

## **The Man Who Loved Altoids**

### 1. The Contest.

Once, I ate a whole tin of Altoids in three bites. Those were the rules, three bites.

I tried to shovel as much of the tin into my mouth on the first bite. I got close to half of it in there. Because, as I already said, I only had three bites to finish it all of. I was pretty sure the last bite was going to be the hardest, so I was doing my best to prepare for that final arc of my journey.

There were only two other rules. Rule two did not allow me to spit any Altoids out once they entered my mouth. Even though I had three bites, once an Altoid entered my mouth it must remain, even if I had remaining bites left. The third rule was similar in nature. It involved no yakking after the fact. Not after the fact forever, just after the fact after the fact. Once it was established that I would keep the Altoids down, I was in the clear.

The prize was another tin of Altoids and two dollars. The new tin of Altoids was not needed for some three months as my mouth kept a general numbness about it for some time after the contest. The two dollars probably helped to buy some smokes.

It wasn't the prize I was after. It was the notoriety. No one else on our floor had ever taken down a tin of Altoids in three bites. Hell, no one else I know had ever taken down a tin of Altoids in three bites.

I was the stuff of legend.

### 2. The Origin Story (everything has one).

Ted Campbell gave me my first Altoid in high school. We met in Mr. Paulson's history course, only in high school it was called Social Studies. We sat next to each other, in the front row. I think the hatred of the seating chart is burned into your subconscious in high school, and the only reason they still exist in high school is because your same teachers had to go through it all those years ago. And they want you to suffer just as much as they did.

He offered me an Altoid. I've always been experimental, but only within the boundaries of my own rules. My own rules,

at that point in my life, were pretty strict. My mother would say I wasn't open to anything. I'd have said I just wasn't open to what she wanted me to be open to. We obviously disagreed.

I wanted to try new things, but before Ted and Altoids, I just didn't know how. Ted became my best friend for quite a few years of my life, and it all started with a curiously strong mint.

So that afternoon, as Mr. Paulson sat behind his desk and pretended to teach (he had tenure, after all), Ted leaned over and held out a small red and white box and asked *Hey, man, want an Altoid?*

I didn't know what to do. I was used to my mother attempting to force something new upon me. She had never thought of asking. I had always fought the new because it was being presented as the only option. This choice, this mint, presented a choice. So I took it. I took the mint. The choice.

I've loved Altoids ever since.

### 3. George, the Curiously Strong Monkey.

Novelty has always bothered me. I want to say because it has no effect on me. That I don't let it get to me. I don't let it control me. It'd be nice to say that.

Truthfully, most novelty doesn't get to me. Most of it, I can resist. But I am a boy who grew up in the MTV generation. I am a member of Generation X. I am lost in a sea of pop, and sometimes I get tired of swimming out on my own.

Because sometimes you find George, the Curiously Strong Monkey.

### 4. The College years.

It was during this time that I ate the tin of Altoids in three bites. More often than not, you found me with a tin of Altoids in my pocket. And more often than not, I was unable to stop touching the tin in my pocket.

There was some comfort in knowing it was there. I would run the line of it's lid with my index finger. Sometimes, I would pop it open and closed again, quickly, while it was still in my pocket.

I really enjoyed when the tin cover would break, come out of the tracks on it's back. It drove me crazy, the way it wouldn't close properly. I would trace the cover in my pocket, trying to think of ways to get it back together again. To make it whole once again.

Sometimes I would take it out and try to force the cover back in to the joints. If it came out so easily, why shouldn't it slide back in so easily? It made no sense.

Once time, I dumped the Altoids at my feet. It was in some English course. The Prof was talking about Renard, or Gevault, or some other French sounding name. I had never enjoyed French writing. To pompous for me.

The Altoids spilled about my feet and some began to roll towards the front of the classroom. I was in a lecture hall that tilted down towards the professor in the front. It was like an old amphitheater. And I was in the back, where I always say due to my paranoia, and I could hear my Altoids making their way between peoples feet and towards the front of the room.

Should I run? Would that cause undue attention? I had the evidence in my hands, and the powder all about my pant legs. It's not like everyone wouldn't know it was me in just a minute. If I ran now, everyone would just think I had some appointment to keep. Or that I was more bored than they were, and just couldn't take it anymore.

But someone might look at me. That would defeat the whole purpose of sitting in the back row, where no one could see me. I didn't want anyone looking at me. And the rolling Altoids weren't a guarantee that anyone would look at me, while getting up to leave meant at least the fella to my left checking out what I was up to.

What to do, what to do.

5. The Photograph.

I came across an old photograph of Ted the other day. We are standing in front of his parents' house, wearing our graduation gowns and each leaning against a post on the porch. We look like we can take on the world, a small grin appearing only in the very corners of our mouths.

The picture is bent down the middle, right across my left shoulder blade. I must have folded it at some point, probably to fit into my wallet. I'm glad I didn't lose it, that I found it again now.

Shortly after that picture was taken, we walked for our diplomas. After that we spent the night locked in the school, pretending to gamble and looking at the posters that the parents of our graduating class made for our classmates.

Ted alternately spent time running in circles around the gymnasium and then crashing on the rafter benches in the back corner. Jim had snuck in what he said was speed, and the boys would take it, get real hyper for about twenty minutes, and then crash for half an hour before popping another tablet and repeating.

I don't think it was speed they were taking.

6. Things Change, While Still Remaining the Same.

Peppermint? Cinnamon? Gum?

Maybe these all existed before. Before the Red & White. For me, there is only the Red & White. The only real curiously strong mints.

I guess the green ones aren't so bad. What are they, again? Spearmint? Something like that. Whatever.

Nowadays, I can't stop eating Altoids if I have them on me. I usually keep a tin in my pocket. Empty. Old habits die hard. There is something relaxing about feeling the shape of that cover.

But if I actually have Altoids in the tin, I just can't stop eating them. I take them down two or three at a time. I feel the cover, test the weight of the tin. Hear the rattle of the contents. And I can't resist. I must eat them if they are there.

I eat them until my mouth goes numb. Like it did during the contest. Like it does at the dentist.

Sometimes I roll them with my tongue. I try to wait. I try to hold out from biting in to them. To let them die as they should, with a slow dissolve in your mouth. Not a crushing defeat between my poorly shaped teeth.

More often than not, they die a premature death.

7. Gum and me.

I don't chew gum. I've never really known why.

I don't mean to say that I'm physically incapable of chewing gum. All my parts work right, at least when it comes to chewing. I just don't like it.

I've never particularly cared about my breath. At least not beyond brushing my teeth in the morning and at night, and after lunch at work. But I don't worry about my breath when I see a girl or anything like that.

Perhaps I should. I'm not trying to say my mouth is the beacon of cleanliness. Or even the beacon of good smells. It probably gets pretty bad in there. I'm just saying, I don't really care about that kind of thing.

And so gum and me, we've never really gotten along. It becomes so plastic and tasteless, almost immediately. Yes, it does help on airplanes. I think more because I think it is supposed to than the reasons they give, the whole jaw movement thing. I find a lot of things work because I think they do, not because they are supposed to.

Maybe that's the big secret, if there is a big secret.

8. Ted.

I read about Ted last week. He died in a bank robbery, over on Wilcox Avenue. I work on Truman Avenue. On Second, the same street the bank is on.

Ted died in the arms of some woman, the lady in line behind him, three blocks away from me. I saw all the police during my lunch break. *Must be a sale on donuts* I joked to my

coworker. He laughed, mostly because it was the courteous thing to do.

I read Ted's name in the paper that night. I saw the picture of the woman holding him minutes before he died. He still looked the same. I could still see that half smirk in the corner of his mouth, even as he knew everything was going away.

I hadn't seen Ted in almost twenty years. I heard about him from time to time. Sometimes, I wondered if he heard about me, from time to time. He sold used cars at a lot about six blocks from my apartment. When I decided to finally buy a car, three years ago, I took a bus across the city to Merv's, the only real competition for Ted's place of business. I bought an '88 Lincoln Town Car that died about sixteen months later.

I didn't ever buy another car.

9. The Muscle Man.

Do you remember those Altoids ads with the body builder? He was clasping his hands together under the logo The Curiously Strong Mints.

Now that is advertising genius.

10. Me, I guess.

I work in advertising. I guess I've always been clever. At least, that's what my teachers told me. They'd say things like *You're clever* and I'd shrug.

Ted always told me that we should work together. Ted was a painter. More than that, Ted was an artist. I could never get the knack of it.

Sure, I could produce. I even got straight B's. My work was always OK. Never extraordinary. Never like Ted's work. The thing was, most of Ted's work came from my ideas.

We would sit together on Saturday nights, drinking whiskey I'd stolen from my old man and coming up with ideas. We'd rent shitty movies from the store down the street, things like *Black Belt Jones*, and we'd work. I'd come up with

concepts. I'd sketch them out. And Ted would do the most wonderful things with them. He'd make them beautiful.

They were more than me. They were more than Ted. I still have some of them. Hanging in various rooms in my home. Sometimes people comment on them. They say things like *That's so clever* and I shrug.

I tell them I picked it up at a art fair. One of those outdoor numbers where you pay an artist more than you want and less than they deserve to take a part of them home with you. I tell them *No, I forget his name. He's gone now. Gone to the ages.*

Nothing I've ever created since has been as good as the work Ted and I did together.

#### 10. The New Novocain.

So, when I ate that tin of Altoids in three bites, my mouth got very numb. I don't know what I've said before, but my mouth was honestly numb for around three hours after I finished that tin. And finishing it was no easy task.

I came close to heaving numerous times. Like I thought, that last bite was the worst. It was a hard chew. My mouth had already begun to numb and the Altoids reminded me of the chalk I'd eaten on a bet as a child. I had yakked that time around, and lost the bet.

I held through it, though. I swallowed the chalk. I won the new tin. The two dollars. I still tell the story about the time I ate a tin of Altoids in three bites till this day. Ask anyone I work with, they usually here it every Christmas when I have one to many whiskey drinks.

My birthday is March 13<sup>th</sup>. And every March 13<sup>th</sup>, everyone gets me a tin of Altoids. Sometimes they bring two, and a couple of dollars. Sometimes they ask me to repeat history. They want to be a part of the story next Christmas.

*Thanks, I tell them, but I'll just take the one tin and my own story.*

#### 11. Can Altoids Stop a Bullet?

I've never been shot before. As a child, well, a teenager in high school, I often wondered what getting shot would be like. Also, being in high school, I often wondered if a tin of Altoids could stop the bullet.

This wouldn't really matter as I usually kept my Altoids in my pants pockets and not the breast pocket of the shirt I wouldn't get shot in. But what if?

You always see the hero being saved by the metal locket, given to him by his lady love. Or the steel coated bible, give to him by his priest. Or the medallion with his father's true name locked away inside.

Why not a tin of Altoids?

12. The New Thirteen.

I try to remember how it ended. Ted and I never had a falling out. No girl ever go in-between us. No Yoko. We both dated, but they never stood in the way of our friendship.

Ted went to UW Stout. I went to the U of M. We met up a few times that first year, but it was never like it had been before. We still drank whiskey until all hours of the morning. We still worked together. For the first six months, I still mailed him concepts and he still finished them.

Then one day, we stopped. It seemed almost mutual. I had started reading Stephen King for some reason, and just didn't have the time I used to have. Ted had bought a car, and it took up more of his time working on it than he spent driving it.

We exchanged birthday and Christmas gifts for the next couple of years. We both stopped, again, seemingly mutually. I knew when he had returned to the city. I knew where he lived. We even had coffee a couple of times.

I never saw his place, but I like to think he had the other half of our work up in it. The ones he kept. I like to think that, but I know it too.

That work wasn't him or me. It was us.

13. *Come on, man, just take one.*

The box of Altoids sat there, floating in the air in-between us. I had two choices, take an Altoid or don't.

But I had two choices.