



SINTA JIMENEZ

# Smoking in Rented Rooms

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It's early April in Philadelphia but the air still hangs frigid with the hollow wind of East Coast winter. We run together through the scumbag streets. Block after block of concrete and black window flying past. Our noses cold, our foreheads dry. There are no entrances to heaven.

I push my body against his as we walk down the street, his arm around me. We hail a cab at Broad Street, City Hall visible down the avenue, to go towards Washington and 7th blocks and blocks away from the ivy league affluence of Rittenhouse. When we get there, he tells me to stand on a corner, in front of a grade school, while he goes to score.

"Are you ok," he asks me.

"Yeah."

"I'm ok."

"I just don't want you to come with me to meet the guy. I'll be back soon."

The wind pushes down and against me. There's not much room for chivalry in addiction, in street corner copping but there's plays at tenderness. He doesn't want me to go with him in case he gets arrested. In case he gets arrested at least I'll be able to go home and sleep in my own bed.

Soon I see him, smiling, coming down the sidewalk with a saunter, almost cheerful. And even with his skull cap and his heavy black jacket, the grace of his face seems to purify him from his acts.

We cruise again though the city, weaving in and out of traffic, but this time without the itch. His pockets are full, my expectations are loaded. We are dead on arrival.

We get home, he brings out a plastic bag, full of little bags, and throws it onto the coffee table. Four grams of herb, two grams of blow packed tight, and then two thin, light blue packets of scag stamped with the words "Day Off."

He hits the stamp bag with his fingertips as he settles down next to me on the couch.

"How much was it?" I ask.

"It's very cheap. Did you know that?"

A bare light bulb flickers and revolves above us as though it were the sun.

“Last year I was hella sick and had to go to the emergency room. That doctor’s bill cost me almost five thousand dollars. All to check if my appendix was burst and to give me a shot of morphine. It was just the stomach flu. I could’ve gotten this for five dollars and forgotten all about my tummy troubles.”

“Just five dollars?”

“That’s the price,” he says with bitterness, cutting like sunlight through Afghan clouds.

Our evening goes late into the a.m. smoking cigarettes and herb rolled with tobacco, listening to Lou Reed.

“Man, I wish I hadn’t lost my Iggy Pop cds.”

“Have you ever heard The Birthday Party? One of Nick Cave’s early bands. I think you’d like them.”

I look into his eyes and wonder how dark the world looks to him right now. He’s done enough to feel warm but not fall into the nod. The contraction of his pupils makes the color of his eyes even more vivid. There is no full, darkened center, only color where light invades.

I kiss his face. I linger below his eyes where the skin is thin, incapable of deception.

“You’ve been with a lot of beautiful girls.”

“I don’t know about that. Really, you’re it,” he says. I choose to believe him.

“I’m scared of how it’ll be when you leave.”

“We’ll be cool,” I say.

I hold onto his slim shoulder, tattooed with a black dragon that continues down his arm and upper back, the black ink drawing a high contrast against the whiteness of his skin. I tell him to look up. His eyes look suddenly translucent like.

“There’s a lot of men out there who want to fuck you,” he says.

“Yes.”

The room pulsates, the air sweats.

We are denied safe passage.

We hold hands in our restless sleep. Half awake I feel him tossing next to me, scratching his neck and arms, kicking his legs, withdrawal bringing the itchy blood. My throat is dry and sore. I put my hand flat against his back. His skin is too smooth. His skin is an impossibility.

“When are you going,” he mumbles, eyes closed.

“I don’t know. In the next day or two.”

“You could stay.”

We are escape artists, conspiring in the underbellies and alleyways.

It isn't until late afternoon until really wake up, groggy and heavy in the comedown. The air is cold and we move slowly under the covers.

"How do you feel," I ask him.

"Alright. Shakes in a bit but I already know I won't be able to piss for a while."

"Maybe later –" I begin.

"Yeah, don't worry. We'll pick up later."

The view from his bedroom window is grim. Power lines and television satellites lie akimbo on concrete rooftops. My nose is raw.

I look at the emptiness of his room, the old discolored blinds, and the white walls encrusted with the drunken distortions, frail lies, desperations, hostilities, prayers and sexual penetrations of past tenants. A pleasure arises in me from this human incoherence emanating from the walls. It seeps from the decaying brick and mortar, makes itself visible only to me.

"Have you ever gone on a fancy vacation with someone?"

"No, never," I lie.

"Should we go to Argentina?"

"The dollar goes far down there."

I carry on with him. To forget the comedown, to

distract from the itch.

"We should go to Carolina too. I have friends with a house in Asheville. They're raising chickens," I say.

"Let's do it. Fresh eggs in the morning, delicious," he smiles.

All the words make fantasies of a future of things nearly impossible, likely improbable. We proceed under the influence, accepting delusion as truth, accepting narcotics for whole grain.

With other men, who I knew I wanted to be with for a while, a disgust always mechanized in me. An automatic default jogging my apathy, preventing further emotion, and nothing, absolutely nothing could bring me back. Neither petition nor memory. But I cannot do that with him. I can tell. I cannot retreat from his body. I won't be able to turn it around.

"I'm going to get dressed. Get out there and bring back some water and cereal."

He walks out the bedroom door to the bathroom.

I share a secret with his room, without distinction except for two o-mamori hanging on his doorknob from the Shrine : I'd discard the immaculate for this damaged space, any time, any how.

The walls seem softer after, submitting like a victim or disciple.

We walk through the streets of brotherly love, high out of our minds again, laughing and kissing, on the verge of tears. We're alone in a shrouded continent, in the schizophrenia of hope.

We pass by a brick row house with an open upper window.

"Ah," he says.

"What?"

"That smell," he nods towards the window.

"What is it?"

He smiles widely. "Someone's chasing the dragon. Doesn't it smell like flowers?"

My last night in Philly we go without the drugs. We have dinner in the arts district in a restaurant we cannot afford.

"It's a very big world. We had a very small window," he says.

I surprise myself. I start crying.

"It's the wine," I say.

"Come sit with me for a second," he says, sliding over in his booth.

"Alright."

"I am trying here, I'm trying to understand and not

to be sad," he says.

His body burns like loaded gun.

All the trains, solo car rides, subway stations, taxis, buses, boats, and airplanes I've taken to reunite with past lovers are bittersweet memories when I really think about it. When I really think about how many I've left and have also left me behind. I recall the reflection of my eyes on those naked windows of travel, the light of streetlamps seen from a plane, the fading pleasures pursued in hotels and apartments around the world.

I am the last person on the bus.

I hear the sound of the motor revving, then driving away. Driving away. This is the sound of leaving. Us both leaving each other again for works and lives that must continue apart. Leaving each other maybe only to follow other people into the dark, into other beds, in our separate cities.

But I think one more time of his worn room. The historical blocks go on for miles in Philadelphia but not all have survived the way his row house had. After I leave I will hunger for the nakedness of that room that we filled with the vibrant, choleric air of our bodies. Maybe some other time, in another season, in another city, we'll be together again, smoking in rented rooms.