

# THE CIGARETTE

"Here," he said, pushing the cigarette into my mouth, then shoving the lighter so close to my face I felt my nose start to burn. Jerking my head back I sucked the smoke into my lungs, numbing out thoughts and feelings. The Captain stared at me, our eyes meeting for only for a second before I shut mine and felt myself tumble into blackness.

When he'd asked, I had nodded my head that yes I wanted a last cigarette, which is kind of funny since my last cigarette is my first cigarette in ten years. Even though I no longer needed to fear cancer, or anything for that matter, since my death was just minutes away, and even though the cigarette did blot out so many feelings while still helping me to focus in some strange way on the moment, I felt guilty and remorseful for taking it.

What do they say, that virtue is its own reward? Was quitting smoking a virtue? It was certainly good for me. I'd learned to not really miss cigarettes and to even think of them in a completely negative way.

The veins in the Captains neck were pulsing, and his dark skin was becoming almost maroon, as blood rushed to his face. I exhaled slowly, letting the smoke form a curtain between us.

The smoke's bitterness bit my tongue. I saw the marksmen, in their mismatched uniforms, about 20 yards in front of me. Two of them were arguing, gripping their rifles tightly and shouting at each other. The other three were ignoring them, smoking and laughing. The sky had a jewel-like quality, and the trees seemed to relish the breezes, sparkling in the sun.

Sure there were lots of times that smoking was more than enjoyable. When it would bring me feelings of comfort, relief and wellbeing. But once I'd quit and learned to live without it, I would denigrate those very concepts. Now I knew that smoking didn't enhance the moment or increase my happiness; it contributed to my unhappiness.

Had I been kidding myself? If virtue is its own reward shouldn't I be steadfast in not smoking, no matter what my circumstances? Did I really still want to smoke? If not, why do it now? Yes, I'm about to die, so none of the negatives matter, or do they? I don't have to fear disease, and I don't really care how my clothes or breath smells, but what about facing reality? My reality now is a firing squad. Will the cigarette change that? I am about to die because I was in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The Captain pulled his cell phone from his pocket and turned his back. Dialing a number he started talking in Sowani, and I couldn't understand a word.

How I ended up in Africa probably isn't important. God, I'd ended up in so many strange countries and situations in my life, most as a result of some crazy whim. Like the time I was smoking a joint, drinking a beer and playing my Moroccan drums on the roof, when I'd looked up at the wisps of white clouds in an endlessly blue sky and said out loud that if I got a letter from Greg tomorrow, from India, I'd go. Naturally when the letter arrived it was

some kind of cosmic sign, and I was off and running. Chasing fantasy, again.

Africa had always attracted me. The women, the music, that sense of romance and art I always conjured out of the third-world's faded edges. The streets were dusty, the people wrapped in cloth of many colors, life basic, the buildings worn down and yet glazed with a soulful patina, a sort of storied wisdom in the beauty of being. It held a sensual reality that touched my heart.

Then, as I'd become more settled in my life, and as wars, AIDS and other violent dangers seemed to dominate more of the continent, I'd lost interest. Now the streets of Paris effervesced with romance and artistic spirit that diminished the allure of the third-world, which had, in my vision, descended into the reality of its poverty, dirt and disease.

When I got the assignment to come to Africa and write a story about corruption I'd actually hesitated. But it was an offer I couldn't refuse. Circumstances had made it necessary to take what paying jobs I could get, and the chance to travel, which I still loved, with an attractive expense account, was just too tempting.

The irony of my interviewing a corrupt cop just when he was arrested by his corrupt enemies and my being arrested, too, well, what can I say, I can't find the humor in that. And what followed, my being accused of spying, sentenced without trial and kept in solitary confinement until being led to this field where I face five ragtag rebels ready to shoot me dead.

When the Captain said the name of my paper in English, I looked over at him. His back was still turned. I could hear the words "ransom and deadline, and I am within my rights to execute a spy," before he walked farther away.


The idea that people knew of my whereabouts and that he was asking for a ransom shook my body with the frisson of possibility, was there still a chance I might live and see those I loved again? But then the reality of the almost universal proclamations that negotiating with terrorists only encouraged terrorism struck my hopes dead.

If the paper knew the government must too, but outside of cash there was little leverage that could be used. Sowana got nothing from the U.S. Whether I was a spy or not, which I'm not, didn't matter either. The publicity, which many may see as negative, would suit the Captain just fine. As much as he'd like to get a ransom, he would also be satisfied to earn whatever notoriety and reputation he could by standing up to the United States.

He looked me in the eyes, "Hurry and finish," he said, "We don't have much time."

Sweat was dripping down my forehead as I closed my eyes and sucked more smoke into my lungs. I could see the marksmen putting out their cigarettes and checking their weapons. Is this the time for an act of defiance? Do I spit the cigarette at the Captain? My hands are tied; my options are limited.

Do I come to peace with my life and death? Is there comfort in reviewing my life, trying to savor my memories and love of my



wife and children? Do I seek to feel the presence of God? Do I pray that the cavalry comes charging over the hill? How can I stretch out these last few minutes or seconds, how can I change this reality?

The Captain reached up to pull the cigarette from my mouth. "Please," I said from the corners of my lips, beseeching him to let me finish. I was through thinking. A last few puffs were all I had of this existence. He drew back his hand, and I sucked deeply. I could taste the filter starting to burn. The cigarette was finished. I was done.

I spit it on the ground and looked at the Captain. I wanted to tell him about my family, about my life, all that was right about it and all that was wrong. God, I'd made so many mistakes; there was so much of life I'd let slip by. So many things I didn't try, didn't do. His eyes were full of blood, his pupils hard. I knew nothing about him, and I knew he didn't care about me. There was no way I could reach him.

"Do you want a blindfold?" he asked. I looked at the hood he was turning over in his hands. I couldn't think of what to say, "I don't know."

Throwing the hood on the ground he pushed me against the tree at my back. Spitting beside my feet, he walked away. Stopping halfway between me and the marksmen, he barked an order.

They hastily arranged themselves in a line, their rifle's butts on the ground beside them. The Captain called out again, and they cradled their guns across their chests. One more command and they all took aim, seemingly noticing me for the first time, they worked the bolt's on their weapons, the sound of the metal clinking against metal seemed in this moment of insane reality to ground me. I stared back at them.

The Captain, this time in English, called out, "fire!"

In that second my heart, my breath, the blood in my veins all froze. In the next second I heard more metal clicking against metal, as each marksmen pulled the trigger on his empty gun. There were no bullets.

I came to my senses, taking a shallow breath. My legs were shaking and I realized I'd pissed myself.

The Captain, smiling for the first time, approached, "I am going to let you talk to your family. I want you to tell them that if I don't receive \$500,000 by wire in the next two days I will kill you." He brought his face a couple of inches from mine. His bloodshot eyes as thick and hard as those in a corpse. "Will you do that?"

I looked up at him, "give me a cigarette," I said.

By Rex Oppenheimer