

" The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited) " by Vesperae

SMOKE SIGNALS MAGAZINE - March - April 2014

The latest installment of "Kayla's Lungs" is still in the works. Sincerest apologies – I'm still working my way through recovery mode from the difficult personal events of last year, and time and energy and focus unfortunately remain in short supply for me at present.

The following story is another offering of mine from the Smoke Signals member archives. It was first published five years ago, in the March–April issue, and continued through four installments in 2009, prior to my column becoming public on the Smoke Signals Community Site in 2010. All four parts are presented here publicly as one continuous narrative for the first time.

"Welcome to Smoking Studies 101 – Introduction to Cigarette Smoking.' I'm Professor Lovering, but you're welcome to call me Diana. By the conclusion of this three week seminar – if you decide to stay with us until the end – the chances are excellent that you will have mastered the skill of smoking cigarettes socially."

I surveyed the faces and body language of the 23 young women seated in front of me, each of whom had an air of decidedly nervous anticipation to varying degrees that made it easy for me to offer a reassuring smile as I looked around the room.

"I think you'll find that the requirements for successful completion of this class are pretty straightforward, and are intended to completely accommodate your personal comfort level with the subject matter. If you attend all scheduled meetings, and directly participate in at least the last six in-class practice smoking sessions, you will automatically receive a 1 credit 'A' towards your Social Studies general education degree requirement. If you attend all scheduled meetings and do not directly participate in at least the last six in-class practice smoking sessions, you will receive a 1 credit 'audit' evaluation." Which, I mused to myself in the back of my mind, never happened.

"And if you decide to drop, even up to and including the final session, you will not be penalized in any way; your enrollment will be retroactively erased, and it won't show up on your transcript."

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

This statement was greeted by slightly broader and slightly less nervous smiles all around, since news of an "easy A" and a "no drop penalty" always had the effect of removing at least a little of the stress from the ambitions of the very driven, often self-critical, and typically competitive young women that a rigorous upscale private school like Willow River tended to attract, even if it only amounted to easing 1 credit of their perceived burden.

223 Wisteria Hall was originally a dance studio, with well worn hardwood floors, a bank of tall, arched, beveled and leaded glass windows opposite the door, and mirrors lining the side walls from the baseboard to three-quarters of the height of the room. The front wall had had the mirrors removed, and was fitted with a dry erase board and a retractable projection screen. On the ceiling were suspended an array of comfortable halogen downlighting fixtures, a high definition media projector, and a state-of-the-art super quiet air handling system that very effectively scrubbed fine particulates from the air and released odor neutralizing ions back into the space. All of the glass was thoroughly cleaned by maintenance once a week and perpetually sparkled like new. Only the faintest aroma of stale smoke could be detected in the room.

"Tonight's session will unfortunately be largely administrative in nature, as I must first collect, individually review, and countersign your release forms, as well as examine and take a scan of your student and government issued IDs before I can enable your unique password to open the online syllabus and instructional materials that accompany this course. Once we've done this, you're free to leave, since I'm sure that you've got a lot more interesting things to do than sit around here and watch me sign and file forms. Please check your student email accounts about an hour or so after you've left, since I'll be sending your login confirmation and assignment for tomorrow night once I've wrapped up everyone's departmental intake processing. And don't worry – the assignment is pretty simple, and shouldn't take too long. As I call your name, please come up and have a seat at my desk."

I gathered the folds of my skirt, took my seat, and called each student up one by one to process her requisite materials. Once seated next to me, most couldn't seem to take their eyes off of the open pack of Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Lights 120s, gold Colibri lighter, and freshly cleaned cut glass ashtray sitting out in plain view that I deliberately left on my desk next to the scanner and my MacBook.

Each student provided signed and dated copies of the following form, which she had previously downloaded and printed from The Department of Smoking Studies main page on the university's website:

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Willow River University of the Arts for Women
Department of Smoking Studies
Enrollment Release Form

– MUST BE FULLY COMPLETED PRIOR TO ATTENDANCE IN ANY DEPARTMENTAL COURSES –

I hereby relinquish any legal claim in perpetuity against Willow River University of the Arts for Women, including its faculty and representatives (hereafter referred to as The University), related to my decision to enroll in coursework offered by The University's Department of Smoking Studies.

I hereby declare, under penalty of perjury, that I am presently at least 18 years of age, the legal age in this jurisdiction to possess and use tobacco products at the time that this completed document is received by The University.

I hereby declare, under penalty of perjury, that the government issued identification that I am presenting to verify my age is entirely authentic, and that the information that it contains has not been altered or falsified in any way.

I hereby declare, to the best of my knowledge, that I am not currently afflicted with asthma or any chronic obstructive pulmonary condition, or any chronic cardiac or vascular condition.

I hereby declare, to the best of my knowledge, that I am not currently pregnant, nor is it my intention to become pregnant during my enrollment in any coursework offered by the Department of Smoking Studies. Further, should I discover that I am pregnant, I agree to immediately drop any coursework that I am taking in the Department of Smoking Studies. This action will not result in academic penalty of any kind, and it is the strongest recommendation of the Department of Smoking Studies that any smoking student who becomes pregnant make every effort to quit smoking while she is pregnant and nursing. Please refer to the last paragraph of this document regarding University resources available to assist students with quitting smoking. The Department of Smoking Studies will permit enrollment of students who have children, however, so long as they sign a statement promising to refrain from nursing while

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

enrolled in courses offered by the department.

I acknowledge that smoking tobacco products has been scientifically and conclusively proven to pose serious and substantial personal health risks, including, but not limited to, shortening my potential lifespan, respiratory and other organ system cancers, chronic obstructive respiratory disease, heart and vascular disease, reproductive complications, fetal injury and death, as well as substantial personal health risks to those around me who may become exposed to my second-hand smoke.

I acknowledge that tobacco contains nicotine, which has been scientifically and conclusively proven to be highly addictive, and that many smokers find it extremely difficult to quit smoking once they have become regular smokers.

I acknowledge that I am enrolling in this program of study entirely of my own volition, without coercion or external influence of any kind, and that, due to the unique nature of the course of study, The University will permit me to drop any course in The Department of Smoking Studies at any time without academic penalty. Further, The University will provide to any student who requests it, at no additional cost beyond standard tuition and enrollment fees, quit smoking counseling, support, and medications through The University's Student Health Clinic during any period of active enrollment.

Signature, full legal name of student

Printed full legal name of student

Student identification number / Social Security number: ____ - ____ - ____

Date of birth: ____/____/____ (mm/dd/yyyy)

Date of initial enrollment in The Department of Smoking Studies: ____/____/____ (mm/dd/yyyy)

Requested initial password for online access to The Department of Smoking Studies:
_____ (6-20 characters, case sensitive, alpha-numeric ONLY)

FOR FACULTY USE ONLY:

Identification reviewed and collected by:

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Signature, Diana Lauren Lovering, Psy.D., M.F.A., Professor
Department of Smoking Studies
Authorized faculty representative

Date of government issued identification age verification: ___/___/___ (mm/dd/yyyy)

I exchanged brief introductory pleasantries as I made my way through the class list in alphabetical order, thanking each student for enrolling and wishing her a good night after her enrollment materials had been successfully processed and collected.

Once the last student had collected her things and was on her way, I closed the door, turned on the ventilation system, lit up, and let the Virginia Slims dangle from my lips as I took long lazy drags and allowed the cool, satisfying smoke to swirl deeply within my lungs and cascade casually out of my nose while I began updating the departmental access database. Once completed, I began sending individually addressed personalized messages to each student, in lieu of using the university's standard bulk email database utility, since I've always been the sort of teacher who prefers to connect one-on-one with her students whenever possible:

From: "Diana Lovering"
To: "Tamara Adams"
Subject: Welcome to Smoking Studies 101 / Initial Assignment / Login Confirmation

Dear Tamara,

I really look forward to getting to know you better as you explore your interest in smoking!

This must be a really exciting time for you, since I see that this is your first year with us, and most likely, your first time away from home for an extended period. You're in a new place, surrounded by lots of interesting new people and experiences. It's the perfect time to try new things, and to see what fits for you, and what doesn't.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

If you're anything at all like most of the women who take this class, you might be a little shy when it comes to the thought of trying smoking. Or maybe you just haven't yet felt that you've had the right opportunity, or felt comfortable enough with the circumstances that you found yourself in, to be able to try smoking before. Its no big deal. Many women never smoke their first cigarette until they go off to college, and most never have the opportunity to really explore the experience of what it's like to smoke their first cigarettes with others who are going through the same experience in a really open and supportive way, which is the whole point of this class. Know that you're among friends, relax, and rest assured that you're under no pressure to continue smoking if you ultimately decide that it isn't for you.

Your assignment for tomorrow night's session is to do these two things:

1) Think about and be prepared to discuss why smoking interests you. Everyone will be expected to share with the rest of the class her reasons for wanting to try smoking, and to be receptive to listening to and discussing with the group what the others have to say. We'll all be seated in a big circle facing each other so that no one feels singled out or put on the spot. And there are no wrong answers, so just be honest, be yourself, and be willing to listen and respond with an open mind.

2) Please login, familiarize yourself with the syllabus, and review the material linked to tomorrow night's session.

I've got your login all set up. Just go to The Department of Smoking Studies main page on the university's website, and enter your university email address in the username field and the case sensitive password that you requested on your release form:

LONGESTSlimsOfAll

(Interesting choice of password, by the way! ;))

Note that you can update your password at any time, once you've logged into the curriculum site from the main department page. And if you should forget your password, just send me an

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

email or give me a call and I'll be happy to fix it for you.

Well, that's it for now. I look forward to seeing you tomorrow night at our usual time!

Diana Lovering, Psy.D., M.F.A.

Professor

Departments of Smoking Studies and Visual Art

532 Wisteria Hall

Willow River University of the Arts for Women

Voice: 555-555-2307

Fax: 555-555-2301

Tamara Adams, 18, returned to her dorm room, filled her hot pot with water from the drinking fountain down the hall, plugged it into the outlet above her desk to make herself a cup of tea, opened her laptop, checked her email, and was excited to see that Diana had already sent her login confirmation and first assignment information.

Truth be told, Tamara had a bit of a crush on Diana Lovering, and had secretly admired her from afar since she first spotted her walking across the campus the previous Fall during her first semester. Not only was her first impression of Diana one of striking beauty and poise, but she was also lighting up a very long white cigarette at the time, which really caught her eye because she'd never seen anyone smoke such an unusual and elegant looking cigarette before. It somehow really suited her and completed her appeal, Tamara thought, and she suddenly began to become much more interested in smoking than she ever had before.

A week later, Tamara spotted the top of her pack peeking out of Diana's open purse while passing her in the Student Union. Since she had never really given much thought to smoking or to different brands of cigarettes until then, she Googled "Virginia Slims 120s" and found lots and lots of information about not only previous advertising campaigns, but about a whole online community of people who got turned on by smoking, and who especially got turned on by women who smoked Virginia Slims 120s, which didn't actually surprise her all that much, given her reaction to seeing Diana light one up the previous week.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

The result was her creative and symbolic choice of password once she gathered up the courage to sign up for Diana's seminar and to fill out the release form. And Tamara couldn't have been more pleased that Diana had commented on it in her email to her, or with the warmth that seemed to flow through her words to her, and she was all smiles as she loaded the Department of Smoking Studies main page from her bookmark menu.

Once logged in, Tamara saw a list of all of the courses offered by the Department of Smoking Studies, and noted that only "Smoking Studies 101" had a live link enabled, which led to the syllabus / instructional materials index page:

Smoking Studies 101 – Introduction to Cigarette Smoking M, T, Th 7-8:45 P.M. 223 Wisteria Hall Diana Lovering, Psy.D., M.F.A. Spring 2009 Session 1

Week 1

Monday: Administrative Departmental Intake Session Tuesday: Instructor and Student Introductions and Discussion / Smoking Risk Awareness Orientation Thursday: Your Respiratory System and Your First Cigarette / Practice and Discussion

Week 2

Monday: Cigarette Brand Comparisons / Practice and Discussion Tuesday: The Image and Identity of The Smoker / Practice and Discussion Thursday: Becoming Increasingly Accustomed to Regular Cigarette Smoke Exposure / Practice and Discussion

Week 3

Monday: Smoking in Social Situations - Role Play / Practice and Discussion Tuesday:

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Deepening Your Inhalation and Holding of Cigarette Smoke / Practice and Discussion

Thursday: Beyond The Basics / Practice and Discussion

Again, only one live link presented itself, next to tomorrow night's class: "Smoking Risk Awareness Orientation."

Tamara felt a tingle and flutter spreading outward from deep within her stomach, breathed in deeply the soothing aroma of steeped jasmine petals, swirled a dark violet fingernail across her trackpad, and clicked.

* * * * *

Throughout the course of the evening and the following day, the 23 newest enrollees in The Department of Smoking Studies logged in to the syllabus site, and reviewed to mostly dutiful degrees the Smoking Risk Awareness Orientation, which provided a graphic and extensive detailing of all of the varied ways that repeatedly inhaling cigarette smoke is generally a very *bad* idea.

And yet, at 7 P.M. on Tuesday evening, all 23 of them were seated patiently in 223 Wisteria Hall, awaiting the next step which would bring each of them one step closer to doing just that.

They could hear the stiletto heels of my Michael Kors boots clicking as I walked briskly down the corridor outside of the studio, and as I turned and came through the door, they all looked up and greeted me with attentive smiles.

"*Good evening, Ladies.*" I said smiling in response as I closed the door and set my computer bag and purse down on the desk at the front of the room.

"Since this will obviously be an interactive group seminar, let's jump right in with introductions, shall we? And since this is obviously a small group, this is the last night that we'll begin by going through the class roster. When I call your name, please tell us what your major is, what year of your studies you're in, and why you decided to enroll in this seminar. But first, please rearrange your desks so that we're all facing each other in a big circle, O.K.? That will make it a

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

lot easier for us to communicate as a group."

As the class moved into the requested co-active arrangement, I retrieved a printout of the roster from one of the side pockets of my leather laptop satchel. Once everyone was settled, I called the first name on the list.

"Tamara Adams?"

"Hi...I'm a Music History major...I'm in my first year...and I guess I'm interested in smoking because someone I'm interested in smokes..." Tamara quickly blushed and looked down at the floor, suddenly very afraid that her crush on Diana could somehow be read on her face.

"Hi Tamara; welcome! Smoking is certainly a very social thing, and that's absolutely one of the main reasons that people become interested in it, as a shared experience that can bring them closer together." I offered my kindest smile at her obvious shyness.

"Melissa Belmont?"

"Hi everyone! I'm a first year Dance major, and I'm interested in keeping my weight down. It seems like a lot of dancers smoke for this reason."

Giggles of recognition filled the room, including mine.

"Hello Melissa; welcome! Judging from the reaction, it seems that you're not alone in this interest! Any other dancers here?"

Eight hands went up.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"Anyone else share Melissa's interest?"

Twenty three hands quickly shot up to laughter all around.

"O.K., I think we've found a pattern here...yes indeed, a lot of women do find that smoking helps them to keep their weight down, and that's another common reason for the interest in smoking."

"Stephanie Benett?"

"Hello. I'm a second year Dance major, which means that I'm a little late to 'the program', but I too am interested in cigarettes for the weight management aspect. Although, I've always thought that smoking just looks really cool and sophisticated..."

"Hi Stephanie; welcome! Smoking definitely has a long-standing and undeniable caché about it, which is an important part of the social aspect."

"Danielle Burns?"

"Hi. I'm in Graphic Design. First year. A lot of my friends smoke, and they seem to really enjoy it, and I want to know what the 'big deal' is about smoking."

"Hi Danielle; welcome! One of the most interesting things about smoking is that it does have this sense of 'belonging to a group'; and if you aren't 'initiated' into it, it's virtually impossible to understand why anyone could find it pleasurable."

This brought nods of acknowledgment throughout the room.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"Jessica Cohen?"

"Hello fellow Smoke Virgins!" Once again, laughter all around. *"I'm a year three Art History student with an interest in primitive cultures, and I definitely get the 'tribal' aspect of smoking that you're talking about Diana. I guess I see learning how to smoke as being a modern version of this, and that has a lot to do with my interest here. That and the whole looking hot in my bikini thing..."*

More laughter.

"Hi Jessica; welcome! Obviously, there are a lot of different levels to the appeal of smoking, and that complexity - from the notion of ritual and group affiliation to vanity - certainly makes smoking uniquely appealing, doesn't it?"

"Andrea DeRossi?"

"Hi. I'm a Cello Performance major. It's my first year. Everyone's always seen me as a 'nice girl' and a 'good girl' and I'm kind of sick of it and I feel like maybe I'd like a bit of an image change...and I guess I'm wondering if smoking could help me do that..."

"Hi Andrea; welcome! Again, there are obviously significant social implications to smoking in terms of how others see us - for good or bad - but there are also very significant social implications based on how we view ourselves. And passing through that 'initiation' of becoming a smoker that we were just talking about is one way that we can change how we think and feel about ourselves, which can often change the way that we interact with others, which in turn can change how others see us."

I could see little invisible light bulbs turning on above heads all around the room.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"Gabrielle Donovan?"

"Hello; I'm a Film and Video major in my second year, and I love the whole silver screen glamour history of smoking, and I frankly kind of like how it pisses people off in this age of extreme political correctness."

I couldn't help but laugh at her directness. *"Hey Gabrielle; welcome! We know each other from The Visual Art Department, don't we? Ironically, sometimes we are the most social when we are being deliberately anti-social, don't you think? And you're so right about the whole image legacy of smoking on the silver screen; it seems that no matter how much time passes, and no matter how much anyone tries to deny or refute it, it just never completely goes away, does it?"*

"Zoe Forsythe?"

"Hello all. I'm finishing up my Graphic Design degree at the end of the semester. I've actually tried smoking a few times over the years, but have never quite been able to get the hang of inhaling...and it's always bothered me that I've never been able to do it."

"Inhaling is certainly the whole point of smoking, but more than that, learning to be able to inhale cigarette smoke can actually serve as something of transformative milestone for many smokers, as we'll discuss over the next few sessions. Once again, it goes back to the significance of the idea of 'initiation'..."

This went on until everyone in the class had a chance to offer her variation of what were essentially one or more of the above similar interests in smoking, and once all of the students had introduced themselves, it was my turn. *"I'm a two time graduate of Willow River; I earned my B.F.A. and M.F.A. in Film and Video here. I earned my Psy.D. at Stanford, and have a deep interest in young adult development, although my love of teaching eventually made me transition from clinical practice back to full time teaching. As many of you know, I'm a Professor of Film and Video in The Visual Art Department, as well as the Chair and Founder of our own little academic oddity, The Department of Smoking Studies. And yes, I'm a smoker, just in case there was any question about that."*

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

This last remark was greeted by smiles all around.

"I started smoking while I was an undergrad, at just about the age that most of you are now, and for many of the reasons that have brought you here tonight. So I can't help but see little bits and pieces of myself in each of you. But before I share more about my experiences as a smoker with you, let's talk a little bit about what you thought about the information that I asked you to review for tonight – the 'Smoking Risk Awareness Orientation.' You're all obviously very bright, well-informed, self-aware young women, or you wouldn't be here at such a rigorous, competitive, and selective school as Willow River. You've all read and signed the grimly-worded departmental Enrollment Release Form. You've all reviewed the very graphic warning materials on the site, because you're all intellectually curious and diligent students. So after all of that, why have none of you yet been dissuaded from wanting to try smoking?"

I already knew the answer to this question, of course, given the built in selection implications of being a highly intelligent female student in an all female environment, combined with the psychological exercise of having to complete the Release Form prior to enrolling. But I also knew that it is essential for any new smoker to discover and face the reality of the answer for herself, if she is to truly maximize the pleasure that smoking can give her.

My question elicited the usual mixture of wide-eyed deer-in-the-headlights blank stares and smattering of knowing smirks and blushes. The "fawns," as I liked to call them, were the ones who could see the patterns, but couldn't quite make them out yet. The "smirks" were those who got it, and tended to relate to the Sadism of the whole thing. The "blushes" were those who got it, and tended to relate to the Masochism of the whole thing.

"Would anyone care to offer her thoughts about this?"

Elise Hanson, 18, a first year Creative Writing student, was one of the "blushes", and was the first to answer. *"Would anyone think that I was crazy if I said that I find the whole idea of the danger of smoking appealing, in an odd way? I mean, it's not like I want to kill myself or anything, but isn't there a kind of weird romance to the idea of self-destruction?"*

Madison Mathews, 19, a second year Acting student, and one of the "smirks", replied immediately. *"Absolutely. I think I know what you mean, but I wasn't sure that anybody else*

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

might feel this way! Obviously not everyone who smokes turns into one of those tragic cases in the PSAs that they keep shoving down our throats, and obviously you have to smoke a lot for a really long time to end up with the kind of nasty stuff that they show in those ads, but all of the propaganda against it kind of makes the idea of smoking in the face of all of that...attractive...somehow."

Jill Perry, 18, a first year Art History student, was one of the "fawns". She remained silent, but I watched her absorb this exchange, along with several of the other "fawns", and the expression on their faces suggested that the idea being presented might have struck a distant, yet resonant chord with them.

Sheila Pommers, a 19 year old first year Literature student, was the first "fawn" to speak. *"Wow . I don't want to get lung cancer or emphysema or anything like that, but when you put it that way...hmmm...I guess I'd never thought about smoking like that before...interesting."*

I let Sheila's comment sink in until the moment allowed a little metaphorical dirt to cover the seed, and then sprinkle a few drops of rain on the idea. *"Well, I've always thought that it is very interesting that people not only continue to smoke, but continue to start smoking after all of the seemingly endless public health information about the risks of smoking that we have at our disposal. It doesn't seem very logical, does it?"*

Madison Mathews laughed. *"Maybe logic doesn't have anything to do with it. Maybe smoking is one of the things that people do to escape the dryness of logic. Maybe it's a purely emotional indulgence."*

"I think you've hit the proverbial nail on the head, Madison. We certainly don't live by logic alone, do we?"

Lisa Jensen, 18, another of the first year Dance students, chimed in. *"I know I certainly don't. My boyfriend constantly tells me that I must have been born without the ability to be logical, but I'm convinced that he's just jealous because he'll never have as much fun as I do, because I don't have the burden of needing to rationalize everything like he does...God!"*

She rolled her eyes and let her head drop to her desk in an exaggerated display of disgust, which got a big laugh all around.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"I think that that's part of what's behind my desire to change the way that others see me," Andrea DeRossi, the 18 year old first year Cello student quietly offered.

"I mean, I feel like a big part of who I am has been determined by what the 'logical' expectations of me are, and maybe doing something completely 'illogical', like smoking, is a way out of that..."

"So for you, you equate the thought of you smoking – to taking the 'illogical' risk of smoking – with taking something of yourself back from others?" I asked.

"Yes...I guess I do." Andrea momentarily looked off someplace seemingly far away, nodded slightly, and smiled, a look and a gesture that was echoed among several of the other more introverted young women in the group.

"So, backing up a bit, what were some of your immediate reactions as you looked through all of those graphic smoking-related disease images on the 'Risk Awareness' site?" I gently pressed.

Belinda Thomas, 19, a third year Dance student, scrunched up her face. *"God, they were gross! But I thought that the photos of the 'good' organs were just as gross as the photos of the smoke-damaged ones. I mean, the whole thing just looked like a collection of horror movie or 'reality show' props to me!"*

Another round of laughter.

"So you wouldn't say that the images were particularly persuasive?"

Twenty three heads began to shake back and forth in unison, and a collective murmur of jaded sighs, giggles, and *"Nos"* immediately filled the room.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Jessica Cohen, the third year Art History student with the interest in primitive cultures, suddenly became one of the "smirks". *"Looking at all of those photos intended to shock me actually made me think of the all of the ways that human beings over the centuries have altered their bodies and deliberately poisoned themselves for the sake of seeking spiritual enlightenment, like many of the traditions of Shamanism. Weird, huh? They also definitely provoked a very primitive and reflexive feeling of rebelliousness in me..."*

Helene Theiss, 18, another of the first year Dance students, picked up her thought. *"...It's kind of like being told over and over again not to do something so many times that you eventually can't help but want to do it, isn't it?"*

Another ripple of acknowledgement and agreement spread through the room. The "Smoking Risk Awareness Orientation" exercise and discussion never failed to provide fertile soil for germinating the seeds of the desire to smoke.

"That's a great point about the example of Shamanism, Jessica. We might also consider the parallels to tattooing and scarification, only in the case of smoking, the changes are largely internal in nature, where only we know about them. And I think that Helene and several of you have identified something very, very significant about smoking; something that smacks of Eve and her Forbidden Apple, or Pandora and her Forbidden Box..."

I had been leaning against the front edge of the lecturer's desk up to this point, but as I spoke I stood up and walked around behind it to the control panel next to the door, switched on the ventilation system, returned to the rear of the desk, opened a drawer, produced the same elegant cut glass ashtray that I had left out during the previous night's intake session, and set it carefully on the desktop. Aware that every eye in the room was now completely focused on me, I opened the clasp on my designer purse and retrieved a fresh pack of Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Lights 120s and my favorite gold Colibri lighter.

"I assume no one will mind if I smoke? All of this talk about interest in smoking has suddenly greatly increased my desire to do it."

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

An easy laughter filled the room at my display of mock concern that suddenly died away as I began to gently tap the top of the unopened pack against my left wrist, which made the stack of thin gold bracelets on my right wrist clink faintly together like a sparkly tambourine. I turned the pack over, and with a final metallic swishing sound from my bracelets, unwound the seal and popped open the lid. Once I had deposited the cellophane and foil into the wastebasket next to the desk, I held the pack over it and ran the tip of my French manicured right index finger across the filter ends to brush off the few bits of loose tobacco, and slowly withdrew a cigarette to fully demonstrate it's elegant length. Continuing the show, I next closed my eyes and brought the open pack to my nose, smiling as I breathed in the bracing fresh menthol aroma. Setting the pack down next to the ashtray, I picked up my lighter and returned to my semi-seated leaning position in front of the lecturer's desk, holding the unlit extra long cigarette near the tip of the filter in my right hand near my face. I took a long moment and looked around the room at the rapt anticipation on the faces of the young women in front of me.

I looked purposefully at the unlit cigarette poised at end of my fingertips, and continued. *"This is nothing more than some paper, some ink, some absorbent synthetic fibers, and some plant leaves – with a few 'miracles' of modern chemistry thrown in for good measure,"*

I glanced back at the class and winked,

"but when I apply a bit of flame and a deliberate, focused breath to it, it becomes a potent instrument of Taboo."

And with that, I happened to meet Tamara Adams' gaze as I brought the cigarette to my waiting lips, clicked my lighter, took a lengthy first drag, snapped it forcefully and deeply into my chest, and then slowly, slowly, slowly released the sweet menthol smoke into the space at the center of the circle where it danced in the light like the ghost of a restless cherub drawing it's bow and taking aim.

* * * * *

"Yeah Mom, I'm taking my vitamins..."

Sophomore Dance Major Kelsey Graham, 19, dropped her head and let her long blonde hair spill over her face as she held her bright magenta cell phone close to the side of her head, her rather overbearing and overly protective mother's voice filling her ear.

As Gillian Graham, M.D., Oncologist, continued to lecture her daughter on proper vitamin dosing and optimum intake times, Kelsey focused on the unopened green and white pack of Virginia Slims Menthol Lights 100s and white Bic Mini lighter sitting on her dorm room desk.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"If Mom could see this - my first pack of cigarettes - sitting right here in front of me, she'd have an absolute stroke" Kelsey thought to herself, a devious and deliciously secret smile playing across her lips.

"O.K. Mom, gotta let you go...I've got homework yet to get to tonight before I can turn in."

"Alright Sweetheart, just take good care of yourself, O.K.?"

"Will do Mom; love you; goodnight."

"Love you too; goodnight honey."

* * * * *

Gina Smith, a grad student in Visual Art, and at 24, the oldest member of the class, sat at her vanity posing with an unlit Salem Slim Light 100 from her first pack of cigarettes, and practicing just the right amount of pressure to apply with her lips and mouth to feel the cool mentholated air rushing over her tongue.

* * * * *

Cassy Hathaway, 20, a Junior Acting student, realized that she had never actually held a pack of cigarettes before in her hand, and was surprised by not only how light it was, but how firm the fresh box of Marlboro Lights 100s seemed - delicate, and yet somehow also sturdy. She slipped her first pack of cigarettes, new black Bic lighter, and change into her jacket pocket, and headed out of the convenience store.

* * * * *

All across the township of Willow River, in convenience stores, drug stores, gas stations, and super markets, the women of my class, "Smoking Studies 101 – Introduction to Cigarette Smoking", went out into the night fresh from my recommendations for what to buy for their first cigarettes.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"Go with 100s. They are not only a more elegant look than 85 mm / 'King Size' cigarettes, but they tend to have slightly longer filters, and the longer length of the cigarette tends to mellow out the first drags more than a shorter cigarette. 120s are a lot of fun, but I'd suggest getting used to 100s first, since that extra length tends to push 120s almost into a Full Flavor experience the further down you smoke.

"Go with Lights. Ultra Lights could be a possibility too, but I think that you'll quickly appreciate the Lights more than you will the Ultra Lights. Full Flavors are nice, but you'll probably have a much easier and more pleasant time for your initial smoking experiences if you start with Lights.

"Menthol is often a good choice for a new smoker, since the menthol helps to numb your cough reflex. You should absolutely try both regular and menthol at some point.

"Brands that I've smoked and can recommend, again in the Lights 100s and Menthol Lights 100s varieties for someone learning to smoke: Virginia Slims, Benson and Hedges, Salem, Marlboro, and Parliament. Salem is the only brand that is available only in menthol, and it's available in both Lights 100s and Slim Lights 100s.

"And don't forget to get a lighter and a decent ashtray. Bring your cigarettes and lighters with you to class Thursday; ashtrays will be provided."

It was their homework for the next session on Thursday night. That, and to go over the material linked to the online syllabus prior to the session:

Your Respiratory System & Your First Cigarette

By this point, you should already have acquired your first pack of cigarettes, lighter, and ashtray.

If you haven't yet done this, please do it first before continuing here further.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

While you're on your own, take some time and acquaint yourself with the pack and how it to open it, as well as how the lighter works.

Once you've opened the pack, check the filters for any loose bits of tobacco stuck to their ends, and flick them off with your fingernail or fingertip if there are any.

Take out a cigarette and smell it. Smells inviting, doesn't it?

Hold the cigarette between your index and middle fingers near where the filter meets the shaft of tobacco, and get used to how it feels to hold a cigarette.

Try looking at yourself in a mirror to see how you look with a cigarette in your hand. Hold the cigarette up near your face and smile. You look different, don't you?!

Place the filter in your mouth and practice drawing air though the cigarette as if you were sucking through a straw.

After you've gotten the hang of taking an unlit "drag" for a few seconds, stop sucking with your lips and mouth, and in a single motion open your lips and remove the cigarette from them, and inhale sharply.

You should taste a little bit of sweetness with a regular cigarette, or coolness with a menthol cigarette, which will be diluted a bit when you open your mouth, mix it with air not "filtered" by the cigarette, and inhale. If you can taste something when you draw air though an unlit cigarette, you know you're doing it correctly!

Evolution has programmed your respiratory tract to recoil, spasm, and cough when it is exposed to smoke, or airborne particulates of any kind. The mucous membranes in the nose, mouth,

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

throat, trachea, bronchial tree, and alveolar bundles are very richly supplied with blood and are very delicate and sensitive, not unlike the mucosa of the vaginal tract, which often has to be sensitized to penetration before sexual pleasure can be experienced in this way.

Starting to smoke is all about conditioning your body to become accustomed to breathing cigarette smoke, which requires patience and determination. The sensual and psychological rewards of smoking can only be experienced once you've learned to *really* inhale.

Learning to inhale is what transforms a non-smoker into a smoker. It's the crux of the "Initiation" of smoking. To become a smoker, you have to be willing to transform your body. And that willingness to transform one's body is ultimately what makes a smoker a smoker.

If you feel like you'd like some group support and want to wait until our next meeting to light up for the first time, you are absolutely welcome to do that.

Or, if you're feeling a little adventurous, or might like some solo experimentation time, by all means, feel free to experiment!

The first time you light up, take very brief drags for the first few, and don't try to inhale them yet. Just focus on getting used to the taste of cigarette smoke in your mouth. It's an acquired taste that virtually all smokers find quite pleasant in time.

When you're ready to try inhaling your first drag, take a very, very small drag from your cigarette, open your mouth, and breath in deliberately. Consciously resist the urge to cough, pause, and breathe out slowly. You will definitely feel a tingling and a sudden fullness in your chest if you've inhaled any smoke.

Take a few more uninhaled drags, and when you're ready, try taking another very, very small drag that you inhale, just like you did the first time.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

At this point, you might begin to feel a little dizzy. Enjoy it - many people do!

But don't push things if you're starting to feel overwhelmed. You can always put out the cigarette and try again later. Just keep reminding yourself that you're in no hurry, and becoming a smoker takes time. Acquired pleasures can often be the best pleasures of all, and part of the pleasure often comes from the fact that it did require acquiring.

I'd encourage you to take a couple of hours between your smoking experimentation sessions, and be sure to have something to drink on hand, since most new smokers find that their initial smoke exposures leave their mouths and throats feeling dry.

Once you find that you can tolerate a few small inhaled drags for a couple of cigarettes, on your next one, try taking slightly bigger drags and inhaling them.

When you experience a lot of coughing, or if you experience nausea, just stop, put the cigarette out, and try again later when you really feel like it.

Every time you inhale another drag of cigarette smoke as a new smoker, you're one step closer to desensitizing the hyper-sensitive defense mechanisms of your respiratory tract, and one step closer to transforming your lungs into a place where you can experience great pleasure in your body, and in ways that you probably can't yet imagine.

Eventually, virtually everyone who is motivated to be able to smoke gets to the point where they can take a dozen or more regular size drags from a single cigarette and inhale them without dizziness, nausea, or coughing. For most people, getting to this point usually takes smoking roughly a pack or so of cigarettes, and if you keep practicing, you'll most likely reach this point over the next two weeks, before the seminar is over!

Just be sure to take your time; patience and determination, remember?

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

And most of all...HAVE FUN WITH THIS!

I look forward to hearing about your experiences purchasing cigarettes for the first time, as well as what you're thinking and feeling while you explore them.

Diana

Since no one wanted to be the only one who hadn't yet tried it on Thursday, 23 pairs of young female lungs had their first deliberate encounter with Virginia Slims and Benson and Hedges and Salem and Marlboro and Parliament smoke that night.

All of them got carried away and coughed and sputtered and got very, very dizzy. Sixteen puked.

But all 23 of them also lit up again on Wednesday.

* * * * *

Faith Roland, 18, a Freshman Music History major, finished up her philosophy survey paper and decided that she would end her evening with a glass of wine from her (21 year old) roommate's bottle...and her third cigarette.

She returned to her room, closed the door, lit some candles, opened her windows, dropped her iPod into her dock, and selected her "Blondie Favorites" playlist. She walked across the room barefoot in her silk nightie and unzipped the outer pocket of her leather book bag, from which she retrieved a pack of Virginia Slims Luxury Lights 120s and a red Bic Mini lighter. She grabbed her new cut glass ashtray, glass of wine, cigarettes and lighter, and set them all down on her desk.

She turned to see her full reflection in the wardrobe mirror on the back of her door, and decided that she looked very relaxed and pretty in the candlelight, now that she was finished with her homework for the evening...well, almost fished with her homework, anyway.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Faith's deep chestnut hair spilled over her shoulders, and she began to dance around a little to "Heart of Glass", picking up her first pack of cigarettes during a quick spin. She stopped to face the mirror again and watched her pale slim arm raise an extra long cigarette and place it gently between her lips. She just let it hang there as she smiled and gyrated back and forth in front of the mirror.

"Dead Sexy Girl!" she thought to herself.

She heard Diana's suggestion about not going for the 120s right away, but couldn't resist after the show she put on for the class the night before. But Faith found that she really liked to let the whole thing burn down between her fingers even if she could only take a few drags at this point, because she just got off on the image of herself holding a long, smoldering "cancer stick." She loved to just smile and flirt with herself, pretending that she was a model at a photo shoot for a cigarette ad, and found that watching herself holding a burning cigarette and thinking about it even got her a little aroused.

She was already good at taking fairly large drags and not inhaling them - just letting them waft out of her mouth in obscene looking ways - and the one largish drag that she last attempted to inhale the night before sent her running to the bathroom, so she wanted to proceed cautiously. But she was also so enamored with the image that she was presenting to herself that she was absolutely ready to try again.

About half-way through her third Virginia Slims Luxury Light 120, and after a good sip of wine, Faith decided to go for it, and watched herself take a slow small drag, pop open her mouth, and inhale a visible little ball of smoke down her throat, where she could definitely feel it expanding her still virginal lungs. She watched herself with amazement as her breasts fell and a long thin white plume of smoke came streaming out from between her smiling lips.

She felt a massive cough rising up in her chest, and she focused all of her will on suppressing the urge to let it try to rid her lungs of the tar that she had just deposited in them.

A Dark Satisfaction settled in Faith's mind and body, beginning to slowly, but surely, change

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

both forever.

* * * * *

On Tuesday evening of the second week of the seminar the discussion topic for the evening was "The Image and Identity of The Smoker". The background material consisted of a variety of female-oriented mass-media smoking imagery spanning the last half-century, including classic US TV cigarette advertisements, foreign TV cigarette commercials, smoking scenes from popular film and TV shows, anti-smoking TV public service announcements, and print cigarette advertisements.

All of the students had reviewed these on the curriculum site prior to the session, but I always liked to play a montage of selections from this material to start the evening off. It had the effect of making the impressions a little fresher for purposes of discussion, and it also gave me an opportunity to quietly observe and survey how far everyone was progressing with her individual smoking experience. As I stood in front of the ivy-rimmed leaded glass windows at the back of the dimmed room listening to Japanese Virginia Slims jingles from the 1980s, I looked around the second floor Smoking Studio of Wisteria Hall and noticed that everyone had been inspired to light up shortly after the media review began, and each held a smoldering 100 or 120 mm cigarette in her hand. Twenty three embers glowed all around the circle, releasing 23 lazy plumes of smoke into the soft glow of the reading lights and media projector. And while the air handling system was keeping up with the filtration of the dramatically increased airborne particulates in the room (at least to a sufficient extent to keep The University's cleaning and painting expenses for the space to a manageable level), a dreamy soft haze quickly filled the room.

And true to the competitive and driven nature of virtually all Willow River students, it was obvious that they had all been practicing. So much so that most people would find it hard to believe that all of them had pink and perfect nonsmokers' lungs only the week before. Their cough reflexes newly willed into submission and respiratory cilia mostly paralyzed with tar deposits for the first time in their lives, I was impressed to see that *everyone* was already inhaling to varying degrees.

I couldn't help but notice how much every young woman in my class had seemed to come out of her shell and blossom since our first meeting, and as I had seen so many times before, they all looked incredibly pleased with themselves. For several of them, this was probably the first time in their lives that they had ever inhaled cigarette smoke in front of someone else, and now that everyone had reached this little milestone, I could sense the impending bond that they would inevitably share, and the friendships that were bound to happen as a result, and I couldn't help but smile.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

And then one of my favorite moments of the seminar happened at the conclusion of the media review, following the infamous Australian anti-smoking TV advertisement depicting a woman smoking outside of an office building that uses computer generated imagery to illustrate smoke rushing into her lungs, causing them to wither and rot. The screen went black after the voice over grimly stated "every cigarette is doing you damage," and after a moment of silence, I watched the coals of 23 cigarettes move and glow brighter – nearly in unison – followed by 23 ribcages expanding, and then contracting, releasing 23 clouds of cigarette smoke...

Everyone realized that they had all just reflexively taken a drag in defiant response to the male voice over's authoritative admonition, and laughter (and a fair amount of coughing) erupted all around. This little exercise in human nature never failed to amuse me as well, and I couldn't help but laugh as I made my way to the control panel at the front of the room to turn off the projector and turn the studio lights back up.

I gave everyone a moment to recover before I spoke.

"I decided to focus this evening's discussion on the concepts of 'Image' and 'Identity', because I believe that these are central to the experience and pleasure of smoking. Consider all of the different messages that we've been exposed to about smoking, all of the different ways in which we experience smoking, and all of the different ways in which these messages and our experiences shape our perceptions of smokers and nonsmokers – and of ourselves in turn, depending on whether or not we smoke – and suddenly, I believe that it becomes pretty clear that the mere presence of a burning cigarette between the fingers of anyone becomes a potent symbol of all of those messages and experiences, in one way or another. And it is this psychological complexity that makes smoking such a powerful social element. Think about that."

Nineteen year old Sophomore Acting student Madison Mathews was definitely putting on a show as she struck a sexy twisted pose in her seat with her Parliament Light 100 held up proudly between her right index and middle fingers, placed the white filter between her lips and stained it with another layer of shiny pink lipgloss and tar as she took a deliberate drag and spread her fingers into a "V," carefully inhaled the 96th drag of her smoking career, and tilted her head back and exhaled slowly through pursed lips. After a thoughtful moment, she spoke: *"It's hard to explain...but I do see myself differently now that I've started smoking."*

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

"How so Madison?"

"Well Diana, I feel like I've connected with myself, and with my body, in ways that I've never experienced before. And it feels...empowering - I guess is the best word...to be able to take this new 'forbidden' pleasure in my body. I feel like if I can learn to find the pleasure in smoking, I can probably learn to find the pleasure in lots of other things as well, and that's kind of liberating and, well...exciting..."

"Wow Madison...that's a great way of putting it. Can anyone else relate?"

Nods and murmurs of agreement and recognition filled the smoky room.

Samantha Rossi, an 18 year old Creative Writing student, sat with a dreamy smile on her face as she looked down at her open pack of Virginia Slims Lights on the desk in front of her. She studied the tar stain on the filter of the slender cigarette burning between her fingers and the Surgeon General's Warning on the side of the box, and deliberately breathed in some of the smoke from the lit end through her nose as it drifted toward upward toward her face. She found the intense bittersweet aroma of the smoke to be absolutely intoxicating now that she had become used to inhaling. *"You know, like a lot of girls my age, I've always been totally skeptical about advertising...but I've got to say that the whole 'You've come a long way' thing actually makes a weird kind of sense to me. Geez, I can't believe that I feel that way about an advertising campaign, but I guess I do!"*

Nineteen year old Sophomore Dance major Kelsey Graham thought about her over-protective Oncologist mother, relished the symbolic middle finger that what she was doing represented to her sense of self, held up her pack of Virginia Slims Menthol Lights, and laughed. *"I know what you mean. Starting to smoke does make me feel like 'I've come a long way', and I guess I'm kind of into 'girly' stuff, so the two together are appealing to me. But it's also kind of a 'chicken or the egg' thing, I think; I mean, is the product defined by the advertising, or is the advertising defined by the product? Does it really matter? Can't it just be 'Naughty Bad Fun'...and stylish?"*

"Mmmm...I love that Kelsey - 'Naughty Bad Fun'! Ha! Well, I've been a Virginia Slims smoker for a long time," I said, "because I really like the way they taste, and I do like the specifically feminine aspect of them. Your cigarettes are ultimately a symbolic projection of your

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

personality, which is more important than most people realize. But as we talked about and experimented with a bit last night, different brands do taste and feel different to smoke, and in various social contexts, each can have a certain appeal; so don't be afraid to continue to try out different brands and styles until you find your favorite, both in terms of flavor and as a projection of how you see yourself. And by all means, be your own woman, and don't be afraid to stand out among your future smoking friends!"

I looked around and smiled. To see their faces, you'd think that they'd each individually discovered the cure for cancer.

I reached into my purse and pulled out two fresh packs of Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Lights 120s and two fresh packs of Virginia Slims Regular Luxury Lights 120s and held them up for the class to see. *"I see that a few of you adventurous souls have already tried 120s; would any of the rest of you like to give them a go?"*

* * * * *

Elise Hanson, 18, couldn't believe how much her world had seemed to change over the last three weeks. She had just returned to her apartment from the drug store after picking up a few things that she needed, including something that she'd never purchased before, but was very excited about.

She was looking forward to the last session of Diana's seminar, and decided to celebrate the occasion by buying herself a carton of Virginia Slims 100s.

Elise couldn't wait to try her first Full Flavor cigarette, and felt inspired to grab her favorite pen and a fresh bound notebook, which she decided would be the first volume of her Smoking Journal. She sat down at her desk, opened the carton, removed one of the elegant gold and white and red boxes, looked longingly at it, and began to write:

My faceless Demon Lover Waits for me in pretty sealed boxes That warn me not to open them

But I've already opened myself

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

A life burning to burn Summoning the release of the flame

Closer now

This deliberate moment that I have chosen requires Sacrifice And solemn silent meditations of Sacrifice

Unspoken

Yet visible for a time in ghostly kisses Lingering upon my lips Before they are remembered

Like dreams after the dawn

Let me draw you in again To the deepest secret places within me In this tender abandonment of innocence

Let us perish slowly together once more

* * * * *

Tamara Adams' roommate was at her parent's house for a long weekend, so she had their dorm room all to herself until Sunday. After a long week of classes, the 18 year old Freshman Music History major decided to stay in on Friday night, turn off her phone, lock the door, and indulge in her favorite combination of newfound "adult" pleasures. Her fingers moved quickly and skillfully over her swollen and glistening flesh as she watched herself light up a Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Light 120.

So many seemingly little changes greeted her in the mirror. Hair of a slightly more sophisticated

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

cut and color. Makeup that was slightly edgier, slightly flirtier. But most of all, a faint little *knowi*

ng look had found it's way into Tamara's eyes that had subtly transformed her attitude and features.

Something about the unapologetic narcissism of it all turned her on more than anything else ever had before.

Tamara had moved the wardrobe mirror to the foot of her bed, and took in the sight of her naked slim body sprawled across her dark red comforter and pillows, her pack of Virginia Slims, refillable Colibri Diva lighter and Willow River fancy cut glass ashtray (the lighter and ashtray were graduation gifts to each member of the class from Diana) which was half full of lipstick-stained butts at her side. She watched herself snap inhale after deeply dragging on the extra long menthol cigarette for five seconds, and felt the thick cool mass rush deeply into her lungs as her pink nipples became erect and her perfectly symmetrical B-cup breasts heaved quickly above her expanding ribcage. The nicotine and carbon monoxide flooded her bloodstream as it passed through her alveoli, and she felt the toxic hit spreading through her body, deeply intensifying her arousal.

Smoking Studies 101 had been over for a few weeks, and Tamara hadn't seen Diana since the last session of the seminar, but she thought of her often. Especially when she was pleasuring herself. The moment that Diana had met her gaze in class and lit up on the second night was seared into her memory, and it was the trigger for every orgasm she'd had since it happened.

Because now, to light up a Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Light 120 – to smoke one of Her cigarettes – was to feel what She felt deep inside Her Body in that one indelible fleeting electric moment, and to summon its power any time that she wanted to. Every time she inhaled cigarette smoke a little deeper into her lungs, the pleasure increased, as did the desire to do it again, and again, and again.

Echoes of the first time she saw Diana smoking, echoes of the first time that she was able to successfully force cigarette smoke into her aching chest, echoes of the Virginia Slims girls in the TV commercials and ads that she'd seen, echoes of all of the reasons she knew she shouldn't be doing this Dangerous and Deadly thing swirled around in her mind like the smoke swirling around her pounding heart. And each cigarette just added another layer of richness and complexity to the appeal of smoking for her.

The Department of Smoking Studies (Revisited)

Written by

Friday, 28 February 2014 18:40 - Last Updated Friday, 28 February 2014 18:44

Tamara stared at herself in the mirror as she let her Virginia Slims Menthol Luxury Light 120 dangle from lips, wave after wave of smoke cascading from her nose. And as the ash from the first third of her cigarette fell between her breasts and scattered down her abdomen, she felt Perfectly Filthy as she imagined Diana watching her with an approving, flirty smile...

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