

Lucky Strikes

Lucky Strikes

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Ever tried to quit smoking? Maybe after this dark tale you will..or maybe not...



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Frank Matthews loved smoking. Ever since the age of 16 when he had his first butt, he was hooked on the taste of the smoke snaking down his throat and warming his lungs; the tingling of his tongue and the sense of lightheadedness he experienced.

Now 41, Frank's passion for nicotine had far from abated as his habit grew to one pack of unfiltered Lucky Strikes per day.

He exited the Korean variety store this morning at 6:00 a.m. before his first fare of the day. He unwrapped the cellophane off the pack and hastily threw the tin foil into the wind. He tapped the pack on his right palm to extrude the first cigarette when he noticed something odd.

The normal pack of twenty cigarettes only contained 19 and a piece of white paper curled up to represent the remaining pack member. Part of him wanted to burst back into the store, angry, *demanding* that extra nicotine stick while the other part of him was oddly compelled to read this message.

He carefully removed the note from the pack and unraveled it with his first cigarette of the day drooping unlit from between his lips. The note read:

Tired of the hacking cough?

Tired of loss of taste?

The time to quit smoking is NOW!

Phone NeuroQuit (212) 837-QUIT

Frank was tempted to throw the note onto the streets of New York as he had the packaging but decided to ponder its message a bit further. Cupping one hand over another to get his cigarette lit, he tried to imagine what life would be like without polluting his lungs and jeopardizing his health as well as that of the environment.

He had heard of other various remedies to quit; hypnosis, yoga, acupuncture and just plain cold turkey, but none of these had he tried as quite simply he didn't *want* to stop. Smoking was a great pleasure in life that he cherished.

He opened the door to his Yellow Cab parked on the curb and began his day, cruising 51st street, hoping to catch an early morning fare en route to work or a business meeting.

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As he drove and the morning progressed, he thought more and more about NeuroQuit. There was no explanation given as to what they actually did to you, how long it would take, chances of effectiveness or more importantly cost. Part of him would love to go back to the day when he was in middle school taking his first drag and instead saying "no thanks", thinking that there was no way possible he could quit now.

But what if he could? What if he was able to drop the habit and begin a new health conscious existence? Despite the fear he felt in his heart, he decided that a simple consultation couldn't hurt and perhaps he would so turned off by their offer he would feel like an idiot for even contemplating quitting in the first place.

Mind you, his wife Jenny was always ragging on him to stop. *Your breath stinks, your clothes stink and it's not socially acceptable anymore*, she would reprimand him. Maybe, just maybe his marriage would improve if he made that big step.

After dropping off a lady at the Rockefeller Centre, he pulled out of the steadily growing morning traffic onto a side street and put on his hazard lights.

He reached for his Blackberry in the glove box and called NeuroQuit.

After a few rings a pleasant female voice answered. "NeuroQuit, today is the day. Lindsay speaking. May I help you?"

Frank cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, uh, I read your little advert in a pack of smokes and.."

"Well!" Lindsay exclaimed. "Perfect! Why don't you come on down for a consultation with our expert staff?"

Frank nervously scratched his head. "Yeah, well I had a coupla questions that.."

"No problem sir. Our expert staff can handle all of your concerns."

"Okay, but I mean, is there a cost?"

The cheerful voice came back on. "The initial consultation is absolutely free sir. You owe it to yourself to come on in and improve your health!"

Frank said, "Okay, where abouts are you?"

"Right at the corner of 57th and Broadway. Big grey building with red sign reading 'NeuroQuit'. Can't miss it."

Frank knew the building, but somehow he didn't recall ever having seen the sign before. "Okay, I'll be there in let's say an hour? Will that do?"

"Certainly," Lindsay replied. "And the name sir?"

"Frank Matthews. M-A-T-T-H-E-W-S, like it sounds."

There was a pause for a few seconds on the line.

"Hello?" Frank asked. "You there?"

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“Mr. Matthews, we look forward to seeing you,” Lindsay answered.

A few minutes before 10:00 a.m., Frank’s cab pulled up to the building that housed NeuroQuit. It was a large, ominous mirrored high-rise with cold, grey cement visible along the sides. Sure enough an illuminated red sign was visible affixed to one of the mirrors displaying the business name.

He grabbed a parking ticket from a machine and waited until the automatic arm allowed his vehicle through. He hoped in the back of his mind that they validated parking even if he didn’t agree to their program.

After parking his vehicle, he made his way into the building and admired the swanky brass door handles and newly polished granite floors as he entered.

He scanned the directory of the building and saw many other reputable businesses in the same establishment; barristers and solicitors, a property casualty insurance company and a computer server business to name a few.

As his finger ran down the list, he came to NeuroQuit 4th Floor. The entire floor was the business! No suite number. *Somebody’s doing well*, he figured.

He sauntered through the large lobby to the elevators and entered aside a slim black woman in a sharp blue blazer and matching slacks.

He nervously pressed the 4th floor and waited as the elevator began its ascent.

“Trying to quit?” asked the woman.

“Yeah, something like that,” murmured Frank.

“Good for you,” she smiled. “I hear they are very effective.”

Frank smiled back and nodded politely. *We’ll just see about that*, he thought.

The door opened and he stepped out to a plush waiting room with tan carpeting and a large oak reception desk where a pretty blonde girl about twenty five years old sat. Her hair was tied back in a ponytail and she wore designer glasses as she gazed at a computer monitor and typed away.

“Hi, I’m Frank Matthews, 10:00 a.m. appointment?”

Her face broke out into a wide smile. “Yes, of course Mr. Matthews. Good to see you. I’m Lindsay. Please have a seat and I will get Dr. Caruthers for you.”

Frank sat down in one of the plush upholstered waiting room chairs. There were four in total, none occupied at present. He regarded some of the magazines on the coffee table in front of him. *Time*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Wall Street Journal*. What, no *Cigar Afficionado*? he joked to himself.

As he idled a few minutes flipping through the *Time* magazine, eventually a tall gray haired gentleman approached in a traditional white lab coat. He was slim, too slim, making him almost appear to be malnourished. He wore glasses that seemed a bit too large for his sunken face. He extended a bony hand and provided a warm smile.

“Mr. Matthews? Ted Caruthers. Glad you came.”

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Frank stood and accepted his handshake.

“Right this way please.” Caruthers guided him through the hallway to his office. All the neighboring offices had tinted windows, blocking an outsider’s view. The place was impeccably clean with the faint smell of Lysol permeating the corridor.

As they neared the end of the hallway, Caruthers moved aside and extended his arm allowing Frank to enter his office first.

Frank sat himself down in a black leather chair which sank slightly as he did.

Caruthers snaked his way around his desk to place himself into a rolling desk chair with high back. He placed both scrawny elbows on the table and said, “So, been smoking long?”

Frank noticed a thick notepad with coiled spine with an expensive-looking pen lying on top.

“Yeah, yeah quite some time” about 25 years now.”

Caruthers’s eyebrows rose, “Well that is quite awhile, yes indeed. Ever tried to quit before?”

Frank shrugged. “No, I haven’t.”

Caruthers looked quizzical. “Really? Like not even for a short period?”

Frank managed a nervous laugh and coughed as he did. “No, I like it too much.”

Caruthers broke out into the wide smile once again. “I’ll bet you do, but at least you are here now and you want to make the change.”

“I think so.”

“Well Frank, before we get into specifics, let me tell you a bit about what we do here at NeuroQuit and how we are going to change your life.”

He reached down beside him and pulled out an Apple laptop computer and waited a moment for it to boot up.

“Nice place you have here, Doc,” Frank said.

Caruthers nodded. “State of the art. Spared no expense and the rewards we give people make it all worthwhile.”

Caruthers then began to type on the keyboard and then turned the monitor to face Frank. He then rolled his chair over beside him so that both could regard the screen.

“Frank, I am a Neuropsychologist. Essentially an expert of the brain’s workings.”

He pointed the mouse to the image on the screen of the side view of the human brain.

“This here is an area of the brain called the insula, part of what is known as the limbic system. Don’t worry about the particulars, but suffice it to say this part of the brain is our pleasure and reward centre. It can read body cravings for nicotine, food, alcohol, take your pick.”

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Frank watched as the mouse danced across the screen, not quite comprehending everything the doctor was telling him, but listening nonetheless.

“Frank, we at NeuroQuit have developed a revolutionary new approach to addiction control. Through perfectly harmless microlasers, we can reach your insula, without surgery mind you, and rid you of your craving memory. Simple as that.”

Frank studied the photo of the brain again, watching the screen change to demonstrate a cartoon laser beam passing through the skull of a cartoon patient happily smiling throughout the procedure.

“It is painless, effective and safe. Essentially you forget that you ever liked cigarettes in the first place.”

Frank ran a hand along his chin. “Now is this, like, approved by the government or what have you?”

Caruthers’ smile melted slowly from his face and he became deathly serious. “Frank, we’ve been around for five years now. Not a long time, especially to get government approval. No, I can’t say that it is, but we have published many successful articles in reputable medical journals, *The Lancet* amongst them as well as providing a cornucopia of educational materials on line.”

Frank raised an eyebrow, “A cornucopia?”

Caruthers’ wide smile returned. “Indeed, a cornucopia. I can show you the YouTube link or our website Neuroquit.com.”

Frank held up his hand, “Nah Doc, that won’t be necessary. I’m just a little apprehensive about screwing with my brain.”

Caruthers drew up a finger like a lightning bolt, “Ah, but you’ll screw around with your body by feeding it noxious poisons now won’t you? Frank, make the right decision.”

Frank shifted in his seat and wished he had his Lucky Strikes on his person at this very moment.

“How much does it cost?”

Caruthers waved his finger in the air. “Don’t concern yourself with cost Mr. Matthews. Please. We can assure you, you will see results in 3 visits, otherwise you won’t need any further treatment as maybe it’s just not for you. Our motto is ‘three strikes and you’re out.’” He then laughed heartily and appeared to wipe a tear from his eye. “Ahhh, I slay me sometimes.”

“No cost?”

Caruthers shook his head. “No cost.”

Frank was even more skeptical now than ever. “So, how do you make any money?”

Caruthers arose from his seat pushed his chair back behind the desk. “Control trials, advertising, research grants from investors, that sort of thing. All you need worry about is to get yourself in good health.”

Frank shifted in his seat. “Can I think about it a bit?”

Caruthers’ jovial smile melted away once again. He leaned into the table as if about to share an intimate secret. “Mr. Matthews, I do not suggest you do that. Research has shown that the more people procrastinate

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about things in life the less likely they are to actually do them. You owe it to you and your wife.â

Frank blinked at him. â How did you knowâ lâ

Caruthers gestured to his wedding band. â Some of us wear â em and some donâ t.â Another deep laugh at his own joke and wiping of the eye.

Frank leaned in as well as if sharing the same secret. â I wonâ t feel nothinâ ?â

Caruthers beamed once again. â Not a thing, Mr. Matthews.â

Frank slammed an open palm on the desk. â Screw it, Iâ m in. Jen will be so happy.â

Caruthers pushed an intercom on the side of his desk. â Lindsay, Mr. Matthews has decided to begin treatment here. Can we please get a nurse in room six to prepare him?â

He stood and gestured for Matthews to leave the office.

Frank turned and said, â Will it be long?â

â In and out,â Caruthers replied.

Moments later, Frank emerged from the change room, clad in a green patient gown fastened from behind and was lead by a male nurse into one of the rooms with the tinted windows.

Inside the room was an adjustable chair with hydraulic bottom, similar to those seen in dentistsâ offices.

â Have a seat,â the nurse said. â Make yourself as comfortable as can be.â

Frank lowered his frame onto the seat and reclined back slightly using a lever on the left side.

Caruthers came in wearing a surgical mask. Frank could tell he was smiling as his eyes were all scrunched up.

â Now Mr. Matthews, a few little precautionary measures we have to take here for your safety..â

The nurse took two straps attached to either side of the chair and buckled them tightly around Frankâ s wrists.

â Whatâ s that for?â Frank asked, a hint of desperation in his voice.

â Oh, just in case you feel the need to get out of the chair during the procedure. Nothing really. Just for safety,â the nurse assured him.

Caruthers slapped on a pair of Latex gloves and tilted his neck to the right eliciting an audible crack. He looked over at the nurse and said, â Could I please have Mr. Matthewsâ file?â

Frank looked at the nurse incredulously. â My file? I have a file already?â

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Caruthers did not respond as the nurse handed Caruthers a legal size file folder that was a few centimeters thick.

He idly scanned through a few pages after which he muttered. "Oh dear. Yes, yes, as I had suspected."

Frank's eyes grew wide. "What? Expected what? What's wrong?"

Caruthers pulled up a stool on wheels and sat down his lanky frame as he looked Matthews straight in the eyes.

"Sometimes this happens, Mr. Matthews." He sighed, "This is your *fourth* visit here."

Frank's eyes appeared to bulge out of their sockets. He desperately wanted a Lucky Strike right about now.

"My *what?* I ain't never been here before!"

Caruthers nodded solemnly. "Yes, yes you have Mr. Matthews. Here is a photocopy of your signed consent, my initial examination findings and your entrance fee cheque of \$10,000."

Frank's wrist strained against the straps. "You said it was *free* goddamn it!"

Caruthers held up a bony hand. "Free for *this subsequent visit*, Mr. Matthews. Clearly the first three efforts have failed and that makes me very sad indeed. You see, the procedures affect the memory centers of your brain, specifically the addiction centers and occasionally people like yourself forget you even came here in the first place."

Frank's heart started pounding and he could feel his temperature rising. "You..you said three strikes and you're out, right? Isn't that what you said?"

"I did indeed," Caruthers responded. "So..that is why I need to refresh your memory a little bit on the contract you signed way back on day one, almost one year ago."

Frank's brain scrambled for memory. He had never seen this wacky doctor before, been in this sterile room, undergone any sort of laser brain treatment—what the hell was going on here? He tried in vain to free himself from the straps, all to no avail.

Caruthers pulled out a sheet of paper and held it in front of Frank's face. His long index finger with perfectly manicured nail encircled the bottom portion of the contract.

"See the part here highlighted in green? This clause basically says that if we, NeuroQuit, fail to successfully cure you of smoking within three sessions, then you owe us your body organs."

"MY WHAT???" Matthews shrieked and thrashed in his chair.

Caruthers put a finger to his lips covered by the green mask. "Please Mr. Matthews, save your energy. These rooms are soundproof and tinted. No one can hear or see you. Now please listen. The contract clearly states that I, Frank Matthews hereto referred to as CLIENT agree to provide NeuroQuit Inc. hereto referred to as PROVIDER to donate all of CLIENT'S healthy organs if and only if the treatment rendered by PROVIDER has failed after 3 (three) visits. This is visit four Mr. Matthews."

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Frank finally gave up his resistance and slumped back in the chair. "You can't get away with this! This is murder!"

Caruthers stood up from the stool and shrugged his lanky shoulders. "No, not murder, Mr. Matthews..public service. You see, if you do not respect your body enough to quit that filthy habit of yours, then why not use what remaining healthy organs you have to give to others that can truly benefit from them? You will be doing an awful lot of people an awful lot of good, Mr. Matthews."

Frank gritted his teeth. He craved a Lucky Strike now more than ever. "And I suppose the recipients of my organs pay you as well? For *my* body? Is that right?"

Caruthers' eyes scrunched into a smile yet again. "Making money is the cornerstone of any successful business, is it not?"

"You sonofabitch lying scumbag.."

Caruthers now had a needle in his hand which he flicked with his index finger, causing a tiny droplet to fly out of the end. "Now, now Mr. Matthews calm down. You won't feel a thing.."

The man with the tweed jacket was walking his golden Labrador Retriever near Central Park on a sunny Sunday afternoon. He felt the pockets of his jacket to see if he had remembered to take his cigarettes with him as he often enjoyed a smoke while taking Jethro out for a walk.

Blast, left them on the night table.

He entered the 24 hour grocery store to purchase another pack, carefully tying Jethro's leash to a fire hydrant before entering.

He removed the cellophane and tin foil from the pack and extracted the first cancer stick. Oddly enough a note was included inside the pack.

Hmm, NeuroQuit. Never heard of them before. Maybe it would be worth a try!

FIN

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