

The Last Five

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If I felt like lying, I'd say the cigarettes were well-taken care of. But they were kept in a thin glad wrap baggie, which puckered slightly in the left corner from a rip haphazardly taped together. I'd stuffed them at the bottom of my hiking bag. Not even a full pack. I always expected a sleek Marlboro box when I buy them - egg white and a scarlet strip oozing some sort of velvety opulence. That lurid canary warning - you know the one - plastered over a poorly rendered picture of charcoal lungs was a stark contrast every time. Sometimes I almost wanted to bedazzle the packs with some of those plastic gems, but when I held up a sheet of flimsy rhinestones to the box it felt even more gaudy. Like I may as well get out the glue gun and stick faux feathers all over it at that point.

The baggie cigarettes were the last five. And by god, as I write this I hope they get through airport security. I used to smoke them all the time because it's sexier than walking around with a rainbow coated cotton candy vape, but let's be real, it's time for me to grow the fuck up and stop using a quick nicotine hit to solve all my problems.

five. I smoked the first cigarette in a tiny cubicle at the Lima International Airport. *Aeropuerto Internacional Jorge Chávez*. It wasn't the most beautiful of places. The pasty pink walls peeled like a tourist's sunburn, it stunk of poverty and piss, and I didn't have any Peruvian sols so the tampon dispenser remained stubbornly closed. I hadn't actually slept since New Zealand. To acknowledge sleep on the aeroplane is laughable - curled up, fingers slapped over my face for privacy, dry sneezing recycled air. It was like I was a piece of rubbish, tinfoil maybe, trying to be squashed by some meaty, sweaty hand into an overstuffed bin. I look up to the corner of the cubicle. There's no spiderwebs. I wonder if they have spiders in Peru. Maybe I should pray. I don't know if I believe in a higher power, but I must have really pissed something off to get my period on the first day in a third world country. Fuck this. God will understand the cigarette.

four. It felt a little disrespectful smoking in a monastery. But I've never had a moral high ground before, so why start now? *Monasterio de Santa Catalina*. The walls were brick, or clay but you couldn't tell because they'd been covered by sheets of paint, thick from generations of layering the colour. I'm in the *Claustro de los Naranjos*. Cloister of the Orange Trees. Archways curve like soft hip bones and columns stretch down as long fingers, unadorned, plain apart from a cloak of pious blue. It's such a proud, pure colour so vibrant it's almost wet. The courtyard is steeped in religion. While I'm not a Catholic, there's

something in those years of devotion. The sweat, blisters, burnt tongues, wailing prayers. Scratched HAIL MARYs, the lack of children, the lack of men, the lack of speech. *Silencio*. All the wasted energy has to go somewhere. It collects, not like dust but scabs of paint sticking like barnacles in the corners. If you lick the wall, it would taste of sea salt.

The walls are covered with clusters of their scabs. They shine with them. They sweat with them. If you squint, you'll see congealed drops of blood slip silently down, moon shaped, egg shaped, dropping to the tiles, sizzling into steam when they hit the floor. And the cycle continues. The sun beats down on the orange trees. They're swollen and pregnant and if you cut them open you'd see they were tight with six bulging segments. But no one brings a knife near these orange trees. The oranges grow until their weight doesn't support them anymore, drop to the ground, coat the soil, unnoticed. Eventually they rot, or fruit flies eat them. They turn dark, maroon, brown, green, black, and back into soil. A ghost courtyard for a ghost monastery. I'm sure no one would notice if I smoked a cigarette here.

three. *El Lago Titicaca*, home of the floating islands of the Uros. They have no nationality, no passports. The Uros lives nomadic on islands made of bound totora reed, urinating under a driftwood shelter straight into the water, catching rainbow trout and Argentinian silversides. They show us how they hunt ducks and flamingos. How they make tea from the *chullo* - the bottom of the reed that they live on.

That's where the tradition ends.

Almost immediately after drinking the tea, we're indebted to them. Dolls, key chains, sweatshop bracelets made from synthetic threads. A charge to go to the bathroom. A charge to see where they sleep. A charge for the tea we just drank. There's a tiny child wandering around, with thick black braids stretching down to her ankles. She keeps falling over on the spongy ground. All the islanders reach just above my waist. They walk slowly, accustomed to the loss of bone density from never being on solid ground. A lady catches me looking and scrambles to show me her woollen blankets. She offers up a basket of tiny knitted animals. A wooden chess set. A case of necklaces. I feel horrible. *Lo siento*.

I buy a bracelet I don't like. Shake my head apologetically three more times on the way to the tower. Acknowledge the bloated pig tied up in the corner. It would be quite a nice place for a smoke if I didn't feel so disgustingly privileged. That doesn't stop me from sitting cross legged at the top of the wooden lookout and lighting the third one indulgently. I watch the

smoke twine over the lake, twist my fake bracelet. When I'm finished, I snuff out the end and put the stub in my pocket so it won't fall to their tiny island below.

two. I think I'm going to be able to quit. Especially after this cigarette. I'm 4600 metres above sea level, my back to *La Laguna Humantay*, facing la montaña. Popping red *soroche* pills like candy, opening my mouth wide to draw as much oxygen in as the paper thin air will allow. Fuck, altitude sickness hit me with the intensity of brown burlap sack across the face. It feels too easy to stagger sideways off the walkway than continue stretching and snapping upwards. My breath feels serrated. Like a bread knife dragging up my throat. And the *soroche* pills taste like sweet fish gills, the vomit makes my breath acidic and vegetably. The smoke from my second to last cigarette sticks to my hair and collects behind my teeth like cavities. There's a tobacco cherry bitterness sticking tar-like on my tongue - when did I like this? Too ugly too addictive, too high and I vomit all over my sneakers.

one. My last cigarette is smoked between map lines. *Salar de Uyuni*. I've got one flat foot in Chile and the other in Bolivia. The sun drags lethargically. Static people dot an unfathomable, shallow chested nothingness, time's breathing lazily in and out so I keep an eye on the 4WD drive, statuesque and redundant, just to remind myself of the bustling, scratchy Bolivian city we left behind. The mountain's closed one eye, the ants sing, the silence roars. I take a drag, and it comes out tainted with passport ink, ash and dirt, stagnant, thin air. Throwing a fist of gravel, all rust tainted and sandpapery, you'd see it drift through the curling zephyr, twining and winding like steamboat smog, slow and tar thick. A place where the day crawls like a preschooler, slow to learn, clumsy in its actions. Unhelpful and unaware, broken up by the scratching of a threadbare fox nosing through crumbs of tourist plastic or a keen creak from the rusting bus as its paint flakes off. If I dropped the orange stub onto the ground, it would be in the exact same place twenty years later.

From time to time, I'll still find my fingers snaking into my inside pocket for a cigarette. They'll itch and crack and twitch for nicotine like it's my blood supply. But those were the last five. I haven't been able to justify a smoke for years.