

The Language of Bodies

by Freida Theant

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Renée's arm, pale as her satin sheets, extended past her mattress with her fingers relaxed in a lazy crescent, cradling her just-lit cigarette, which spends its down-time spindling ghostly risers from the edge of its ember. Renée feels serene, seeing her lover resting at peace. Only a few months ago they were strangers: she, a Columbia professor of Sociology and marginalized wife of a commodities broker; and Monica, a Master's candidate at City College, part-timing as a bookstore clerk.

Reliving their meeting day back in May brings a smile as she draws a reflective pull on her Benson and Hedges Menthol. That first sunny day of the year compelled Renée to flee her claustrophobic faculty office and taxi to the corner of Madison and 93rd to revisit a favorite used book store. She sought several hard-to-find volumes, and after her search failed she hailed the nearby clerk.

"I can't find works by Patricia Highsmith, or uhhh...Djuna Barnes. Would they be displayed under lesbian authors?" Renée asked.

The clerk Monica paused from shelving books to reply, "No, all the Feminist Literature is maintained right here, whether or not it's cataloged 'lesbian'. But we do keep unsorted books in the back," she proposed. "Do you want me to take so you can rummage for yourself?"

"Now that would be an adventure," Renée gladdened, "Shall we?" They exited via the stockroom door that segregated its moldering-paper aura from the fluorescent air-conditioning of the front store. Monica signaled when they had arrived at the Social Issues area, so the pair knelt to cherry-pick through the boxes of threadbare, dog-eared and yellowed volumes amongst tattered and crumbling pamphlets.

Renée shattered the quiet, "Patricia Highsmith! The Price of Salt! Now THIS is a find! Can we

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get this into the light?”

“Sure, out into the rear alley and anyway I’m overdue for my break.” The pair emerged into the blinding vernal sun as framed by sooty brick walls and draped in the omnipresent aura of fermenting garbage.

The young clerk seized Marlboros and a Bic from her apron and banished the gagging fetid smells with welcome drafts of cigarette fumes into her mouth and through her nostrils: Renée, ditto, with her Benson and Hedges Menthol. The pair scanned this valuable edition with a brief page-flip tour of the novel between inhaled drafts of opaque renewal, and in the chatter, enjoyed the discovery of mutual enthusiasms.

Renée was charmed, “So what’s your major?” she asked, smearing out her exhale fog into the modest breeze.

“Gender Studies,” the clerk replied. “My thesis covers Ruth Hale, a key feminist of the 1920’s and the Torches of Freedom.

“If you come to my office at Columbia, I’ll dredge up some references for your thesis research,” she proposed. Monica, surprised, but grateful, jumped on the offer. Kissing off their final drags, they dropped their cigarettes onto the gritty concrete, ground them out and penciled in mutual addresses and numbers in their pocket calendars.

Monica’s office visit with Renée at Columbia bore ample fruit. After several hours of reading over the hand-picked documents, the grad student summarized, “I can’t thank you enough for these leads.”

“Well, I’m glad to have been of help. Now what I’d like...” Renée’s brown eyes glittered, “is a bite to eat; May I invite you to join me?”

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“Thank you for all you’ve done for me, but I...” It was this wanting to be with Renée that embarrassed Monica, not the unfulfilled gratitude, “I’m not hungry myself...”

“Well, if we sit at a café table outside, I’ll eat something, you can drink coffee and that’s one place in New York where we WILL be free to smoke.”

Monica capitulated in spite of her turmoil. At the sidewalk café she and Renée conversed to create their private world, comparing their girlhoods, which progressed to their adolescent ambitions and disappointments. Renée laid out the roadmap for a childless marriage that descended into spousal ennui and Monica the chart to alienation that comes from internalizing life’s higher ideals into her personal morality. They swam in the parallel streams of self-discovery and shared converging emotions and attitudes.

Something of a spiritual sisterhood emerged from the blending fog of complex emotions and cigarette smoke. Their relationship was sculpted by their words and feelings: the dozen year age differential did not divide them. Rather, they found communality and kinship in their histories of betrayed relationships. They shared the conviction that love interests would always disappoint, not in dramatic theatrical gestures, but slowly, by chronic erosion.

Eventually Renee offered, “If you’d like, I can help you....by editing and critiquing your thesis. You know another pair of eyes and maybe some suggestions for rewrite?”

Monica understood this was intended for her benefit, yet this commitment would bind them routinely for weeks, months; and make her unusually vulnerable. The strained look on her face, and her hesitation betrayed that agony.

“Would that be too much negativity?” Renée asked.

“Let me call you tomorrow,” Monica confessed. “Before I burn up so much of your time, I need to think about it.”

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After a rocky session with her major professor the next morning Monica phoned in to her benefactor, "You're right," she said. "I can really use your help. How do we arrange this?"

"We can meet at my house, most Wednesdays," Renée suggested. "My husband is never home during the times I have available."

Their initial weekly reviews went well; Renée laid out the pages on the kitchen counter with critiques in colored pencil, and for grammar and rhetorical errors. During the quiet spells her mentor spent absorbed in the text, Monica found herself concentrating more and more on Renée's winking cigarette while she indulged in her long, pensive pulls rereading or correcting. She focused on Renée's expressive face and the ways she smoked, especially while reacting to the textual rewrites and argument minutiae. For example, her glacial dribble of the smoke ribbon from barely parted lips during intense readings while she concentrated profoundly on the subject, she understood to be a neutral reaction, maybe approval. Then there were her twin-cone nostril jets that shot out when she uncovered an absurd proposition or a hopelessly untenable conclusion. That flagged a negative. As she scanned new text nervously, her pulls on the cigarette were frequent and brief; double pumping the drags before releasing the composite cloud afterwards. That meant a skeptical 'so-far-so-good'. When she was emotional, Renée talked through out her exhale; blurting opaque puffs with each syllable uttered, and simulating commas with steadily blown smoke.

A stormy Wednesday afternoon in July, Monica slipped through the front door, and dumped the soggy papers and books on the kitchen table.

"What's going on?" Renée asked.

"I had my weekly thesis meeting this afternoon..." Monica groaned. "My prof, Dr Bennett, commented on how well prepared my chapters have been. She say's we'll be ready to submit the proofs to the printer in a few more weeks."

"That's wonderful," Renée said, "You can expect to defend your thesis by August, and graduate in the fall. Doesn't that please you?"

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“Of course,” she said. “But before we start today, I wanted to say that it’s thanks to you that I’m so far ahead of schedule.” Pausing and unsure as to how to word the rest of her thought, she let the ritual of lighting up her Marlboro fill the awkwardness.

“But there’s something else, isn’t there?” Renée realized, and sensing a cigarette would be required for what would follow, freed the latent spirit in one with her gilt lighter’s flame.

“Yeah, there is,” Monica confessed, whooshing out cigarette smoke and her frustration jointly. “I’ve gotten to know you; and used to our get-togethers. I guess I’m gonna miss these sessions....”

“I’m sure we’ll continue being in touch even though ...” Renée offered.

“But there’s something I hafta tell you,” Monica cut her off, “and it might freak you out a little. It creeps me out!” She withdrew her hand and cradled her chin with both elbows on the table, eyes downcast.

“I hope we’re comfortable enough to speak freely,” Renée assured her, “After all, we’re both trained to deal with negative feedback objectively.”

“Okay. I think I’ve been fixating on your behavior,” Monica said.

“And why do you think that?”

“Because I’ve gotten sensitized to your smoking routines.”

It was Renée’s turn to be surprised, “I don’t think I understand what you mean?”

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“It means I notice what you do; how you feel when you’re doing certain gestures....” and Monica listed Renée’s smoking patterns as she had come to understand them from their sessions together, and the various meanings she derived from them.

“Do these behaviors disturb you?” Renée felt flattered and amused.

“Oh no,” she protested, “Honestly, they’re just you! But the idea that I get so caught up in them creeps me out.”

“Do you think they have a special meaning for you?” Renée asked. “Don’t forget, your studies sharpen your powers of observation in personal interactions; that’s part of becoming a sociologist.”

“Yeah,” Monica continued, “and I know it’s an occupational hazard; over-analyzing. But it’s gone beyond that for me. Now I watch your smoking no matter what we’re up to. It’s not just about my thesis anymore; I look for how your gestures reveal whatever you’re feeling the rest of the time.”

“Would you feel more comfortable if I didn’t smoke around you?” Renée raised the hand with the wedged cigarette merrily rolling off white streamers.

“No, we both enjoy smoking way too much. All I wanna know is, ‘what does that mean?’”

“It means whatever you decide it means,” Renée answered clinically. “If you decide it’s meaningless, then...”

“But I know better. It’s gotta be hinting at deeper feelings or associations from my past or...”

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“...emotions you’ve been trying to suppress?” Renée offered. She stood and turned toward the draped lace-curtains, peering through the window as though their answer lay in the view of the rainy street below.

Because the ambient lighting past the kitchen spaces was dark, Monica saw Renée in back-lighted silhouette with the white tendril from her cigarette an alabaster vine endlessly seeking the ceiling. Her expelled smoke radiated outwardly, diffusing and defining a pallid aura that dramatized by contrast, the black figure of her slender body centered within.

Monica stubbed out the Marlboro, rose and quietly approached her from the rear, laying her hand on the her mentor’s shoulder softly. “You’re thinking suppressed sexuality, aren’t you?” She dared lift a hank of Renée’s flowing brown hair and let it slide through her fingers as she lifted her hand like a comb.

Renée rotated to face her friend, and the act itself entwined her in Monica’s arm whose hand was already clasping her hair. Renée’s eyes were moist and flanked by tears. “I just couldn’t let you know how I really felt about you,” she confessed. “The world is so judgmental now; even the ghost of an impropriety can cost a professor her job; reputation ...marriage. But somehow, your instincts seemed to discover it anyway.”

Monica brought her other hand to Renée’s chin, which she cupped and drew toward her moistened, parting lips. A crack of thunder split the silence following the brilliant lightning strike somewhere, and the pair involuntarily clasped each other more tightly. Their long, loving kiss dissolved the world and cleansed its wrenching pettiness and invited them to feast upon each other’s passions and joys unfettered.

Renée returning now to the present, in the darkened bedroom where she sits undressed, reminiscing and enjoying luxuriant pulls on her cigarette; remembers one more thing. She moves her head near Monica’s sleeping face and in sotto voce, confesses “I should have told you that the whole time I was watching you, too. It wasn’t just you observing me in my smoking. You might be surprised at how much you revealed, even subconsciously. And I’m so glad you did.”