

World's Best Quitter

“And people think they’re better than cigarettes,” Jason says, sitting across from me while we drink coffee. I just told him how when I would pick up my sister from school her friends would pass a vape around the back seats of my car. “People think it’s better than cigarettes. That’s why it’s worse.”

Jason drew the connection between the perceived harmlessness of vapes and the resulting accessibility, normality, and overuse of the nicotine-delivery device. Developed and marketed as quitting aids to smokers in the 2010s, electronic cigarettes showed real promise. Flavored like Menthol and Tobacco, giving a buzz with none of sex appeal, they were intended as an intermediary, a layover, between smoking and abstaining. Never an entry point. The best part is: they’re harmless, or so goes the pervasive ad campaign pressed at homecoming pregames and extended bathroom breaks. You can take ten bathroom breaks in an hour and drain your bank account over and over again, but still, no one can accuse you of being a smoker. A given cigarette contains 7,000 chemicals, including rat poison and plastic, though those don’t constitute the 70 known carcinogens. Thousands of vape companies have wafted their product through the FDA — easy, remember, because they’re quitting aids — so no one has the faintest idea what they contain.

“Cigarettes are easy,” I say in agreement. “Boom. Lung cancer; one and done. The jury’s still out on vapes.” That ambiguous gray area is jumped on by kids as a kind of absolution. My parents still quiver about the unknown portend of the five years they smoked 30 years ago. Vape users only kind-of-but-not-really know that vapes are better for you than cigarettes, and push that end like no other. Any unknown side effect of vaping — say 60-year latent exploding lungs — will only be compounded by the sheer ardor with which people guzzle strawberry lime fun time

vapor. “There’s no lingering scent, you don’t have to light it, you just keep it in your pocket,” Jason says. “It’s just easy.”

Vapes, or electronic cigarettes, are battery-powered, aerosol delivery devices that heat a liquid and create inhalable vapor. Usually cylindrical or rectangular, users put the perforated tip to their mouths and inhale as one would a cigarette. The battery is activated by a button or air intake, set off by the user puffing. A battery inside the body of the vape heats the liquid to a point of vaporization at which a pallid white plume forms. Users inhale the plume deep into their lungs, reportedly feeling euphoric, distressed, or dizzy, just like one does a cigarette. And I used to smoke cigarettes, too. The habit was the sediment of books by Bukowski and an old girlfriend who tasted like Newport’s; part of me wishes I stuck to the cigarettes.

Before COVID hit, I was just a white-toothed, year-one smoker at the age of 17. Having picked up the habit in a meaningful way (beyond the literary and the romantic) to take smoke breaks at my high-octane restaurant job, I can say that I started smoking for the right reasons: I was stressed and they de-stressed me. Soon after I started, I discovered the modern workplace only allows for a break every two hours. As months went on, those two hours became the anchors I structured my day around. On days off, left to my own devices, I was apt to sit in a park and smoke through half a pack on an empty stomach so as to not throw up. What was a high schooler’s appreciation for anything that made you feel mildly out of sorts turned to a badgering need to satisfy my cravings. When the world went into lockdown, my most pressing need was how to get that nagging little fix.

For all the reasons Jason said, I took up vaping as a means to keep the habit alive while living in such proximity to those who cared about my well-being. Young and with good lungs, I was my family’s designated grocery shopper during COVID. I would go to Safeway, buy what

was needed to survive, then tagline the trip with an excursion to the smoke shop, and buy what was needed to survive. The Washington, DC city council declared *Smoke Island* as an essential business, meaning it could keep its neon joint glowing and it's inflated, red-eyed Rasta alive as the pandemic waged on. Twice a week I would go in, choose a flavor form under the glass counter and retreat to isolation.

Where with cigarettes I had to train myself, put in the work, to stomach more than three a day, vapes came to me naturally. Take too many puffs and you might get dizzy, possibly nauseous, or even throw up, but then wait a couple hours and you're good to take another crack at it. In a week I was an expert. Sitting through zoom classes, I would turn my camera off whenever I needed to take a pull. After about two weeks the camera stayed off.

Vapes are discrete, so discreet they could pass as thumb drives, and their faint odor can be wiped out with minimal Febreze. With no ability nor need to go outside, the habit became esurient, and my room has never smelled better. Simply, I started vaping because I couldn't go on smoking. But there's a reason I had to go on with something. Strip a vape of its mechanics and strawberry shortcake flavored propylene glycol, confront it with the question of "why do we inhale?" and you're left with nicotine.

First isolated from the tobacco plant by German chemists Posselt and Reimann in 1828, nicotine was identified as the primary psychoactive compound of tobacco, or simply, the reason smoking feels so good. When you smoke, nicotine molecules flood the brain and fatefully maneuver their way to acetylcholine receptors, the same switch pressed by sex and MDMA.

Once nicotine bonds to the receptors, the brain releases dopamine, norepinephrine, and acetylcholine. Respectively that's the feeling of being rewarded, of mental acuity and sharpness, and pervasive stimulation like adrenaline. Nicotine is also the principal ingredient in a vape. In

fact, a whole pack of cigarettes worth of nicotine is condensed into a single cartridge of vape juice which, at the height of COVID, I was tearing through at a rate of two per day.

But vapes haven't been the only means by which I tried to quit smoking. Currently quitting, the nicotine patches that I'm wearing are a constant tease of how good a cigarette could be and the gum I've tried in the past hits too strong to be a stop-and-go, yet they both contain nicotine — so shouldn't they be as effective?

A detail so obvious that the FDA can leave it out of the warnings is that people are just as addicted to the motion, the knowing what to do with your hands at parties, the habitual pulls tied to the sun. My father would say when you quit smoking, you're quitting a thousand habits. That one bench you always smoke on when you pass demands a cigarette, as does the backdoor you exit out of when you leave work, as does the taste of coffee that's become entangled with smoke. When you smoke enough, the habit becomes a knotted, tumorous growth of the physical act of taking drags to the rising tides of each day.

With vapes, all you quit is the full body inflation of lungs billowing with smoke, not the drags. Nicotine is one thing, but everyone's addicted to their tics, a world of depraved addicts all trying to do what feels right. If smoking was the nicotine equivalent of a methadone clinic's dixie cup ratio, I'd be arrogant enough to say the habit wouldn't have swelled past 16. But no, it's the motion of feeling like Marlon Brando every 2 hours, or the slight nod other smokers will give you that makes cigarettes so incredible. It's all that's great about cigarettes you don't have to lose about vaping. It's the same thing that makes vaping impossible to give up.

Well, not impossible to give up. I currently don't vape. I "currently haven't vaped" at a minimum of five points in my life. I remember smoking with my chef, our aprons so greasy after

a manic shift that we risked catching alight, when she told me a recycled old joke: “quitting smoking is the easiest thing in the world. I’ve done it a hundred times.”

I have quit too many times to count. There are days when I would quit twice. I would smoke or vape and then say never again, even going as far as to throw a full pack or pod away before buying another two hours later. I’m quitting right now. Either I’m the world’s best quitter or the world’s worst quitter. Maybe I can blame my dad’s little league baseball sermon: “You’re no quitter.” Drags and nicotine are hard to quit, a fact that’s brutalized me for coming on five years. I knew this when I smoked for the first time, and I wasn’t as arrogant as to think I was the exception. However, when I started vaping under lockdown, I really had no idea how bad it was going to get.

I’m going to present the electronic cigarette in all three of its forms to hopefully show where things went wrong. Medicinal vaporizers were first patented in 1927 as heat-activated aerosol delivery devices. They were large devices looking much like what one would expect to get probed with on an alien spacecraft. They were used to treat asthmatics and deliver anesthesia. These vapes were not fun. Nicotine delivery devices hit the market in 1963. Using much of the same technology as medicinal vaporizers except heating up nicotine, these devices were sold as quitting aids. However, given that cigarettes were still in vogue at the time and yet to be slapped with ‘smoking kills labels,’ they didn’t gain traction. These vapes lacked sex appeal. Jump forward to 2015 and you have vapes in their current form. Sleek, slim and with flavors like mango and crème brûlée, these vapes were an instant success. Some, like Juul, use interchangeable pods you can clip in and out of the rechargeable battery. They had adopted technology to make them the most compact model yet. These vapes are so easy, a child can use them. And they did.

How was Juul, the leading vape manufacturer up to 2019, supposed to know that using underage actors in their advertisements would attract kids? How could Juul have expected a 15-year-old may see an appeal in a variety called “fruit medley”? How was Juul to know that their nonchalant advertising would entice me to sink more money into a vice than I ever have before or become debilitatingly dependent?

Addiction is a disease. The amount I was vaping during COVID made me feel like I was diseased. My head was a sudsy washing machine, swirling from oxygen deprivation and blood pressure changes. My throat was scorched dry yet with phlegm overflowing out over my tongue. My teeth were brittle as porcelain and my eyes were like septic yellow moons. My fingers shook with or without the fix and my muscles were taugt as petrified snakes curled up around my spine. The stairs up from my basement room — given I hardly left — were a menace and sometimes, at night, when I would breathe too hard, I swear I could hear little bubbles popping all across my lungs. I’m sure my parents noticed too. I was, of course, a moody prick, though that may have been a symptom of being 17 and not related to the disease.

This went on for six months. Though I didn’t take up vaping as a half-step on the way to a final, absolving quit, I can quite confidently say it doesn’t work. Vaping is a nasty, nasty habit that turned me into a sickly hamster sucking on a water syringe. It’s a medication for its own ailment. It’s like a firefighter who starts fires or a doctor who spreads venereal disease.

I haven't smoked or vaped for what should be around three weeks (my record is four months). I’m quitting because it’s a token step to self-improvement, because they’re bad for you, because the head shop on Forbes might start breaking kneecaps for the money I owe, and because the girl I’m seeing hates the taste. This might be the big quit, probably not, but I’m definitely never touching a vape again. I like smoking because I like to smoke. I know it’s not

good for me, yet I know it's better than vaping. I know that if I were a better, calmer, less anxious person I wouldn't feel the need for either. But if I'm going to suffuse life with slow death, I'd do it with a Marlboro over a Mango Lassi Puff Bar™.

Rational

In writing this essay, I was confronting the sole misconception of vapes as better than cigarettes — admittedly pulling only from anecdotal evidence as, officially, the jury is still out. Most of the information I pulled from the encyclopedia entry was the overview of the addictive properties of vapes and then went further to do more research into the origins of nicotine. I was trying to establish at a baseline why these devices are so addictive, then used my own experiences to back this up. I also pulled a lot of the history from the encyclopedia entry to build a more stylized chronology of how vapes came to subsume such an addictive form when they've been around since the 60s. I also pulled all the information needed to give the reader a baseline understanding of what a vape is and to be able to identify one if they saw one.

My primary structure choices were inspired by David Foster Wallace's *Consider the Lobster*. I used the closures of my paragraphs to lead into a tangent taken on by the next one, all while wrapping around the central narrative of my own experiences with vaping. The aim here was to fluidly provide context and evidence to validate my experiences without bogging the reader down with too many technical junks. On the latter, I tried to veer away from technicalities by presenting the hard facts with examples and language choices that (I hope) made it more interesting to read. Lastly, in the paragraph about my quitting attempts, I used my experience with vapes and cigarettes interchangeably to show how vapes are as hard, if not harder, to quit and confront the common understanding that they're quitting devices.

I think my paragraph on the chronology of vapes works best primarily due to my sentence-level style choices. By following the description of period vapes with the impact they had (i.e. these vapes lacked sex appeal) I think I was effectively able to show why the technology only took prominence in recent years. I also think the tone worked quite well in that paragraph because yes vapes are addictive and yes addiction is a disease, it is only nicotine. I understand

I'm not quitting a drug with the potential to be life-threatening, and I think this paragraph especially steps away from the melodrama.

Upon a rewrite, I'm going to strengthen the thread tying my first paragraph to my last. My general thesis is suggested as "in a sense, vapes are worse than cigarettes," which I don't know how effectively I was able to show. I think this can largely be addressed by stating this in the first and last paragraph directly, or by possibly having a recurring juxtaposition of vapes and cigarettes throughout.