

T’was a lovely spring afternoon in downtown Chapel Hill. I strolled down the sidewalk captivated by the sweetly unfurling new green leaves on the limbs of the trees in an untidy row beside me. The temperature was exactly perfect, and the delicate spring sun shone upon my face and bare forearms. Having passed by the shops on Main Street (boutiques and other such stores beyond my means) and turned the corner, I was now passing those second-string store fronts and offices rented by business owners who relied more on word-of-mouth than touristy location for their commerce. I scanned for the address numerals that would indicate I had arrived at my destination. As Main Street receded, and seediness had just begun to make an appearance, the tarnished brass numbers appeared on an old wooden door next to a shop display window that showcased only an abandoned and dusty wooden desk and straight back chair upon which fell a single beam of light bursting with dust motes. A moment’s pause, then I rang the bell, as I had been instructed to do by the gentleman I was there to see.

A somewhat chubby man, of medium height with light brown hair beginning to recede at the forehead opened the door, smiling and showing off his pearly whites. Peering down the Home-Depot-special wood-paneled hallway behind him, I noticed the lint and bits of debris on the well-worn carpeting and that dry dusty smell that comes of little use, as well as the fact that the building tilted just a little. “Jim Pillow,” the gentleman said, and stuck out his hand. I shook and gave my name. Amidst a bit of small talk, he led me down the hallway towards the back of the building, and just before a doorway marked “Storage Closet” we made a left into a sparsely appointed office. Jim Pillow, dressed in trousers and a diamond-patterned pullover sweater without a shirt collar showing, plopped into a chair behind the big old desk that surely came from a yard sale or junk shop. He indicated a plush new-looking recliner, the only other piece of furniture in the tiny room, and I sat. Glancing down under the desk, I noticed brown tasseled loafers with no socks. Now I ask you, does this fit the profile for a hypnotist?

No matter- I needed an unconventional hypnotist to help me overcome a common habit in an unconventional way. I wanted to quit smoking. I wanted the monkey off my back.

Having tried every known approach to ending the smoking habit, from cold turkey to, yes, hypnosis, I was an expert at quitting smoking. It was staying quit that I didn't have down. This time I was after something different; I wanted regression hypnosis. I wanted to go back to the original cause of my smoking habit, the underlying mental pattern, the original event that had me locked into a habit I no longer wanted to be part of my life.

After I explained to Jim what I wanted, he nodded. Wasting no time, he began the induction. “Close your eyes back down... lose the numbers... all gone...” I was under. With Jim's unusual induction style, I was in a deeply relaxed, hypnotic state, yet conscious of us and our words. Drifting back, back through time, back to teen age years and that first cigarette. How badly I wanted to be a smoker so that a gorgeous boy of the slouching leather jacket crowd who I had a crush on would want to date me who was an egg head, a nerd. The first cigarette I ever smoked, an unfiltered Pall Mall- one sassy inhale and I turned 'bout face and walked smack into a huge oak tree! Ouch. And yes, the memories of Dad smoking till he coughed up blood, and Mom screaming at him to quit, did he want to die of throat cancer in his bed like her father did, and if he did, she was damned if she was going to nurse him in his death bed. And Grandpa Toner with the big chunk out of his lower lip- removed due to cancer from smoking a pipe all his life. All this was nothing new and was not getting me where I wanted, needed, to go. I didn't know where that was exactly, but I knew this wasn't it.

Restless, frustrated, I muttered it wasn't working. From afar, Jim's voice commanded me, “deeper, deeper now...going back....” And then I was there! I was someone and somewhere I had never seen before.

I was a young boy of maybe 15 years, tall and gangly, with unkempt black wavy hair to the collar. Strong black brows shadowed deep set dark eyes and hollowed cheeks highlighted my emaciation. I was wearing loose colorless pants and shirt, like long sleeved hospital scrubs, but of a coarse material. I wore a short shabby jacket of the same

scratchy thin material. My ankles and wrists stuck out of the too-short garments and my feet were wrapped in rags. My teeth chattered from the cold and my lips were tinged blue. I and two other boys bantered with a warmly dressed soldier outside the doorway to some offices in a commandeered house, taunting and teasing as if to entice him to chase us. In his heavy wool overcoat, fur hat and boots, he remained immobile, rifle slung over one shoulder and a strong wood baton swinging at his side.

With good-natured gruffness, he said, “Seien Sie ab mit Ihnen!” Be off with you! Laughing, we ran off towards a low wooden barracks that looked like it had once been a chicken coop.

We were in a German work camp for youth. It was not a concentration camp as there were no gas chambers or horrible experiments or mass executions. Our job was to dig the stone quarry from sun-up to sundown, until we died from exhaustion, starvation, illness, or cold. The Nazis, in what they considered their kindness to the young Jewish boys, were working us to death. We each had a lice-infested flimsy mattress upon a hard bunk and one thin blanket which the boys would steal from each other when desperate. We were given a tin bowl of cold gruel, occasional piece of hard bread, and a cup of water at each day’s beginning and end. There was no heat.

We were always hungry. We were always tired. We were always cold.

One morning in those chicken coop barracks I found myself so exhausted I couldn’t get up. The boys shook me, and dragged me from my bunk, “Daveed, get up! Hurry! Get up.” They dragged me to the yard from which we began our trek to the quarry each day, yelling and shouting, “Get up! Get up!” But the mind-numbing sluggishness dragged me down into a stupor. I staggered into line and wavered drunkenly on my feet. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, in the world I wanted more than to drop to the ground and

sleep- even to die. The idea of falling into a deep slumber and then into death was so appealing it was a burn in my gut, an all-consuming thought behind my eyes.

But alas, our task-master whacked me straight across my back with his stick, knocking the wind from my lungs and knocking me down to my knees. Then, shouting in German and cursing me, he hit me over and over again about my legs and arms and head. "Get up!" Somehow I managed to lurch to my feet as he beat me and shouted. Thoughts of slumber and the sweet release of death were driven from me, replaced by fear and pain.

We trudged in a line to the quarry and the day of hauling rock and swinging the hammer was a living nightmare from which I could not wake. I thought to myself, "let me die, let me die."

At day's end I could barely hold the bowl of gruel to my lips. And then I felt the tap upon my shoulder- one, two, three times the guard tapped me on the shoulder with his baton. Oh, this was a cruel one, the meanest of the bunch. He had heard about the morning's escapade and apparently regretted that I had inconvenienced one of his men by causing him to have to beat me- or so I gathered through my mind-numbed haze. Matter of factly he informed me I was to be punished.

"Mock Schniel" Hurry up! He shoved me before him across the main compound yard, poking me with his stick. Past the soldier's quarters with the warm lights and the smoke from a fire drifting up from a chimney within, to a point in the middle of the wide, barren dirt area between the soldiers' building and the high barbed-wire fencing that defined our prison. Confused, I thought he would shoot me- execute me- there on the spot. But something much worse awaited me.

Impassive, he gestured towards the ground. Looking down, I saw a big square hole in the earth, holding a rusted metal box. The box was about 4 feet long by 4 feet wide by 4 feet deep and came just up to the level of the ground where we stood. The guard gestured and shouted and poked me with his baton, and I slowly comprehended that he wanted me to climb into the box. As my panic began to take hold, he pushed me and I toppled into the cavity in the earth. He used his baton and his booted foot to shove me down and instinctively I curled up on my side to protect myself from his blows. As the beefy guard heaved the heavy iron lid into place, the last of the yard light slipped from my sight.

Shock and panic flowed over and through me like lightning bolts. No room to move, to stretch, to turn, to strike out- I was wedged into the unyielding box with no room to spare. Fear was a living entity sharing this prison with me. Icy tendrils of darkness caressed the surface of my open eyes, mocking me. In darkness, the cold gained presence, and its unrelenting touch became more intimate- first my face and hands, bare ankles, then seeping through my hair down to my scalp, and finally slipping beneath my clothes to steal any small bit of warmth that might struggle to pulse there. Where my cramped body pressed against the rusty iron floor and walls, the cold was more arrogant, deliberately making its way through skin, then muscle, and down to the marrow of my bones. I felt my blood cool and slow its course. My heart fought for every beat, pumping icy sludge to my lungs and belly. As my core cooled, and my violent shivering became more intermittent, painful physical sensations dimmed and my thoughts began to shift from panic to horror.

Just that morning I had wished for- begged for! death. But this! Not this! Alone, silent, buried in the cold dark earth, unable to move, unable to feel- unable to rage – my despairing thoughts were only of my utter isolation. Cold and pain, even imprisonment, were suffered together by all the boys. This was different. I yearned for someone, anyone, to acknowledge I was here, to tell me this was going to end, to tell me I should fight for my sanity as well as my life.

And in that moment as I, David, begin to disappear, poised on the brink of the schism of self, a boot fell heavily onto the lid of my box. Instantly my mind woke up and burned with the awareness that someone was standing on top of my box- to let me out? No, for what came to me was the smell of smoke- the companionable, delicious, smell of cigarette smoke. The guard did not speak, but he stayed with me, smoking, and I suppose keeping watch. He must have wondered if I was dead or alive- for I did not yell out- I could not.

Later, in my unconscious state I did not hear the lid being removed but became aware of being lifted from my iron prison into the weak sunshine of day. I was carried to the barracks and unceremoniously dumped on a bunk. I had made it through the night. The shakes woke me fully but my thinking was fuzzy. As feeling returned, pain came.

I was unable to work the quarry, at first because of the frostbite, and then because I was sick and burning with fever. When death came, I left my body in my bunk, but with my soul and my Self intact.

Emerging, shaken, from the memories of another lifetime, I quietly took my leave of the hypnotist’s office. At home, I stood on my front porch, drinking in the aroma of the pines and watching a pair of bluebirds work together on their nest. I pondered the psychic branding of that long-ago cigarette saving my life, my soul, my sanity. I contemplated the social aspects of smoking that called me back to the habit time and time again: Times of companionship, or the longing for companionship; Times of celebration; Family gatherings, parties, weddings, funerals; Times of great stress. These psychic traps brought the need for a cigarette to a burning desire to which I had been mostly powerless to say no. I considered that soldier being “on top.” He belonged to the elite- the soldiers, the “haves”- while I belonged to the have-nots. He had boots, warm clothing and food - I did not. And he had cigarettes. I did not.