

## Smoke Break

Thursday L. Peyton

Standing in the rain, smoking a cigarette in the designated area (a green box painted on the concrete in a corner of the campus quad) with my glasses fogged up and rain dripping from my hair, I think to myself that it really sucks to be a smoker. I am staring at the big concrete ash cans. They look like big planter pots, as if those of us standing around smoking are waiting for a cigarette tree to sprout from the ashes.

I notice an old man making his way, slowly, with a hunched, shuffling gait, toward the nearest ash can. He lifts the lid and begins sifting through the ashes and the trash in search of a butt long enough to smoke.

“Excuse me sir, would you like a smoke?”

“Yes ma’am, I would.”

I remove a cigarette from my little leather cigarette case and hand it over as I look at him more closely. Not as old as his body language would indicate--maybe a really rough 40-45. His clothes are raggedy and inadequate for the weather. His hair is long and tangled. He has only one eye.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

He pulls a soggy book of matches from his pocket and struggles to make fire.

I hand him my Zippo and he lights up.

We stand together, smoking.

I notice that the collection of students that had been clustered in and around the green painted box a few minutes ago are still in the quad, but it is as if they have all taken a giant step back and are all studiously looking in another direction. In my head I hear an old Arlo Guthrie lyric, “And they all moved away from me on the bench.”

“Well sir, I have to get back to class now. You have a good day.”

“Yes ma’am, I will. And thanks again for the smoke.”

“No problem.”

I pass through the quad. A path is cleared as if no one wants to get to close.

Smiling to myself, I head back to Dr. Ignacio’s lecture on social class and inequality.