

Kayla's Lungs, Part 3

Written by

Monday, 30 April 2012 18:24 - Last Updated Monday, 30 April 2012 18:36

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by **Vesperae**

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January 7, really late / really early (cont.)

Choking, disgusted, and feeling deeply ashamed and exposed, I quickly opened the passenger door of Kayla's car, wanting only to flee what had unexpectedly become a physical and psychological torture chamber. My head was spinning, my heart was pounding, and my lungs were on fire from the concentrated dose of Virginia Slims poisons that being with Kayla had saturated them with. The first breath of cold winter night air only sharpened the pain deep in my chest. Hacking and overwhelmed with embarrassment, I quickly found my feet and slipped away into the darkness in search of distance and recovery.

I just ran away like a geek.

Kayla texted me twice right after I left:

"I'm so sorry Sweetie. Please call me. I hope you're OK."

"I feel awful. Please forgive me, and PLEASE call me."

Eventually the physical revolt within my body subsided, and I walked for hours and hours thinking and focusing on healing my lungs with deep cleansing breaths of fresh air. But every time I passed a streetlamp or storefront, the water vapor of my breath condensing in the freezing air reminded me of cigarette smoke, and in my rattled state of mind, seemed to mock me just as Kayla had. At first, I had this intense fear that I had inhaled so much of Kayla's Virginia Slims smoke that I was actually still exhaling it!

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At one point I stopped in front of an anti-smoking poster on the outside of a bus stop shelter that showed a woman in a bikini with an x-ray of cancerous lungs superimposed over her chest. I caught my reflection in the glass covering it, and as I stood there watching myself exhale plumes of condensed water vapor, for a split second I imagined what I would look like exhaling plumes of cigarette smoke. Funny how I never really thought about that before, but then again, I've never had this fixation with smoking before. I looked down at the paved area below the poster display case and noticed that there were about a dozen or so spent and crushed cigarette butts, most ringed with lipstick. I imagined all sorts of different women standing right where I was standing, smoking, and looking at the same PSA telling them that they were stupid and bad to be doing what they were doing, as they exhaled plumes of cigarette smoke right back in the face of the message being directed at them.

Did it make smoking more enjoyable for them in that moment, before they sucked all of the carcinogenic gas that their cigarettes could produce into their lungs, and before they selfishly littered the sidewalk with their filthy butts? I'm sure that it didn't make any of them think for a second about quitting, but I'd have to guess that they all reacted in *some* way to this authoritative and paternalistic message being shoved upon them in the middle of their day.

With everything that'd happened, I was so distracted that I'd completely forgotten about dinner, but intense hunger pangs suddenly reminded me of the fact that I hadn't had anything to eat since morning. I decided to pick up a frozen pizza at nearby convenience store and head home.

There were a few people in line checking out at the convenience store, and while I was waiting, for the first time I really noticed all of the different kinds of cigarettes that they had on display behind the counter, and was actually surprised that there were so many to choose from. They offered like three brands of frozen pizza, but dozens of brands of cigarettes! Different brands of cigarettes...different kinds of smokers? But all smokers still have so much in common, because they share in the experience of smoking, and of deliberately killing themselves, and in the stigma of doing it. Is that a "good" thing, in a "reverse psychology" sort of way?

I spotted Kayla's brand – Virginia Slims Gold Pack 120s – in the middle of all of the other kinds of Virginia Slims that they offered, and had to laugh at thought that there were so many different types of *just* Virginia Slims!

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When I got to the counter, and my pizza and 2L bottle of Diet Coke were rung up, the young woman behind the counter asked if I also wanted cigarettes.

I felt intensely vulnerable again, like my weird fixation was visible to everyone in the world, but managed to quickly regain my composure, and to say, "*uh...no thanks,*" with a polite smile.

She smiled back and explained that she thought that I was looking at the cigarettes like I was looking for a specific brand.

"I don't smoke," I replied quietly, paid, and walked out.

Kayla texted me again just before I got back to my apartment:

"I'm really bummed that we didn't get to spend the evening together, and I hope that we can talk soon. xo – K."

When I was finally home with the door shut behind me and the lights turned on, I slumped down on the couch and smelled Kayla's intense dose of Virginia Slims tar soaked into my hair and my clothes as it warmed in the heated indoor air. My lungs ached. My chest hurt. I felt numb and dirty and bad and twisted and busted and on the verge of dying of embarrassment.

January 7, late afternoon

I scraped up the energy to stick the pizza in the oven, choke down a slice, take a shower, and go to bed.

I remember from all of the disclaimers that I've heard during TV commercials for quit smoking nicotine replacement therapies that one of the side effects of nicotine is vivid dreams.

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Between the events of the day, eating lousy frozen pizza right before bed, and the heavy dose of nicotine that I inhaled in the gas chamber of Kayla's car, the Smoking Soap Opera in my head was in overdrive as I slept fitfully.

At first, I dreamt of the convenience store. It was empty as I walked in and approached the counter. Clouds of cigarette smoke drifted beneath the fluorescent lights. Kayla was standing behind the counter next to the young woman checker who rang up my order earlier, and both were smoking Virginia Slims 120s, only the checker was smoking the menthol version. Both flashed teasing smiles and took turns cooing at me:

Checker: *"You want cigarettes, don't you?!"*

Kayla: *"I know that look."*

Checker: *"You want to be a filthy cigarette smoker, don't you?!"*

Kayla: *"I see how you watch me."*

Checker: *"You can buy cigarettes right here whenever you're ready to start killing yourself."*

Kayla: *"You want to try smoking a cigarette, don't you?"*

Checker: *"What's your personal fashion statement for killing yourself?"*

Kayla: *"I see how you watch me."*

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Checker: *"What's your brand of cigarettes?"*

Kayla: *"C'mon Baby...kill yourself..."*

Checker: *"So many ways to destroy your lungs!"*

Kayla: *"I know that look."*

Next, I was sitting in a surgical auditorium, seated between Kayla and the checker, both dragging hard on their Virginia Slims 120s and releasing their toxic waste into the air of the auditorium and surgical bay below. Occasionally one or the other would ash over the railing and giggle. Below, a young middle-aged woman who was quite trim, toned, and still very good looking, was undergoing the removal of her left lung due to adenocarcinoma. The surgeon held up the blackened twisted mass of tar and tumors and said that she started smoking in college. Kayla and the clerk both laughed, took long cheek-hollowing drags, inhaled deeply, and let out massive plumes of smoke as they flicked their lipstick stained butts over the railing.

I woke up before the butts landed. Terrified. And in the grip of an intense coughing spell.

After several minutes of unpleasant phlegmy distress in the bathroom, I washed my face, brushed my teeth, had a big drink of water and, thoroughly exhausted, went back to bed and once again fell into an uneasy sleep.

"At least you're breathing easier now," the poised and cheerful woman's voice said as she closed the door behind me.

As she walked by me, I recognized the technician who performed Kayla's smoking lung scan from my other dream.

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"Kayla sent you here, didn't she?"

I was reeling as I looked around and recognized the clinical suite where Kayla had her tests, and was stunned into silence.

The technician sat down opposite me across a table with a large glass ashtray like the one in Kayla's apartment. She produced a pack of Virginia Slims 120s and a black lighter from her white lab coat pocket, and watched me closely as she lit up, snapped a massive ball of tar and nicotine and carbon monoxide and over 4,000 other chemicals deep into her chest, and exhaled them all directly into my face. She repeated this with every drag she took, and did it each time before she spoke.

"You know that cigarette smoking is deliberate, premeditated self-destruction, don't you?"

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that once you soil your lungs with cigarette smoke that they'll never be clean again, right?"

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that cigarette smoking is deadly and dangerous."

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that cigarette smoking causes lung cancer."

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I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that cigarette smoking causes heart disease."

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that cigarette smoking causes emphysema."

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"You know that cigarette smoking kills."

I nodded yes as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"So why are you here?"

I sat frozen as her toxic breath washed over my face.

"It's your dream, Baby..."

I deliberately inhaled as deeply as I could as her toxic breath washed over my face.

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She smiled at me, ashed her fuming coffin nail, and said, *"of course you know that cigarette smoking is giving up your health and longevity for something else, and that something else is the experience of being a cigarette smoker, which only a cigarette smoker can truly understand."*

I felt her toxic breath inside me, conditioning me.

"It hurts a little in the beginning, and for some, a lot in the end, but all of the pain in the middle feels really good once you train your lungs and your body to accept the punishment of cigarette smoking."

Suddenly, I was back in the auditorium above the surgical bay with the female lung cancer case, and I started shouting *"I DON'T SMOKE!"*

I woke up flailing in a cold sweat. Couldn't get back to sleep, so I ended up replaying my dreams and last night over and over in my head. I kept thinking that I have to call Kayla, but I don't know what I'm going to say to her when I do. I'm seriously scared to call her. And after spending the morning curled up on the couch watching the light change and the sun come up, I realized why. At this point, if I call her, we'll almost certainly get together to talk. And if we get together to talk, we'll almost certainly talk about smoking. And if we talk about smoking, I have this fear that I will end up trying to deliberately inhale a drag of cigarette smoke into my lungs for the first time. I can picture it so easily that it terrifies me.

"I don't smoke."

I kept telling myself that over and over.

As the sun slowly started to go down I sat staring at my phone, which I'd left on top of the atlas of lung morphology that I was reading when this madness all started. As the sun set, my phone chirped a new text. Kayla, of course:

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"I'm a stupid bitch. How can I make it up to you? xoxo – K."

I sighed heavily, put down the phone, took a long shower, put on my robe, and sat back down on the couch where I resumed staring at my phone. I can now empathize completely with Pandora.

"I don't smoke."

I felt this incredible head rush and sensation of free-falling as I watched my hand reach out and pick up my phone, seemingly of its own power and without any help from me. Suddenly it was to my ear and it was ringing.

"Hey..."

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