

END OF THE TRAIL

THE LAST CIGARETTE SMOKERS in America were located in a box canyon south of Donner Pass in the High Sierra by two federal tobacco agents in a helicopter who spotted the little smoke puffs just before noon. One of them, Ames, the district chief, called in the ground team by air-to-ground radio. Six men in camouflage outfits, members of a crack anti-smoking joggers unit, moved quickly across the rugged terrain, surrounded the bunch in their hideout, subdued them with tear gas, and made them lie face down on the gravel in the hot August sun. There were three females and two males, all in their mid-forties. They had been on the run since the adoption of the Twenty-eighth Amendment.

Ames, a trim, muscular man in neatly pressed khakis who carried a riding crop, paced back and forth along the row of prisoners, their shoe soles motionless. "What are you people using for brains? Can't you read?" he snapped, flicking the crop at their ankles. He bent down and snatched up an empty Marlboro pack and thrust it in the face of a pale, sweaty man whose breath came in short, terrified gasps. "Look at this! This warning has been there for decades! Want me to read it to you? Want me to give you the statistics? What does it take to make you understand? Look at me! Speak up! I can't hear you!"

In fact, the smokers had been very subdued since long, long before the acrid tear-gas fumes drifted into their hideout, a narrow cave near

the canyon mouth. They knew the end was near. Days before, they had lost radio contact with the only other band of smokers they knew of: five writers holed up in an Oakland apartment. It had been three weeks since the Donner group's last supply drop from the air, forty pounds of barbecued ribs, ten Picnic Tubs of Jimbo deep-fried chicken, and six cartons of smokes, all mentholated. Agents who searched the cave found exactly two cigarettes. There was not a single shred of tobacco found in any of the thousands of discarded butts. The two cigarettes were hidden in the lining of a sleeping bag, and the general disorder in the cave—clothing and personal effects strewn from hell to breakfast—indicated that some smokers had searched frantically for a smoke that very morning. Blackened remnants of what appeared to be cabbage leaves lay in the smoldering campfire.

"Move 'em out of here!" Ames said. "They disgust me."

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Among the personal effects were four empty packs, carefully slit open, the blank insides covered with handwriting. An agent picked them up and put them in a plastic bag, for evidence. They read:

Dear Lindsay & Matt—

This is to let y. know I'm OK & w. friends tho how this w. reach you I dont know. 5 of us are in the mts (dont know where). I never thot it wld come to this. All those yrs as ashtrays vanishd fr parties & old pals made sarc remarks & FAA crackd down & smoke sect. became closet, I thot if I just was discreet & smokd in prv & took mints I'd get by but then yr dad quit & I had to go undergrnd. Bsmnt, gar., wet twls, A/C, etc. Felt guilty but contd, couldnt stop. Or didnt. Too late for that now. Gotta go on midnt watch. More soon.

Love,
Mother.

My Dear Children—

Down to 1 cart. PlMls. Not my fav. Down to 1 cg/day. After supper. Hate to say it but it tastes fant. So rich, so mild. I know you never approvd. Sorry. In 50s it was diffrent, we all smokd like movie stars. So gracefl, tak'g cg from pk, the mtch, the lite, one smooth move. Food, sex, then smoke. Lng drags. Lrnd Fr. exh. Then sudd. it was 82 and signs aprpd (Thanx for Not S). In my home! Kids naggng like fishwives & yr dad sudd. went out for track. I felt *ambushed*. Bob Dylan smokd, Carson, Beatles. I mean WE'RE NOT CRIMINALS. Sorry. Too late now. More soon.

Love,
Mother.

Dear Kids—

This may be last letter, theyre closing in. Planes o'head every day now. Dogs in dist. Men w. ldsprks. Flares. Oakland chapt got busted last pm. Was w. them on radio when feds came. Reminded me of when yr dad turnd me in. After supper. Knew he was a nut but didnt know he was a creep. Cops surr. hse, I snk away thru bushes. No time to say g-b to y. Sorry. Wld you believe I quit twice yrs ago, once fr 8 mo. I'm not a terrible wom. y'know. Sorry. Know this is hard on y. Me too. We're down to 2 pks & everybody's tense. Got to go chk perimtr. Goodbye.

Love,
Mother.

Dear L & M—

This is it. They saw us. I have one left and am smokng it now. Gd it tastes gd. My last cg. Then its all over. I'm OK. I'm ready. Its a better thng I do now than I hv ever done. I love you both. . . .

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The five smokers were handcuffed and transported to a federal detention camp in Oregon, where they were held in pup tents for months. They were charged with conspiracy to obtain, and willful possession of, tobacco, and were convicted in minutes, and were sentenced to write twenty thousand words apiece on the topic "Personal Integrity" by a judge who had quit cigarettes when the price went to thirty-five cents and he could not justify the expense.

The author of the letters was soon reunited with her children, and one night, while crossing a busy intersection near their home in Chicago, she saved them from sure death by pulling them back from the path of a speeding car. Her husband, who had just been telling her she could stand to lose some weight, was killed instantly, however.