

How to Become a Birdwatcher (or How to Quit Smoking)

written by Guest Contributor | November 10, 2017



1. As a child, admire the heavy, cut-glass lighter your grandmother uses and the way the etched crystal throws prisms when it catches the afternoon sun. Be fascinated by the smoke that curls out of her lipsticked mouth when she talks and the way she ashes into a marble bowl with a delicate one-two-three tap of her manicured finger. Mimic her at age twelve when you swipe her cigarettes.
2. As a teenager, steal packs of cigarettes from the gas station and practice how to do a French inhale. Develop a regular habit.
3. As an adult, have a child who learns that smoking is bad for you. Listen sympathetically as she begs you to stop, remembering how you did the very same thing with your own mother. Promise her that you will quit, effective immediately. Then insist she play at her friend's house so you can sneak a cigarette. In the mornings, smoke behind the shed until the day she wakes up from a bad dream and comes looking for you. After such a close call, vow to stop. Go a day or two until your boss lectures you about being three minutes late to work. Use your irritation to justify a well-deserved cigarette.
4. Keep up the habit until the tally of years you've spent inhaling burning leaves into your lungs equals two-thirds, or sixty-six percent, of your life. Ignore the wet sound of your coughing every morning and the aching in your chest every night. Carry perfume and mints with you wherever you go to cover up the smell. Resent the hold the habit has on you but not enough to quit.
5. Have knee surgery and smoke your first night home from the hospital still woozy from pain medication. Ignore the warnings your husband gives you. Wait until he goes to bed and light up right there on the couch. Immediately regret it as dizziness and nausea bowl you over. Vomit down your nightgown because you're trussed up and can't move. Sit in the stench of bile and smoke and swear that was the last time. A few days later try again and find that you don't get sick. Get right back to it, but this time add the clumsiness of maneuvering yourself outside on crutches while holding the plastic grocery bag that carries your scented lotion, mints, water, cigarettes, and lighter. Despise yourself for continuing to smoke.

6. Shortly after your fortieth birthday, lose a favorite aunt to cancer and feel the first jabs of fear. The next week, hear about a former coworker who has cancer. Two days after that, get an email telling you that your sister-in-law found a lump in her breast, and she doesn't even smoke. Go through your own scare when a radiologist says your mammogram is suspicious and requires further diagnostics.
 7. Feel the fear click fully into place when the young man who mows your lawn, the one who's closer to your daughter's age than yours, starts crying when you ask how he's doing. He just lost his mother to cancer. Hug him beneath the poplar tree he planted six months ago when his mother was still alive and everyone thought she was coming down with a cold.
 8. Worry that it's going to be too late. Recognize that you've finally arrived at the quitting point but wonder how.
 9. Avoid going outside because being outdoors equals smoking. Fashion a substitute cigarette from the barrel of a pen stuffed with paper to give it pull. Fake smoke as you watch out the window. Notice the variety of birds that flock in the sugar maple.
 10. Decide to become a birdwatcher instead of a smoker. Buy some binoculars and a bag of unshelled peanuts for the blue jays, thistle for the finches, and safflower seed for the cardinals. Sit under the maple and tell yourself you won't smoke a cigarette until you've seen a red-bellied woodpecker.
 11. And then wait some more. Learn patience. Learn to delay gratification. Learn to be more excited about seeing a woodpecker than you are about flicking the lighter and taking that first drag. Learn to sit and wait and sit and wait until you've waited a day to smoke, a week, a month ... until you're at six years and counting.
 12. Keep watching birds.
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Andrea Boucher, writing under the pen name A. Lyn Carol, has won multiple contests including the *Redivider* Blurred Genre contest judged by Jerald Walker, the *Redivider* Beacon Street Prize in Nonfiction judged by Ned Stuckey-French, and *The Wind Prize for Windmill: The Hofstra Journal of Literature & Art*. In addition to these publications, her work has appeared in *The Rumpus*, *Hippocampus*, *SMITH Magazine*, and *Not Like the Rest of Us: An Anthology of Contemporary Indiana Writers*. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee.