

Me and Mean Norma Jean were bullshit-tin', as she calls it, at the rehab center where she lives now, and she was wishing she could smoke and drink like she used to. The two of us, ex-smokers, ex-drinkers, sat there remembering the romance of our bad habits.

Norma said, "When I was 12, I used to go down the road picking up butts."

"To smoke?" I asked stupidly.

"I was a country girl," Norma replied, as if that explained everything.

It did. I immediately pictured a baby dyke during the Great Depression. Walking on a dirt road, barefoot, hair pushed back behind her ears, her big brother's thin, patched dungarees rolled up above her skinny little girl ankles, Norma would have had a keen eye for forbidden fruit.

"We had a cigarette machine in the lobby of my apartment building," I told Norma. "A pack cost 30 cents. I bought Herbert Tareytos. Remember the ad? The bellboy yells, 'Hurr-burr Tareyton!'"

"Fifteen cents."

"When you were 12? Did you ever buy a pack then?"

"All the time."

She'd smoked for over 60 years, until her lungs made her quit. We weren't bullshittin' much that day. Breathing takes most of Norma's energy, and she doesn't feel so hot.

The Herbert Tareytos were unfiltered and stale. They made me nauseous. But when I came out, my girlfriend smoked. I took up Kools. Smoking was a part of our puppy love, of who we were, gay kids.

"I quit in December of 1977," I volunteered. "I had the flu and it hurt too much to smoke."

Bad habits were the way some of us got through life. I remember learning to have conversations after I gave up smoking. When I still smoked it seemed like all I had to do was make gestures. First came that little strip I pulled off the pack. Then the foil, torn back to reveal two cigarettes exactly. I ditched the crinkly cellophane.

Rebel without a pause

Vices may have virtues, and for a seasoned bad girl the romance of rebellion is the hardest one to kick



There was a special way to get at a cigarette. Did I tap on the bottom and then pull one out with my mouth? It was definitely not

cool to stick fingers in the pack. Fumble-fingers were bad advertising.

Then there was lighting the thing. I favored

IN MEMORY OF NORMA JEAN

Norma Jean Coleman was born in 1924 and died on March 12, 1998. Her mother was French Canadian and Native American. Her father was European American and separated from the family early. Norma grew up near Klamath Falls, Ore., was briefly married in Portland, Ore., and joined the U.S. Navy in 1944, where she met her first woman lover. After she was mustered out of the Navy in 1946, she lived in Portland, San Francisco and Alaska.

Norma worked where jobs were available: shipyards, restaurants, grocery stores, delivery services, real estate, banking, and property management. She loved to hunt and fish and learned to fly in 1947.

Norma's great love was a hard working former U.S. Marine named Phyllis Ann Farley

(1932-1984) whom she met in San Francisco in 1964. They moved to Alaska in 1967. In 1981 they retired to Southern Oregon so that Phyllis Ann could be near her family.

Norma's ashes were buried in the veteran's cemetery near Eagle Point, Ore., where Phyllis Ann is also buried. Their personal photographs will be housed at the Lesbian Herstory Archives in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Lee Lynch writes about Norma rebuilding her life after Phyllis Ann's death: "It was hard at age 60 to reach out to a new lesbian community. Most of the visible members are much younger than she...but Norma's adventurous spirit pulled her through."

That spirit and quick repartee will be sorely missed.

■ Tee A. Corinne

small Zippos, with their clicking covers. Flick it up, roll the ignition wheel, flick it down, all with the thumb. Matches were more romantic. Leaning toward another woman, hand cupped around the flame, meeting her eyes on the way back up—holding her gaze as long as I could before the smoke got in my eyes.

I didn't say all this to Norma. Some things butch buddies just seem to know about each other.

I did tell her, "I had my first drink when I was 17. My parents were away. My girlfriend and another couple were coming over. Pete, the other butch, could get all the beer she wanted. Her dad ran a corner grocery store and Pete would steal beer out of the back. I went to a super market and stuck a six-pack in the shopping cart with the food. The cashier just rang it up. When the kids came over the beer tasted awful to me. But you couldn't have a party without liquor and cigarettes."

Norma was smiling. "My mom made beer."

"Naw. Was this Prohibition?"

She nodded. "Once two cops came by and asked her, 'Are you making beer?' They searched around and found it and came back saying, 'You sure make good beer!' They drank it all the way to town."

We laughed. Then I asked, "Weren't you scared?"

"Yeah. I was a little scared, but I knew my mother could take care of herself."

I was impressed.

There was a time I couldn't imagine life without my bad habits. But quitting was easy for me. Those were the disco years. I went to bars to dance and drank mineral water because I was thirsty. Alcohol and tobacco interfered with my endurance on the dance floor. The next thing I knew I'd quit the bars and was doing yoga.

Norma gestured to the window, beyond which stretched a large patio with chairs and tables. "The ladies go out there to smoke," said Norma. Staff on smoke breaks stood near the door. Patients smoked in wheelchairs. It wasn't exactly a gay bar, but Norma wanted to be out there with them in the worst way.

Norma's still a country girl rebel, looking for a smoke.

■ LEE LYNCH's new novel, *Rafferty Street*, will be released May 1 by New Victoria Publishers (\$10.95 paper).

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