

Cold Turkey

JENNIFER VIVEKANAND's father butts out, temporarily

My father made the monumental decision to have his wife and children lock him in the shed in order to stop smoking, the summer of '79. I was 8. "Cold turkey," he said. "This will make me stop smoking, cold turkey."

My father had promised my mother before they married he was going to quit smoking. Each year after that, the same promise was made, and broken. I truly believed he had tried every method known to man at the time. There was the "chewing-gum method" and the "hard-candy method." Both involved stuffing something into one's mouth when a craving occurred. My father gained 40 pounds but did not stop smoking. It was just too hard for him. Then came the summer of the shed.

He had built his own storage shed along the left side of our home. Well, that was what he told the neighborhood board that approved the initial plans. It turned out to be a two-story wooden fortress that towered above our

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home like a lifeguard station. It stood on a cement slab my father poured himself. The shed was massive and army green. Our neighbors hated it immediately. I remember my father rapping his knuckles along the side saying, "They don't make them like this anymore. This baby can withstand tornado-force winds." My father envisioned setting up a table on the second floor where we could all hang out and play cards and board games. From across the street, the shed stood out like a green beacon to home-improvement do-it-yourselfers

throughout the neighborhood.

After numerous complaints, the association made him lower the second story so that it became more of a loft, with spiky nail ends threatening the tops of our heads when we had to crawl up there. The door was bulky, with an inner ledge that three kids could swing on at one time. My father was enraged at having to "modify" his creation. "It ruins the whole design!" he had complained.

The thought occurred to me that in the event of a nuclear explosion, that shed would still be standing. Our neighbors had nice little lumberyard kits they had put together with faux-Bavarian trim. "No cookie-cutter shed for us," my father had exclaimed.

We emptied the shed of the lawn mower, our bicycles, the weed trimmer, and most of my father's tools so there was room for my father and his supplies. These items went into the back bedroom. It was strange to see the lawn mower next to the bed.

At the time, to us children, it seemed like a logical thing to do. A neighbor girl wandered over to ask me why we just locked my dad in our shed. I pretended I didn't know what she was talking about, and told her she was crazy. My father had often told us her family was strange, and we should stay away from them. It suddenly occurred to me that we were the strange ones. It was not a pleasant realization.

The shed was stocked with "provisions." A portable toilet, a small black-and-white TV, and a mattress were among the things we kids loaded into the shed. My father also had snacks, a cooler filled with cold drinks, and a fan. The shed was wired for electric-



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ity, so he had light to read by. We were to pass hot food to my father through a small opening under the roof.

The preparations for “locking in” did not take long. We kids waved farewell to my father as if he were Shackleton headed off aboard a steamer on his Antarctic expedition. I remember thinking at the time how brave he was to attempt this incredible feat. My father seemed almost giddy with anticipation.

“No matter what I say,” he told my mother, “don’t let me out.”

I remember my father giving a little wave, as the heavy door was slowly pulled shut. As the lock clicked, we heard my father’s voice, muffled, through the door.

“Now remember, no matter what I say, don’t let me out.”

My mother herded us into the house for dinner after that, admonishing us, “Keep your mouths shut. I don’t want the neighbors to know.” Even without that warning, we had no intentions of blabbing to our friends. I wasn’t so sure about my little brothers. They were too young to be

trusted.

Halfway through dinner, we heard a commotion. It was my father. He wanted out. My mom tried to pacify my father by passing food through the hole as instructed earlier. He still wanted out. We crowded around my mom to listen.

“It’s not funny!” he snapped. “Let me out of here!”

“You said not to let you out, no matter what you said,” my mother reminded him, laughing.

“Open the door!” my father barked. He pounded on the door for emphasis.

“Quiet! The neighbors will hear you!” hissed my mother.

“I don’t care!” my father shot back. “Open the damn door!”

My mother had us all go back inside. She waited until later that night to let my dad out. I don’t know if it was to avoid the eyes of our neighbors, or to make him try for at least a few more hours. I remember her sitting at the kitchen table, looking out the window every so often at the shed. She seemed sad and amused, at the same time.

*“Now remember,
no matter what I say,
don’t let me out.”*

We never spoke of this incident again. It was as if it never happened. My father avoided our eyes and the neighbors for a few days, but that was it. Years later my siblings and I can laugh about

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it, but we never bring it up to my father. We don't think it would be wise.

The whole incident was the best anti-smoking message I ever heard as a kid. I never wanted to be so addicted to something

I would resort to locking myself into a shed in front of my children. My father still smokes. He has tried the new wave of stop-smoking techniques from "the Patch" to "Nicorette Gum." He once remarked that the only way the patch would work for him was if he "rolled it up and smoked it." But at least he's still trying. He has no future plans, however, to lock himself in again to quit. •

A resident of Durham, Jennifer Vivekanand is an illustrator, author and graphic designer. She graduated from Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and has studied at the Accademia de bella Arti in Perugia, Italy, and the Royal College of Art in London. She is a member of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, and has won many awards for her designs. Her work can be seen at www.idraw.biz.

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