

[The Nicotine Hiatus](#)

by Freida Theant

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Penny moaned. The red-haired business manager just calculated the time span of her enforced no-smoking for her spur-of-the-moment out-of-town conference. "Thursday I won't be able to smoke for at least fourteen hours." Depressed, she pondered, "That's how long I'll be in the air, in taxis and presenting our strategy to 'corporate' while conferring with our clients."

She knew that it wouldn't be possible to slip in a smoke break in a schedule that tight, since she would never get the smell of smoking out of her hair and clothes in time. Her company Strategic Business Solutions held the automatic assumption that their employees are non-smokers, or at least present the unassailable appearance of having pink lungs.

She dropped the phone's receiver back on its cradle anxious about her sudden, significant call from 'corporate'. Just to get her mind around the enormity of this projected abstinence she would have to light up within the next several minutes or suffer a panic attack.

She rose from her cubicled desk, grabbing her purse, donning her charcoal three-quarter length coat and slender black rabbit skin gloves. Penny fled to the elevators for a quick descent to the pavement outside; the ice and snow had been largely shoveled off, with crunchy sidewalk salt crackling beneath their soles and scattered cigarette butts.

A few dozen nicotine-starved office workers on break gathered near the entrance to this thirty story office building in the business district where they shivered together, draped in a fog of Marlboro, Winston and Newport smoke. As the newcomer, Penny could only bumble around the outer fringe of the cluster, farthest from the overhead shelter of canopies and awnings.

Talk was scarce; the business at hand was smoking, not chit chat. Smokers lose valuable lunch time minutes just to light up here before eating their sandwiches. Some managed coffee in a Styrofoam cup, balancing cigarette, pack and lighter in one hand, and the white foam cup in the

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other.

The smokers were so involved in maximizing their time with their cigarettes, many barely interacted with the others. The crowd was subdued; even their cell phones were a distant second in interest on this particular noon; the exceptions including the moms who called their family members during this break, and sweethearts whispering sweet nothings to each other via their cell phones.

The women and men alike engaged in various aspects of power smoking. Double pumps were a clue that a smoker was at the tail end of her/his break, who tried to inhale as much smoky relief as possible smoking the whole length of their cigarettes, too, so that the butts were shorter than the average. Their frantic drags were longer than the casual pulls so typical of at-home smoking in front of the TV.

Penny, in the throes of a full blown 'cigarette jones,' reached into her handbag to fetch her lighter and pack of Virginia Slims while observing the brunette next to her with her straight shoulder-length hair. Her neighbor's hollowed cheeks and pressed lips gave the impression that she was sipping fire through her cigarette as she lit up her third one of her break, but the illusion was dispelled when she ejected that spurt of discard smoke and the tip flared up with a fierce intensity. No sooner had she ejected the light-up puff then she followed with a hunger for that mild first draft, pulling so long and hard on the filter that the slip stream of smoke rising from the burning ring disappeared fully into the shaft. Only when she had drawn her fill did the ecstatic coal shoot a thick rolling comma of smoke rushing upwards, tailed by a filmy ribbon.

Penny surveyed the array of Virginia Slims in her open pack and imagined them for a second as if they were piano keys, finally selecting one and saying to herself, "this smoking session will be in the key of G." She rolled the filter gently into place before blanketing it with her apricot-glossed lips. Grasping the lighter and clicking it into a luminous flame, her pucker compelled the flame to enter the cigarette's face and convert the brown circle into a shimmering disk. Glowering with the energy of Penny's brief draw, the fiery wafer quickly gained depth into a shimmering band that left a grey skin of ash where there had been paper. Blasting out the light-up puff, she took her serious pull on the Virginia Slims, and hoping to lighten the mood, asked her companion, "So how was your Christmas? Get all your shopping done on time?"

Her neighbor's lips separated into a slight grin as she extruded the chest-cleansed smoke from her last draw through that fleshy slit. The outrushing opacity left her mouth as a flat jet that

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dissipated into rolling fluffs that rolled and tumbled over each preceding cloud as they widened and shoved each other aside. “Yes, pretty much” she said, as the last slender streamers of white pulsed from her slender nostrils in harmony with the syllables of her reply. Before qualifying her reply further she paused, and lifted her lipstick smudged Winston to her expectant lips. Pulling an ample draft, she routed the chalky stream out her nostrils to maximize the abrasive and pleasantly bitter surge that would help ease her anxiety about the approaching end of break. Propelling the last wisps of smoke like an ephemeral exclamation from her pursed lips, she continued, “This year I didn’t buy as many presents as usual, but somehow I still spent more than last year. How about you?”

“Pretty much the same,” Penny replied, rigorously patting the cigarette with her forefinger until the tight ash broke its hold on the black circled ember and plopped into the mound of snow and ashes below. “I just learned this morning that I’ve got to go to a conference on Thursday and it’s going to be fourteen hours without even a chance of breaking for a cigarette.” She reinserted her cigarette excitedly, and drew so hard on the filter that the glowing dome angled upward erect as it shone out the fierce heat. Speaking with the husky voice of the smoke enshrouded words, she continued, “I just don’t know how I’m going to do it.”

“Yeah that’s a tough one, all right,” Missy agreed. An orange streak leaving her hand and a shower of sparks on the gritty pavement signaled the fall of her butt, so she crushed it out with a twist of her leather sole as she continued, “There’s a dozen ways to handle that, but none of the usual tricks ever works a hundred percent. You still end up counting the minutes until you can put your lips around the next filter.”

“By the way, my name is Penny and I work for Strategic Business Solutions. We’re on the 16th floor,” she offered. “I think I’ve seen you out here before.”

“Yeah I’m one of the dedicated smokers here. Everybody calls me Missy,” the long haired smoker reassured Penny, and glanced at her watch nervously. A frown wrinkled her face while she excused herself, “I’m afraid my time is up....I got to get back! If you’re here at three thirty, I’ll see you again.”

The business of this afternoon seemed to move at warp-speed, and before she was aware, it was three thirty and Penny returned, sidling up to the smokers’ clique. She retrieved her Virginia Slims pack and lighter as she surveyed the crowd in her approach, hoping to locate that new fellow ciggy fan, Missy, from the noon break. At the intersect of the crowd and the building, she

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spotted Missy.

"I hoped I would find you here, Missy," Penny said.

"I'm glad you did," the brunette replied. "I want to pass on to you something that may help you get through your nicotine hiatus this Thursday."

Penny looked at her in awe, "You've got something that will help me? Is it legal or does it need a prescription?"

Missy laughed, "Nothing like that. It's kind of an exercise you use when the cravings hit. You have to TOTALLY imagine that you've just placed your cigarette in your mouth. Close your eyes if that helps. Picture yourself bringing the flame to the tip, and pull with your mouth closed so that the suction reinforces the illusion of you just having 'lit up.'"

Penny took a pull on her Virginia Slims in silence, spellbound by this concept.

"Now you put your fingers to your lips as if lifting that filter up for your first long, hard toke. Focus on the cherry at the end of your Virginia Slims burning while you're drawing," Missy advised. "As you remove your fingers from your lips, draw in one inhale of air that you imagine to be that first big hit; the one with your first smoky draft."

"Keep this up, inhaling phantom smoke, exhaling for real, like your invisible breath was smoke-charged, until you drop the butt down to the floor, and make your shoe crush it out." Missy smiled, and concluded, "Like a mime, the more you use your body movements to supplement your imagination, the more realistic the session feels, and the better relief."

Penny thanked Missy, "I'll try your routine and by Friday, I'll let you know how it worked."

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Friday arrived grey with overhead clouds who were burdened with snow, which was sifting down in at a moderate pace. At noon, the 'usual suspects' clustered around the traditional site and Penny had trouble locating Missy.

Everyone was so heavily bundled up in scarfs and woolly knit hats and shrouded in steamy breath mixed with smoke. Snowflakes made the visibility even hazier. Finally Penny spotted Missy at the far side of the circle.

"Thank you for your passing on your routine to take the edge off of my no-smoking spell. I used it and it had an unexpected result!" Penny greeted Missy.

"I'm so glad it worked for you," Missy said joyfully, "But what do you mean it had an unexpected result? Did you quit smoking?"

Penny burst out laughing, "No not at all. In fact, during the morning I got better and better at tricking myself into believing I had just had Virginia Slims. Then, as the presentations, luncheon and conferences wound down, our client, a middle-aged blonde named Janice asked, "Penny, can you recommend me a really good Greek restaurant? If you can, I'll treat you to dinner, just you and me."

"It was perfect; some quality time alone with the client and no interruptions. What an opportunity, a chance to offer that personal touch that so endears a client! When I hailed us a taxi, I gave the driver the address of a place called the "Alexander the Great" which had the best reputation."

"Were you 'jonesing' by then?" Missy interjected.

"Oh yeah. While we were in the back seat, she got on her cell phone. It was dark so I felt safe going into my routine while she touched base with her 'peeps'. I did my pantomime thinking that she wouldn't see," Penny continued.

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“By the time we got to the restaurant, I paid the driver but Janice hesitated before entering. She turned to me and said, ‘back there in the taxi, I could have sworn you were enjoying a cigarette. Anyway, that’s what it looked like and it just made my urge for a cigarette even greater. Do you mind if we don’t go in until I’ve had a Dunhill?’”

Missy exclaimed, “So she was ‘jonesing’ too!”

“Yeah, so I told Janice about the trick you taught me. She and I both enjoyed a laugh and cigarette right there and spent a stress-free evening smoking without worrying about our reputations. I later learned from corporate HQ that she solidified our business relationships with her company. She recommended me, saying that I was instrumental in presenting our company’s strategic advantages, so I got high marks from the upper management for this project.”