

*Nick and Choose* { NICK ALTSCHULLER }

## LIGHTING UP

On the efficacy and dissatisfaction of electronic cigarettes



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IT'S A FILTHY HABIT. Though it may feel cool, we all know the facts as we willfully suck the pollutants into our bodies. Long-term use is linked to hypertension, cardiovascular disease and cancer. Occasional use can become a crutch, which turns into addiction. Like many people, I ignore these facts and continue to drink. Then I sometimes want a cigarette.

I'm not a smoker by any stretch. My occasional lapses in judgment usually end with me waking up inflamed and regretful, gargling Listerine as I try to avoid my reflection in the mirror. I have an unabashed love for gadgets, though, and with the rise of electronic cigarettes, I was itching to give them a try. Plus, there was the notion that I could obliterate my occasional cravings by smoking myself sick, like a boy discovering his grandfather's Pall Malls.

Approximately 2.5 million Americans used electronic cigarettes last year. In a recent Italian study, after six months of e-cigarette use, more than half of the test subjects reported at least a 50 percent drop in their regular cigarette consumption. Free from the formaldehyde, tar and other carcinogens found in a pack of Camels, an e-cigarette instead contains a small reservoir of nicotine that's vaporized with each puff to create an inhalable mist.

While many medical organizations view e-cigarettes as a useful alternative to smoking, they're not fully stamped as safe. The Food and Drug Administration and the American Cancer Society have tried to block their sale. They're currently banned in Canada, the land of universal health care, but are also illegal in Denmark, home of sanctioned prostitution, and Mexico, where a Tijuana pharmacist will sell you horse tranquilizers without a prescription.

I received a couple of shipments through the mail. From Krave, purportedly the industry's most popular brand, came a disposable e-cigarette (\$15) approximately equal to two packs of the real thing. Almost immediately, what began as a mischievous inquiry became a shameful embarrassment. "That could not get tackier," said one coworker as my inhalations lit the plastic rhinestone tip a bedazzling shade of blue. With the color scheme and the unwieldy weight, the sensation is more like sucking on



### It's like getting caught kissing your animatronic girlfriend.

a Maglite than a Marlboro. And though it was thrilling to legally smoke inside a bar, I was too humiliated to take more than a brief, secretive toke. It's a robotic facsimile of sin. Getting caught smoking a Krave would be like getting caught kissing your animatronic girlfriend.

The situation improved with the arrival of the V2 Ultimate Kit (\$160) stocked with a variety of models, chargers and cases. I shared the contents with a coworker who'd recently fallen back into the habit, and we both began to warm to the e-cigarette's potential. With the industry's "thickest stream," V2 does a better job mimicking the density of actual smoke, so it's easier to succumb to the fantasy of enjoying a real cigarette. Plus, discussing office politics with your feet on your desk and a cigarette in your hand drapes the workday in a *Mad Men* atmosphere, without the stink or the fear of ashing on the carpet. By the time we broke out the flavor packs, which ranged from cherry (noxious), to peppermint (oddly refreshing), to coffee (frustratingly tasty), I began to worry that I might be enjoying myself.

There are key negatives, though. First, e-cigarettes lack any sense of ceremony. There's no opening spark, smoldering middle or

stamped out finale, just an endless, unsatisfying series of impotent draws. And while the routine is ruined, the physical reactions remain the same. The dry mouth, the itchy throat, the dilemma that bubbles up in the mind of "Why did I do that?" Of course, that can be spun as a positive. You're not supposed to want to smoke, and in fact, my coworker said he could see quitting if he had a supply of e-cigarettes at the ready, so I gave him all I had left.

But my self-destructive curiosity remained. During my trial, an e-cigarette exploded in a Florida man's face, turning his front teeth into shrapnel. I continued my experiment anyway. On my last night, like a sign from above, a friend told me he had cancer, and I still took a few furtive puffs. And the honest reason why is because e-cigarettes aren't poisonous enough. I was chasing a buzz that the knockoff couldn't deliver. But I tried anyway. As with any regrettable act, there's some element of gratification motivating you to commit it in the first place. Smoking is unsavory, but at least it's a relaxing, tingling misdeed.

I know that cigarettes are stupid, so I didn't need the lesson. I needed an excuse. What I got was a faulty approximation best left to those looking to kick smoking and not to those who smoke for kicks. \*\*\*

Got an opinion? Send your stories and suggestions to [nick@improper.com](mailto:nick@improper.com).