

Cigarettes

By Takashima Hatsuhsa

Last fall I visited a hot spring in the Hokuriku region of northern Japan that was beautifully tinged with autumn colors. I decided to stay at a long-established Japanese-style hotel or *ryokan* where the proprietor with refined taste had reduced the number of rooms from over 100 to just 12 to offer service to his satisfaction. I was lucky to reserve a room on short notice and after soaking in the hot spring for the first time in quite a while, I threw myself down on *tatami* mats ready to enjoy the tasty crab and fish from the Sea of Japan. Yet somehow, I couldn't relax. The room

was nice, the serene garden before us was tastefully laid out, and there was nothing to complain about. There was, however, this faint odor of cigarettes hanging in the room. It wouldn't have been as bad if cigarette smoke was drifting in from a smoker in the next room; yet, the smell in the room was particularly unpleasant because it seemed to have been absorbed over many years. Even if I wanted to run out of all this, I couldn't request another room because my wife and I were told upon our arrival that we had taken the last available room. Well, I decided not to take the situation so seriously and thought that the smell wasn't all that bad, and by opening the windows and bearing the cold for some time, the smell would go away. I was too optimistic. Even after calling it a night, I couldn't fall asleep because of the odor. So, I sniffed various spots around the room again and again and found that the curtains seemed to be giving the strongest odor. It's dark outside, so why not open the curtains? Tying up



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the curtains seemed to have improved the situation, and I finally dozed off.

Seeing the way I had bustling about because of cigarette odor in the middle of the night, my wife was amazed to see "How people change." I couldn't argue because I had been a really heavy smoker, puffing away like a factory chimney every day for over 20 years since taking my first whiff at 17 until I quit at the age of 39. Seventeen years old. Back then, I was in my second year of high school and only smoked occasionally in secret. My father and grandfather were both heavy smokers, and I was used to cigarette smoke from my childhood, and for me, the question wasn't whether I would smoke or not but when I would start. Recent statistics show that one in three Japanese middle school boys has smoking experience, and this figure jumps to one in two for high schoolers. Maybe this makes me, for the most part, an average high school kid. There were a number of times when I would hear my mother coming when I was smoking secretly in

my room, and I would hurry to open the window and fan my jacket to let the smoke escape. After entering university, though, I started smoking everyday without minding these things. It was after I became a TV reporter that my number of cigarettes shot up considerably. Especially during my Washington D.C. correspondent years in my mid-30s, I am disgusted to say that my daily consumption was five packs of Winston, an American brand, which had 20 unfiltered cigarettes each. Naturally, smoke filled my home and office, and the curtains and carpets smelled strongly of cigarettes.

One night, I ran out of cigarettes in my pocket and looked for some that were supposed to be stashed in the cupboard, but they were nowhere to be found. I re-lighted a butt from the ashtray, but knowing I was out of cigarettes made me edgier. Waking my wife up would get me nowhere. So, in the middle of the night, I reluctantly had to drive to a drugstore that was open 24-hours a day. With doubts remaining, I pressed my wife for answers the next morning before leaving for work, and she yielded by bringing out the Winston cartons that used to be in the cupboard. My 7-year-old daughter had seen a film at school on how cigarettes were hazardous to one's health and had asked the teacher, "My father always smokes these bad cigarettes, and the house is filled with smoke. What should I do?" The teacher replied, "Just hide them." So, as soon as my daughter got home, she took the few cartons from the cupboard and hid them under her bed. With her intentions well understood, I had no

choice but to return the cartons under her bed and tried to refrain from smoking at home, but that didn't last long. Many years later when my daughter had grown up, I complained to her about her smoking, but she flatly said, "I can't believe what you're saying. When we were kids, the family had to breathe in so much smoke in the cramped Tokyo apartment and the Washington D.C. home with no fresh air in the winter and summer that I thought I'd turn into 'smoked-something.' You have no right to say that."

Just around the time when my daughter hid the cigarettes, I had a chance to cover the latest situation on smoking in the United States for a Nippon Hoso Kyokai (NHK, Japan Broadcasting Corporation) television program that broadcast overseas information. Because it was a report from the United States where cigarettes originated, the program introduced the relief sculpture of tobacco leaves displayed on the Capitol wall and documents that told the history of the colonial period, but the program mainly focused on the anti-smoking movement that was starting to spread at the time. We decided to attend night seminars for adults at a school in my neighborhood that taught how to quit smoking, in order to give a detailed report on what was being taught. The seminar was very impressive, as it went to the extent of taking a lung specimen of a person who had died of lung cancer and cut it open to show how stained it was. The participants from the neighborhood licked lollipops for the entire two-hour class trying to forget about nicotine and listened intently to the lectures on the horrors of smoking. I should have quit smoking then, but my purpose of attending the seminar was not to quit in the first place, so the cameraman, also a heavy smoker, and I ended up going outside with cigarettes in our hands each time after taking two or three cuts. And thus, the report concluded with the words, "I will consider whether or not to quit smoking over my puff."

After returning to Tokyo in 1979, I was afflicted with terrible chest pains just before departing for my filming trip

to the Middle East to report on the oil situation. X-rays revealed that my left lung was half filled with body fluid, and I was hospitalized immediately. Even a cigarette lover like myself did not feel like smoking during the treatment which lasted almost three months, and my illness gave me a chance to bid farewell to cigarettes. After quitting, it even surprises me how intolerant I have become of cigarettes, as I cannot stand the slightest odor of them in a ryokan room. Had I experienced the "Suffering that comes with quitting" and had I licked those candies desperately, maybe I would have understood or come to sympathize with smokers and those that want to but cannot quit, and I may have been a little more patient. But my illness allowed me to quit without any effort, and this may have made myself more strict with cigarettes.

As a non-smoker, I have come to notice how Japan is lenient with smokers. Public areas such as public transportation and theaters, of course, are applying a stricter no-smoking rule, but there are over 620,000 cigarette vending machines in Japan whose area is smaller than that of the state of California, and this environment allows minors to easily buy cigarettes. The warning on the cigarette package still indicates something like, "For your health, be careful not to over-smoke." This message seems much too weak in comparison with the United States or Canada where words like "dangerous" and "hazardous" are frequently used. In the negotiations on the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control (FCTC) of the World Health Organization (WHO) being held in Geneva, Japan is the only country that is opposed to the prohibition proposal against vending machines and is showing reluctance in banning advertisements, clearly indicating its position to protect tobacco farmers and to place importance on the tobacco tax. With the number of adult male smokers decreasing over the years, the percentage of non-smoking adult males was 51% in 1999, exceeding that of smokers for the first time. Nevertheless, females smokers topped 10% in 1999

and combined with smoking among minors, overall cigarette consumption has not fallen. Tobacco companies and the government collecting tobacco tax just can't seem to stop laughing. Reports from the United States say that since the Bush administration took office in 2001, the court ruling that ordered tobacco companies to pay huge compensation may be overturned, and these companies are enjoying excellent performance now that their cause of trouble is gone. These reports leave anti-smokers in low spirits.

Against this backdrop, I have developed a keen interest in the ordinance enacted in Fukaura, a town in Aomori Prefecture with population of 9,300, which has called for the removal of outdoor cigarette vending machines. In addition, Itami in Hyogo Prefecture with a population of 190,000 has bid a "Farewell to Smoking" by declaring it will "achieve a zero smoking rate among citizens within the next decade." Itami's declaration has been covered widely by the media as it was the first city in Japan to adopt such a policy. Tobacco companies have rushed to protest, while newspaper reporters stirred up disputes on the pros and cons. To what extent will these regional trends make their way to other parts of the country? The opening ceremony for the World Cup soccer finals jointly hosted by Japan and South Korea will be held on May 31. This date coincides with World No-Tobacco Day initiated by the WHO. Korea is proposing Japan that "prohibit smoking in all areas of the venues in both nations," but the Japanese side is arguing that "No smoking in the spectator seats is enough." As we near the World Cup, this issue will likely generate greater interest as an example indicating Japan's close connection to tobacco. I wish this will serve as a timely opportunity for Japan to become a country with a more critical eye toward smoking. **JUTJ**

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