

Until That Day

by Freida Theant

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For today's special event, Leslie drives to Countywide Community College for today's open air seminar dressed as 'the woman in-touch with nature'; the theme-appropriate look for the topics under discussion: 'inner awareness and consciousness raising'. She brushed her shoulder-length brunette hair arrow-straight with only a few fly-away strands. Her green eyes are overarched with chestnut hue eyebrows plucked to a thin, long comet shape. Leslie's loose and open black dress off-sets her fire-engine red nails to perfection. Her muted mauve lipstick actually diminishes her deliciously full lips.

She drops the speed of her 2004 Buick LeSabre down to 45 so she can better locate those road markers announcing the remaining distance to her destination. The expected sign finally appears: "Six more miles and we're there, Becky" she affirms to her passenger.

Replying to Leslie, Becky nods, "Okay". She is same age as Leslie; meeting as classmates in freshman English at State University a few years back and now is her BFF and roommate. During the week she struggles as an office manager for an insurance agency, a job she got right after graduation but this Saturday they're taking in this lifestyle seminar. She brushed her wheat-straw blonde hair to drape back over her shoulders and then bound the gathering-up with a scrunchy. She looks stunningly healthy with her 'almost-no-make-up-at-all' look, modest body tan and lip coloring so natural it almost appeared that she used none; ditto for her nail polish. Her wire-rim, oval eyeglasses compliment her liquid grey eyes.

"I'm a little nervous about this workshop 'the Enlightened Way', or whatever it is," Leslie confides. "Do me a huge favor and light me up," and shoves her purse toward her passenger.

Blocking the opening of this purse is Leslie's pack of Vogue Ultra Slim Lilacs. The lilac floral emblem dominates the Vogue cigarette's white box which surprises Becky. Moreover the pack looks slightly squashed. "Did someone step on your cigarettes?" she asks. Puzzled by the unusual format; she drew out one of the white occupants, and even though she was intrigued by cigarette's narrow dimensions, she centers it within her lips like any other while depressing the

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car's console lighter.

"No, their box just comes that way," Leslie giggled. "Why? Don't you like it? Madonna does....it's her brand."

The pop of the car lighter tells Becky that its lighter just hit ignition to transform this Vogue from a promise into a smoking experience. She presses the fiery rings of glowering yellow-orange firmly up against the slender face of this designer cigarette and draws a pull strong enough to transfer the day-glow orange to the tip. When she takes the lighter off, no crumbs of unlit tobacco stick to the heating coil; confirming her success as she jets out her short light-up puff of smoke in a chalky blue-white billow. She plucks the lolly-pop handle of a cigarette out from her pouty mouth, upends it between her first and second fingers to examine the lavender floral design on the filter, running her fingers up and down the paper-white shaft lightly. And now she notices that each puff on this Vogue registers more heavily than a standard diameter cigarettes.

So when Becky reinserts the Vogue between her lips to draw a second draft, she takes her time with a gentler, almost delicate draw. "It's flavored a little, but not menthol." She pulls the scented cloud down to steep inside her lungs a moment, hoping the rising fumes will permeate her nostrils with the aroma. "Not bad," she judges candidly, I can see why Madonna likes these." She dismisses the smoke very, very slowly through her nostrils attempting to absorb as much aroma as she can. Pinching the flowery filter between her thumb and forefinger, she passes it to her friend, "All yours."

"Did you leave me any?" Leslie jokes, seeing how much Becky has shortened it with her tastings. "You know you can finish this one if you need it that bad!" But Leslie just sets the Vogue between her lips and dangles it there, pulling a hands-free deep hit while she steers the LeSabre.

"Your cigarettes look expensive. How can You afford them? You're still unemployed," Becky asks reaching into her own purse to dredge out one of her Trues; clearly a lot cheaper than her friend's brand. For the second time, Becky punches the console lighter with gusto just above the sliding black plastic ashtray.

"I Can afford them 'cause I'm free-lancing news-items and human interest articles in between

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job interviews,” Leslie protested, her cigarette still firmly positioned between those speaking lips, bobbling up and down with the various syllables of the sentence and squirting out wisps of smoke with some of the harsher consonants. “I bring in money. Just not steady money like you and your insurance agents do. Besides, I might quit smoking after going to this seminar.”

“You quit smoking?” disbelief clouded her friend’s face even more than the violent exhale from her just-lit-up True. “When did you decide that?” Becky’s forced exhale catches her throat and triggers a brief spate of coughing.

“When I saw this seminar’s advertisement on-line,” Leslie left hand extracts her Vogue from her smile. “I thought I’d learn some inner consciousness control over my urges, and conquer my need to smoke.”

Returning to normal breathing, Becky comments, breathlessly, “The description for this course said she can help us take control of our own destinies, but you’re reading too much into what you’re gonna learn. Quitting ciggies takes counselors and drugs nowadays. It’s even covered with your health insurance.”

Becky, threatened by the thought of her friend turning non-smoker, tore an long, angry pull on her True and imprisoned the massive cloud within her for a short eternity, as if the longer she retained the smoke, the less likely Leslie would be to act out on her absurd idea. When she finally banished the river of chalky fluff out her nostrils, the car’s atmosphere clouded, forcing them to lower the windows.

“There! This is where we turn....the entrance to the college!” The driver drops the Buick’s speed and turns onto the main entrance, crushes her cigarette out in the car’s ashtray and rolls in slowly to the tree-shaded parking lot next to pavilion, already more than three-quarters full of attendees. Clusters of ‘seekers’ and individuals of both sexes and maturities ranging from adolescent to silver sat at picnic tables or were milling around the grassy meadow. Adjacent to the parking lot, a banner proclaims ‘registration’ to mark the table where new arrivals pay their fee and sign in, gather up their Enlightened Way reading materials, and affix their sticky-backed nametags. Leslie and Becky select a table and within half-an-hour, the speaker, using the professional name Gayle, Life-Guide, introduces herself and opens the session. This guru surprises the listeners with her authoritative baritone voice and innovative instructions.

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Gayle has the deepest brunette hair that the two women had ever seen, framing a complexion that by contrast looked almost pallid. "She probably saw her fortieth birthday several years back" Leslie whispers, "See how her lips are surrounded by slight wrinkles? That's from being a long time smoker and the same for that rasp accenting her speech and those crow's feet at the corners of her brown eyes."

"Yeah, but she lacks nothing in voice projection and enthusiasm. This crowd loves her: the message, her persona," Becky replies.

After 45 minutes of animated instruction, the Life-Guide has persuaded them to uncover their innermost compass and think in an spirit-centered way, questioning themselves for their true feelings. They begin separating their personal motivations from the commandments or goals pressed on them by authority figures. They learn how to increase sensitivity to their inner voice.

Then Gayle breaks off to disperse the 'seekers' to a twenty minute break before going on. Many head to the restrooms; others to the grassy lawn to smoke, or the vending machines for a drink or snack. Leslie and Becky saunter toward the Life-Guide, who has her first American Spirit fired up and delivering volumes of rich fumes into her nico-starved chest, while chatting up several initiates one-on-one. She answers their questions in the midst of her exhaled drafts of additive-free tobacco smoke, so her words burst forth clad in smoke blasts and jets; it drops her voice even lower by several notes. The cluster of hangers-on fades as the disciples increasingly seek the relief of the toilet and fountain, finally leaving Leslie and Becky with the Enlightenment guru.

Leslie introduces herself and Becky; the trio shake hands, and Leslie asks her burning question, "You smoke openly and yet you promote a personal awareness lifestyle, which implies choosing healthy choices? Do you see any contradiction here?"

"I enjoy smoking my cigarettes," Gayle said, "as much as a form of meditation as an expression of my personal and individual choice."

Silence follows; the Enlightened Way Life-Guide proposing virtues inherent in cigarette-smoking was a great shock in a morning filled with her startling concepts.

She continued, "For the First Americans, over the last thousand years smoking tobacco had meaning as part of their belief system as well as a part of a communal and social interaction, and even a remedy for some illnesses. For the rest of humanity, however, it is a recently added custom, only several hundred years old, and has evolved into an extremely personal choice with much-debated consequences."

Gayle senses the confusion in their minds over this self-contradiction within her message. "What philosophy I bring today is not that people can or cannot do something because it's unhealthy. The heart of this awareness process is personal, not group oriented self-discovery and self-realization. Others can't understand your history and spirit so they shouldn't tell you who are."

Gayle uses the pause in the dialog to draw strongly again on her American Spirit, now pretty much expended. "Only you can determine that. Your own journey of enlightenment helps you finally learn what really at the heart of who you are."

"Well I thought that after hearing your seminar I would be able to quit smoking," Leslie offers.

"I think you'll be able to quit smoking now if the time is right; you don't need my seminar for that," Gayle proposes. "What will change after your enlightenment internalizes is your awareness of whether or not that is your decision. Being coerced by those not-in-touch with your lifestyle's needs and goals keep you from empowering yourself to make the natural choices; which will be the ones that work in the long run."

"So maybe giving up cigarettes isn't my best choice?" Leslie asks.

"If that's not who you are, no matter how many times you quit, you'll just go back to smoking again," the guru assures her. "You're better off enjoying your cigarettes now while they are a source of fulfillment, because when the day comes when you no longer find benefit in it is the day you quit for good."

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Both women continue to look disbelievingly; wordlessly at Gayle, trying to get their minds around her provocative reply. Gayle wastes no time in getting her lighter to liberate smoke from a fresh America Spirit and fog the adjacent air slightly. "Are you disappointed?" she asks.

"No, I should be surprised, but I'm not." Leslie and draws out her lighter and a Vogue from her purse, "Mostly I'm relieved. Deep inside, I felt my quitting was doomed to fail, but, I mean, everyone today is quitting smoking, so I felt I should, too."

"I will quit smoking cigarettes on whatever day my inner being tells me to, and then I will not fail" Gayle pronounced and she hauled another of her hungry drafts from the smoldering column. "Until that day comes, if ever, I enjoy smoking my cigarettes and accept the consequences happily, because any other path leads to disappointment."