed. There was a squirt gun nearby, and just in case that was related to smoking, I hid it as well.

Then, for the next four decades, I wished I hadn't done it. Maybe, I have thought, if he had been caught that day, I wouldn't hear him cough every time I speak to him on the phone.

I could taste the cold metal of the spoon and the sweetness of the ice cream as I looked blankly across the table at my old friend. "What's she supposed to do about his smoking?" my sister-in-law snapped back. "It's not her responsibility, for God's sake."

It's not hers either, of course. But that hasn't stopped her from pleading and yelling and sending him to a workshop at the local hospital where they showed him pictures of blackened lungs.

"Nothing works," my brother told me after his last bout with the nicotine patches. "Absolutely

nothing works. So I just tell myself it won't happen to me. Or I think, okay, so I'll live until 90 instead of 93 -- it'll be worth it for the pleasure I get."

Ninety? Ninety-three? We are the children, he and I, of parents who died at 55 and 71. Where on earth does he get these numbers?

But I don't confront him, because I know the current wisdom on addiction: Only the addict can make a change. What I need to change, I'm told, is my wishful thinking -- my addiction to the idea that I can solve the problem.

And usually I believe that. But sometimes I don't -- sometimes I believe I should do everything I can think of to help. When, in 1989, another sister went on television to try to save her brother's life, I sat transfixed. After the American journalist Terry Anderson was captured in Lebanon, his sister, Peggy Say, spoke before Congress, petitioned the president and held news conferences to plead with the country that we remember him and his fellow captives. I wondered if I'd do the same thing if it were my brother; I hoped I'd try anything.

Over the years I've called a local spa that advertised "Bodywork to End Addiction -- We Specialize in Smoking Cessation," and thought about casually driving my brother up there the next time he came to visit. I've ordered the "Learn How to Quit Kit" from Smokenders, looking for chapter meetings near his home. And I've sat in the health section of bookstores searching for advice. Maybe I'll say just the right thing, I thought, and he'll quit smoking and live to be 93. Do a seven-step breathing exercise whenever you want a cigarette, the experts write. Eat orange vegetables, tape your cigarettes to the inside of your pants leg so you have to take off your trousers to reach them, draw a sketch of every cigarette you touch, indicating how much of it you've actually smoked.

When I mentioned my research on the phone to my brother, there was a pause. "You think I don't know this?" he asked.

On the morning after our dinner at his house, my brother drove me to the airport. I promised myself I'd say something to him in the car when it was just the two of us, but I could not, for the entire ride, think of what to say. I wondered if I'd ever told him about the importance of orange vegetables, and as we got closer to the airport I spent a little time trying to remember which ones, besides carrots and yams, were actually orange. Pumpkin, I thought, staring at the road. Eat pumpkin, I'll tell him.

He pulled up to the curb under a sign that said "Departures" before I spoke. "Mom and Dad are dead," I said. "I can't stand the thought of you being gone."

My brother looked out the front window and nodded.

"I'm going to go on television and plead for your life," I said. "I'm going to lobby Congress and ask them to subsidize other work for the tobacco farmers. I'm going to get an audience with the president and tell him that simply boosting the price isn't going to do it -- you spent your whole allowance on cigarettes when you were a kid."

My brother looked into his side mirror to see if it was safe for him to open his door. "I'm going to talk to your employees," I continued, "and ask them to go on strike if you don't stop smoking in

the office. I'm going to squirt you with a water pistol whenever I smell nicotine on your breath." "Enough," my brother said quietly. Then he turned toward me and gave me one of those smiles you could die for. "Have a safe trip," he whispered, and we reached across the seat to hug each other.

It is enough, I admitted, as I headed into the sky. I'm finished. My brother knows a lot more than I do about addiction -- he would love not to be addicted.

So I didn't read the "Hooked but Healthy" story in the airline magazine that showed a picture of a woman with a cigarette in her hand. I leafed right past it. I studied the layout of O'Hare Airport, I wrote a letter, I watched the clouds.

How, I wondered an hour later as I slipped the magazine out of the seat pocket in front of me, could you be healthy if you were hooked? The woman in the picture, it turned out, was holding a plastic cigarette that she filled with nicotine cartridges. Nothing here to ruin your lungs -- no smoke, no tar; you simply inhale the chemical your body craves.

I'll just have a short talk with him about this one article, I decided as I tucked the magazine into my bag, and then I'll quit for good.

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