

[Kayla's Lungs, Part 7](#)

by **Vesperae**

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January 10, late morning

Shortly after it got dark last night I walked over to Kayla's to pick up my car. It was warmer than it has been, a welcome respite from the bitter cold of the past few weeks, and as I made my way comfortably through the now familiar streets between Kayla's apartment and mine, I thought of the spring and summer to come. I pictured Kayla as I did in my dream night before last when I followed her through the city to the "Virginia Slims Lungs" exhibition at the museum – wearing sheer, short, gauzy, feminine things, much of the bare porcelain skin of her (at least outwardly) perfect body shamelessly exposed and lovingly caressed by balmy air and the lingering eyes of countless admirers.

As I walked I thought to myself that this would be Kayla's first spring and summer as a smoker. The girl I knew in high school never wore the things I imagined her wearing now. But the woman she's become gets off on repeatedly banging her lungs with Virginia Slims, and a woman who is comfortable enough with her body to slowly, sensually, and dramatically destroy it seems like she would also likely be the sort of woman comfortable enough with her body to flaunt it. This certainly seems to be the case for Kayla, and turning this thought over in my head sent a shiver of excitement through me...not that I wasn't a bundle of excitement already.

When I was close enough to see Kayla's building, I noticed that the lights in her apartment were off. I was reflexively disappointed, but then quickly felt relieved. I hadn't seen her since our "conditioning session" on her couch, my subsequent realization that I'm a lesbian, and of course, my first deliberate pre-meditated infliction of tar and nicotine and carbon monoxide on my own freshly deflowered and abused lungs. There was just so much that I still needed to process, as well as a bunch of things that I wanted to do before I saw her again.

As I approached my car, I noticed that there was an envelope under the windshield wiper blade on the driver's side. As I reached down and freed it, the now familiar blend of Estée Lauder and carcinogens found my nose. It was a note from Kayla, of course:

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"Hey Baby – I can't wait to hear how things are going with you! But I will, because I know that what you're going through right now takes time. Call me whenever the mood strikes! Hope you're having FUN! – K." She'd written it in pink ink, drawn a little heart after "Hey Baby," and kissed the paper just below "K" with dark pink lipstick.

I shivered, smiled, and replied softly aloud *"I am."* I kissed my right index fingertip and pressed it to Kayla's lipstick stain before slipping her note back into the envelope and into the outer pocket of my jacket. I wanted her so badly in that moment that it felt like I'd been punched in the chest, and even though I've never been with anyone before, or really have ever wanted to be with anyone before, all of my instincts tell me that we could be together. Maybe it's just wishful thinking, but the thrill of what could be has me walking on air.

I couldn't stop smiling as I unlocked my car and hopped in. I had some Christmas cash to spend. I'd decided that I was in need of some new clothes...among other things, and thought that I might do a little shopping. But as I settled into the driver's seat and turned on the ignition and waited for the engine to warm up, it dawned on me that I had no idea where to begin. I sat there listening to the engine steadily pumping poisons through the tailpipe into the quiet evening air and thinking about Kayla and the strange lingering toxic taste of Virginia Slims tar still coating my mouth from the night before. Eventually I decided to give up on the shopping trip for the time being and just drive around a bit and head back home.

After sleeping in late and generally slobbering around all day essentially passing time and giving my body a chance to recover from my first cigarette the night before, and after getting some fresh air on the walk over to Kayla's, I was feeling decidedly better physically. Almost normal. And realizing that I felt this way, I suddenly had a strong urge to see how well my lungs might tolerate their second round of deliberate, premeditated abuse. I laughed at the strange thought that my response to feeling better after making myself sick was wanting to make myself sick again.

For no particular reason, I decided to take a different route back to my apartment than I had before, and on an unfamiliar side street, I spotted a shop in the basement of an old brownstone building that I'd heard about once but had never visited. Below several stories of apartments in the sprawling basement was a walk-down entrance beneath an aging painted and dimly lit sign that read "Veritas Scientific Supply." I saw that they were open, and on a whim, decided to stop. The store specializes in a wide selection of laboratory and "hands-on" educational resources – tools, instruments, models, posters, charts, microscopic slides, and preserved

specimens – and was tailored to K-12 science educators, especially biology teachers.

As I made my way down the stairs and stepped into the interior, I was met by bright fluorescent lights and the faint but unmistakable aroma of formaldehyde, and an old fashioned small brass bell mounted to the door jingled to announce my entrance. A very friendly woman who looked to be in her 40s suddenly appeared as she rounded a tall bank of well worn wooden shelves. "*Good evening! Can I help you?*"

"Hi. I'm a bio student at the U, I heard about your store, and I just wanted to check it out, if that's OK?"

"Absolutely! We offer a 10% discount with a student ID. Feel free to look around, and if you have any questions, or can't find something that you're looking for, please don't hesitate to ask. I'll just be around the corner here if you need me."

I thanked her, smiled, and began to look around. As I perused the vast selection of dissection kits, waxed trays, microscopes, slides, beakers, flasks, and test tubes near the entrance, I heard the shop keeper humming softly to herself as she stocked and tidied a display several aisles over. And this sense of deep calm settled over me for the first time since I'd returned from Christmas Break. The dorky kid in me was delighted by all of these shiny new toys on the shelves in front of her, artifacts and reminders of the simpler psychological place that all bright "good" kids live in. That straightforward place where the only thing that seems to matter is studying and taking tests and making "As" and being praised for being bright and being "good," and doing it all over and over and over again.

I continued to browse charts detailing the periodic table, Krebs Cycle, phases of mitosis, carbon cycle, and taxonomy, shelf after shelf of preserved frogs, various and sundry animal organs, fetal pigs, ant farms, aquaria, terraria, plastic human anatomical models, and on and on. As I did, I became lost in an unexpected blissful reverie of childhood memories and the innate sense of wonder at the miracle of Life in all it's infinite diversity and expression.

When I finally made my way all the way around the store I ended up at the display across from the front counter that the shop keeper had been working on when I first came in. And as I turned to look at it, the equivalent of a school bell began ringing inside my head that abruptly

ended my childish psychological recess.

There was a sign above the shelves identifying the section as "Health Education." Approximately half of the materials were devoted to smoking, with the remainder being divided between alcohol and drug abuse. I was glad that I was alone when I'd gotten there, because I'm sure that I flushed and went wide-eyed when I first saw it. In case the shop keeper could see me, or came back to the section suddenly, I decided to make a concerted effort to spend as much time looking at the alcohol and drug abuse sections as seemed reasonable, until I finally allowed myself to look through the smoking section as coolly and nonchalantly as I could. As I did, I felt the now familiar rush of free fall in the pit of my stomach, equal parts intense anxiety and growing arousal.

Most of the anti-smoking books, posters, and displays were cartoonish and designed for young children. But there were three items designed for high school and young adults that thoroughly frightened and fascinated me. The first was [a life size plastic model of a smoker's lung](#) that could be opened and held in your hands, designed to show chronic bronchitis, emphysema, and cancer. The second was a table top display made of a cardboard bust of an attractive blonde woman with inflatable latex lungs attached to the front of her chest – one made black, emphysematous, and cancerous by smoking, and one pink and normal – called, rather ridiculously,

["Lou-Wheeze."](#)

The third was a laminated

["Dangers of Smoking" poster](#)

that contained numerous illustrations within and around the silhouette of an attractive female figure detailing all of the different ways that cigarette smoking destroys the tissues and organs of the human body over time.

The plastic smoker's lung model and "Lou-Wheeze" table top display each cost several hundred dollars, but the "Dangers of Smoking" poster only cost \$22.50 with my student discount, and I decided that I had to have it, although I was terrified that my bizarre secret motivations for wanting it might somehow be apparent to the shop keeper. But then I realized that I could just tell her the entirely probable story that I was getting the poster for a student teaching project. As I reached out to grab one of the sealed tubes below the display, I felt my heart pounding in my chest and again tasted the caustic lingering stain of Virginia Slims tar in my mouth as it went dry. I steadied my nerves and approached the counter, and thankfully had a minute to compose myself before the shop keeper emerged from a back room while studying something on a clipboard.

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She looked up immediately once she noticed me. *"I'm so sorry! I certainly hope you weren't waiting long?"*

"No, not at all; I just got here. Your store is awesome! Thanks so much for letting me look around!"

"Thank you! Did you find everything you needed?"

"Absolutely; I'm sure I'll be back, and I definitely plan to tell my student teacher friends about this place." I congratulated myself on deftly executing my crafty little lie, although I'm sure she probably couldn't possibly have cared less why I was buying the particular item I was buying.

"Thank you; we'd really appreciate that."

She smiled, took my student ID and debit card, applied my discount, and rang up my poster without commenting on it at all. As she did, I stood there really looking at her for the first time. Her mousy brown hair was cut short like mine, but with flecks of grey. No makeup or jewelry. Simple functional clean androgynous clothes. A pair of simple reading glasses hung around her neck on a simple chain. Other than the hint of a few slight lines at the corners of her eyes, she appeared to be robust, healthy, and fit. Her teeth were very white. Given the serious cross country Nikes she was wearing, she's almost certainly a runner. I have several pairs of the exact same style. I was suddenly caught off guard by the feeling that I was looking at one very plausible potential future version of myself, although given the events of the last few days, a potential future version of myself that now seems increasingly unlikely.

"Are you alright?"

I snapped out of my unexpected distracted musings with the sudden realization that I was unintentionally staring at her rather rudely. *"Oh yes...sorry...I was thinking about a friend of mine because I just realized that you remind me of her..."*

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I smiled and apologized again, she handed me my ID, debit card, receipt, and poster, we exchanged parting pleasantries, and I made my way back to my car with my perverse little treasure tucked safely beneath my arm.

Given my newfound intense fascination with smoking, all sorts of different random memories have started popping into my head that never really had any particular relevance to me before. And as I drove home, I started thinking about cigarette advertising, which I recall hearing a lot of chatter about in the news while I was growing up. I have vague recollections of a smattering of magazine ads for cigarettes here and there, although I can't really remember any of them, since I never really paid any attention to them before.

Once I got back to my apartment, I opened my laptop and quickly found the [Stanford School of Medicine Tobacco Advertising Archive](#) and it's vast repository of various and sundry pitches over the decades designed to tempt human beings to light up and to keep lighting up. The collection is sorted and categorized in many different ways, but for obvious reasons, I was immediately drawn to the section on "Women's Cigarettes," and was delighted to find that the bulk of it was comprised of print ad scans for Virginia Slims from the late 1960s through 2000.

As I began to dig into this treasure trove of banned imagery, another random memory popped into my head – a catchy little song by one of the many folk singers that my mom and dad always seemed to be listening to when I was a kid, ["Advertising Man" by David Wilcox](#). I remember thinking that it was kind of goofy, and still do, but after tracking it down and listening to it again, it took on a decidedly different appeal for me:

*"If you want some real contentment
To live life at it's best
You can buy these dried tobacco leaves
To breathe into your chest
And then look up at the billboard
While all the promises come true
For you..."*

*"You'll laugh with every lungful
As the change comes over you..."*

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*"So look up at the billboard
See her smiling, sexy, and tan
But the only one who's laughing
Is the advertising man..."*

*"I guess they're makin' easy money
And climbing up the rungs
From selling us a parasite
That's feeding on our lungs..."*

*"Now crack will kill you quickly
That's why it's got to go
They'll get more of your money
If they kill you nice and slow..."*

The Stanford Archive is obviously intended as a public health reference resource. But like my motivations for buying the "Dangers of Smoking" poster now tacked to the wall above my desk, I clicked my way enthusiastically through the collection, completely aware that I was using this well-intended resource for reasons that would absolutely horrify those who provided it. And there was that familiar sensation again, the one that I've had again and again over the last week – the feeling that's basically a little voice in the back of my head wordlessly droning: "I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't be doing this. I'm going to get caught. I'm going to be punished. I deserve to be punished. This is WRONG."

And yet it feels so amazingly GOOD somehow...to be doing something so completely WRONG.

I surfed through the slick and sophisticated Virginia Slims "come ons" for hours and hours, and saved each one to a folder on my laptop. And once I'd downloaded every one that I could find on the site, I opened them all as a looped full screen slideshow and began to let the words and images soak into my brain like carcinogenic tar into bronchial epithelium.

As I sat there studying them, it occurred to me that these print ads were never really intended to

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be viewed in this way. I remember reading or hearing at some point that print advertising is designed to make a largely subconscious impression in the fraction of a second or so that it takes for you to flip past one while you're sitting in a waiting room somewhere. But what I was doing felt overwhelmingly Decadent. Absolutely Evil. How else can you describe it when you deliberately go looking for a concentrated dose of Seduction created by those whose only interest is in making money by enticing you to kill yourself?

The Devil is an impossibly beautiful woman with countless different faces who remains forever young and vital across time. She stands and walks and dances and sits and poses, her body enticing and perfect. She flashes you an irresistible smile, her teeth white and perfect. She looks into your soul, her eyes sparkling and perfect.

And she wants you. ALL of you. She wants your lungs. She wants your life.

The freshly lit long slim coffin nail poised between her long slim fingers is ripe with the promise of so much forbidden potential...so much pleasure...so much destruction. In the midst of everything else on the page, it stands as an exclamation point designed to focus your entire impression of her – about who she is, about where she's been, about where she's going. Her story becomes a silent siren song that sends thorny tendril hooks deeper and deeper into your bleeding imagination the longer you look. Until the Seduction blossoms and reels you in.

And you want her. ALL of her. You want her lungs. You want her life.

I kept coming back to one particular incarnation of the Devil, an early Virginia Slims ad from 1972, probably because the model's features actually resemble mine a little, at least in a "long lost aunt time warp" kind of way, although she was the essence of "girly-girl-ness," as all Virginia Slims models were. She had really long hair in a very elaborate updo, and was wearing a lot of makeup, strappy high heels, funky 70s jewelry, and a very frilly floral dress.

What drew me to this ad was not only the model, but also the text that it featured. Or actually, I guess I should say the juxtaposition of the text that it featured. What I'm talking about can really be found in just about any cigarette ad, but for some reason, it really struck me in this one. On the one hand is the ad copy "come on," and on the other are the mandated Surgeon General's Warning and Federal Trade Commission ("FTC") tar and nicotine content report.

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After another quick web search, I learned what was meant when it said *"by FTC method"* in a cigarette ad. There were these big weird industrial laboratory smoking machines full of tubes and flasks and filters and condensers and suction pumps that they used to collect and analyze the smoke from rows and rows of burning cigarettes. These burning cigarettes were inserted into banks of collection port "mouths" that would drag on them in unison in a bizarre robotic simulation of mass human smoking.

In this ad, the Devil is a smiling seated ruffled bouquet of silk and bare limbs gushing visual pheromones masquerading playfully as innocence. With her tender naked right arm wrapped across the dark secret hidden places beneath her breasts, her right hand caresses her left shoulder where she wields her freshly lit exclamation point and it's promise of forbidden pleasure and destruction between her slim manicured fingers.

And then there's her story...the story that could be yours:

"Virginia Slims are the slimmer cigarettes made just for women. They're tailored slimmer to fit your hands and your lips."

And your lungs. Oh yes...your lungs.

"Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health."

Danger designed and tailored just for women...just for you.

"With rich Virginia flavor women like. 18 mg "tar," 1.3 mg nicotine av. per cigarette by FTC method."

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Rich hot sticky brown Virginia Slims carcinogens and addictive poisons repeatedly coating your tongue and your mouth and your slender throat and your lungs...milligram after milligram...puff after puff...cigarette after cigarette...day after day...pack after pack...week after week...carton after carton...year after year...until they kill you.

"You've come a long way, baby."

You can smoke. Oh yes...you can smoke. You can become a living/dying, breathing/wheezing human smoking machine. All you have to do is go out and pick up a pack of forbidden pleasure and destruction, stick one into your mouth "port," light it up, inhale repeatedly, and turn your girly little lungs into increasingly filthy and diseased tar and nicotine collection filters.

Why let the industrial robots at the FTC have all the fun? They can't die. But you can.

So I gathered up my laptop and Kayla's gifts – the perfumed and kissed note that she left on my car, the now open pack of Virginia Slims Gold Pack 120s with 19 fresh cancer sticks patiently waiting to deposit themselves in my lungs, as well as her lighter, ashtray, and tube of "Good to be Bad" glossy dark red lipstick. I arranged each carefully and lovingly on my desk below my new "Dangers of Smoking" poster. I got my hand mirror, poured myself of glass of wine, let my robe fall open so that I could touch myself freely, sat down, and began deliberately again.

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