

Kayla's Lungs, Part 1

Written by

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by Vesperae

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January 3, early afternoon

It feels great to get back to my apartment after the holiday trip to see the family. The semester won't start for two more weeks, so the campus is quiet right now, which I really like, and I'm really enjoying the thought of some completely unscheduled "me" time. The only thing I have to do is get started on my paper for Human Anatomy and Physiology, since the preview syllabus specified that all students would have to write a detailed overview of an organ system of their choosing. I decided to do the respiratory system, since I've always been an exercise enthusiast, and I love the calming meditation of deep breathing, especially when I run.

January 3, late

I saw Kayla! We haven't seen each other since graduation last June, even though we ended up going to the same university. But it's a big school, and spread out. She decided to come back from her holiday early too, drove by, saw my car, and called me.

Next thing I know, I'm headed over to her place to hang out and order some delivery food. When I get there, she answers the door barefoot in a tight black t-shirt and black jeans, big retro eyeglasses, and her thick dark hair is much longer than she wore it in high school except for a very stylish straight bang, which she never had before. And she looked at least 10 pounds thinner than when I saw her last. Noticeably paler too.

She gave me a big hug, even though we travelled in different circles and we never really spent much time together in high school, but we always got along really well when we ran into each other, and it was a fun blast from the past to see her again in a completely different place. I remembered the Estée Lauder perfume she was wearing, but I also instantly smelled something else that surprised me...toxic, burned, vaguely caustic...cigarette smoke?! And then a little drift

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of smoke slipped past the door, and I looked inside and instantly noticed a long white cigarette burning in a large glass ashtray on the coffee table, which had numerous spent butts in it, each with a ring of lipstick the same shade of pink that Kayla was wearing, and an open pack of cigarettes and fancy gold lighter next to it on the table. A haze hung in her apartment. I couldn't believe it. None of my friends in high school smoked, and I never imagined Kayla smoking, but it was obvious that she's a smoker now.

For a fraction of a second, I was a little scared to go into her apartment, for fear of my second hand smoke exposure, but I was so intrigued to see how much she seemed to have changed since last summer, and since I didn't want to be a jerk about it, I decided to brave a little of her personal air pollution for the sake of catching up.

She apologized when she saw that I'd noticed that she was smoking, and I told her that it was OK, and that I was just surprised. Shocked, actually. But I didn't want to come off like a total geek, so did my best to play it cool. She said she started smoking about a month after she got to college, because she wanted to try something new, and because she thought that it might give her a new, more sophisticated image. And she said that she really enjoys smoking, and she smokes all the time now.

It was really weird to hang out with her all night and to watch her smoke one cigarette after another every twenty to thirty minutes or so. She's obviously a serious, committed smoker. She smokes very deliberately and gracefully, taking long drags, snapping big balls of smoke and holding it in deep in her lungs, and then exhaling long thick white plumes slowly through playfully pursed lips. She smokes these really long Virginia Slims 120s in a gold and white pack, and she holds her cigarette up right next to her face between her French manicured fingertips like a little smoldering magic wand that commands your attention.

Part of me couldn't help but be taken with the dramatic visual impact of watching Kayla smoke her long fashion cigarettes, while I tried to reconcile my memories of the non-smoking "before" of her in high school with the smoking "after" of her now. Even though the smell is horrible, I have to admit that she looks really poised and worldly smoking, not completely unlike the girl I remember, but dialed way up. Could starting to smoke really do that for someone?

But another part of me was horrified by the thoughts that couldn't help but keep popping up in my head.

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Lungs. I thought of her lungs. Poor, poor lungs. I pictured Kayla's lungs inside her chest, beneath her tight black t-shirt, beneath her breasts, beneath her ribcage. After a few months of increasingly heavy smoking, I imagined her lungs just starting to get a slight patina of yellow–brown tar particulates coating her airways. Like any smoker, Kayla has repeatedly paralyzed her respiratory cilia at this point by deeply inhaling cigarette smoke over and over again, and there are places in her lungs where cellular changes are probably already taking place. Dangerous cellular changes.

Thinking about this and writing about it makes me feel very unsettled. For some reason, I've just never been exposed to anyone I knew that well and spent time with regularly who smoked. But seeing Kayla smoke, and seeing how much she's changed, and given our history, I feel like I'm starting to think about smoking for the first time beyond what I've always thought – that it was something that I knew I wanted to avoid and had no interest in. It was just a reflexive given for me.

Part of me is programmed to believe that she must have somehow gotten trapped into smoking. But that doesn't seem reasonable to me. Kayla must have wanted to smoke before she started smoking. But why?! Why would anyone want to deliberately hurt their bodies by forcing cigarette smoke into it?!!!

January 4, early

I had this really intense dream, and I can't sleep now.

I dreamt that Kayla and I were together in this dark room, standing, facing each other a few feet apart. She was naked and her body was translucent and glowing, and I could see all the way through her, including all of the internal structures of her body. Then she lit up a cigarette, and I watched her take drag after drag, and after every one, I'd watch her part her lips, and snap inhale a big ball of glowing yellow–brown cigarette smoke down her throat and deep into her airways, spreading throughout her lungs, until I watched it rush back up out of her chest as she exhaled the luminescent toxic cloud right into my face.

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And then Kayla moved close to me and extended the yellow–brown glowing stained filter of her lit cigarette toward my mouth and said, *"C'mon...take a drag Baby...kill yourself..."*

I looked down at her chest and saw that her entire respiratory tract was outlined perfectly with glowing yellow–brown carcinogenic residue.

I woke up freaked out and feeling very restless.

And my hair still reeks of the Virginia Slims tar that's deep inside Kayla's lungs.

January 4, afternoon

So after surfing the early, early news programs on cable, the sun was finally starting to come up, and I decided to go for a run to clear my head. I was feeling sleep-deprived but wired, and thought that a little cardio and some fresh air would do me good.

What I immediately noticed after I was out a few minutes was that my chest felt tight, and I knew that it probably had to do with all the toxic gas that Kayla spewed like a smokestack into the air that I breathed for several hours last night. The carbon monoxide levels in my bloodstream were probably elevated, and my airways were probably a little inflamed and swollen. Kayla's cigarette smoking had poisoned me a little.

The more I ran, the better I felt. I could actually feel my lungs slowly opening and blossoming as they repeatedly filled with the oxygen-rich crisp dry clean air that my body craved. I was giving my body everything it needed to feel strong and healthy, and I felt really good about that.

When I got back home, I opened my door and was startled to discover that I smelled cigarette smoke. It was on the coat that I wore last night that I left hanging on the back of my apartment door. I'll probably have to get it dry cleaned!

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I took a shower and shampooed my hair, and after I toweled off, I was feeling very relaxed. I grabbed one of the books on the lungs from the stack that I checked out of the library, and curled up on the couch to start reading it. I was most of the way through the morphology section when I drifted off to sleep. I had this dream where I imagined that I was an oxygen molecule passing from the mouth down through the pharynx and larynx, down the trachea, deep through the bronchial tree, all the way to a single tiny fragile alveolar sac, where I pass into minute capillaries to be absorbed by a red blood cell that will take me to the furthest reaches of the body's tissues, where a cell that needs me will absorb me.

Such a delicate balance. Such intricate structure. Lungs are beautiful soft sensitive glistening things. Lungs are life.

"Yes, and some of us really like to repeatedly suck them full of carcinogenic filth." Kayla stepped out in front of the lecture room screen in my mind, laughing out little residual bursts of deadly Virginia Slims smoke that she just put deep within the most essential organ system in her body.

I awoke with a start, and for a second had no idea where I was. My heart was racing and I had this strange feeling like I'd just escaped some sort of a close call. It was actually kind of exciting in a weird way, but very disorienting.

I'd just made some tea and was sitting down to wake up and mellow out when my phone rang. It was Kayla, and she was wondering if I wanted to come over and watch a movie tonight. It was so totally surreal to be talking to her after having the dreams about her that I'd had, one not a half an hour ago. After a moment of internally shifting gears, her invitation registered. I thought of the tightness in my chest earlier, and then thought that I could always go for another "clean out" run tomorrow. Besides, my coat already reeks of cigarette smoke. Might as well get my money's worth at the dry cleaners.

I also think that I have some sort of a weird, morbid, totally unexpected curiosity about observing Kayla smoking, almost as if she were like of a lab specimen to be studied.

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So I accepted.

I listened to her inhale sharply, and then with her lungs and throat brimming with cigarette smoke, her voice was husky as she said "Cool, see you tonight," and then I heard her exhale right into the phone as she was hanging up.

January 5, really late / really early

Just got home from Kayla's. She wore red silk pajamas and a purple silk robe, and looked like a Diva. The movie we watched was "[The Cook, The Thief, His Wife, & Her Lover](#)", and we polished off two bottles of Pinot Grigio.

We sat in the living room, and she sat turned towards me in a chair slightly in front of the couch where I was sitting. She's a huge [Peter Greenaway](#) fan, and this was a particular favorite of hers, so she gave the film her full attention, except for the few moments where she'd whisper some detail about the script or about a certain shot or actor to me, which means that I just happened to have a perfect candid profile view of her reacting to the movie, and also of her smoking, which she did almost constantly. The lights in the room were off except for the TV, and every last wisp of Virginia Slims smoke was perfectly highlighted and visible to me.

Over and over again.

I watched Kayla light up extra long slim cigarette after extra long slim cigarette, always taking cheek-hollowing, deliberate drags that made the tip glow bright orange and advance steadily toward the filter. I watched Kayla part her lips and snap a thick drag down her throat. I watched her breasts rise and her chest expand as cigarette smoke rushed deep into her lungs. I watched her hold the toxic vapor in her airways for a few seconds, her breasts heaved out and still, and then I watched her slowly exhale the cloud of poison out into the room as her breasts fell and her chest contracted. An intelligent, attractive, willing test animal for self-inflicted lung damage.

Over and over again.

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And each time Kayla sucked a little more tar and nicotine and carbon monoxide into her airways, I realized that she'd probably just ruptured a few more alveoli, and she'd probably just deposited enough tar in a few spots in her airways to cause precancerous metaplasia. She'd just erased a little of her life. And yet she smokes her Virginia Slims 120s with such abandon, as if repeatedly filling her precious lungs with a concentrated cloud of industrial waste gasses was the coolest and most natural thing in the world.

Over and over again.

I watched Kayla smoking and dying, and it fascinated me as much as it frightened me.

And I found that once I got used to breathing the haze of toxins all around me that glowed in the light from the TV, I was actually almost starting to like the smell of Kayla's Virginia Slims smoke. It still smelled harsh and foul, but there was this one sickly-sweet chemical aroma that I started to notice that was almost pleasing, if only I could get over the urge to choke.

So if it's hard to breathe diluted, how could anyone make themselves be able to deeply inhale cigarette smoke? Choking is our natural reaction to breathing air that is dirty, and to smoke, you have to be able to overcome your lungs' built-in protection mechanisms and clear cut warnings that you shouldn't be breathing what you're trying to breathe.

Sounds like smoking is both kind of sadistic and kind of masochistic to me.

January 5, afternoon

Long day yesterday, so I slept in. Woke up coughing and with a headache. Skipped my run.

Had another dream about Kayla. No surprise there, I guess. Although this dream was even

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more intense than the last, but I was able to stay asleep and in the dream this time for much longer, or so it seemed. I was standing at the foot of her bed, and she was sitting up against a pile of pillows in front of her headboard, wearing only a bra and panties. She was looking right at me as she snapped her gold plated lighter to life and lit up one of her glamour-length cancer sticks, and as she smoked with carefree devotion, her face lit up with a smug little smile and an evil glint in her eyes. And every time she'd inhale another drag, I heard this faint pathetic crying sound coming from inside her chest, and it seemed to amuse her immensely. It was as if her lungs were begging her to stop abusing them, and her head was getting off on hearing it and continuing to smoke anyway.

And right before she took every drag, she'd whisper "*Look at me, I'm killing myself...*"

I was horrified, but couldn't stop starring at her and listening to the muffled shrieking coming from inside her chest.

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