

Shooting Smoke

by Johnny Dantonio

In our first conversation, she tells me love is a dragon. She has come across it's destruction, hears of it's size, mythology; of it's immorality. I sip my hot cocoa (God, I pray she thinks it is coffee) long and hard, flashing my teeth as if it is black and laced with liquor.

"I don't know what I'll do exactly when I find that lair, and I *will* find that lair. Maybe I'll befriend the beast, become exiled with it. Maybe we will stay in that mountain cave forever and I will leach to it like it is mine and for no one else and we will never come out. I know my mission as a young 21st century woman, and hear the whispered expectations of what everyone else wants, but I'm not too sure I'll slay the creature when I arrive. Maybe I won't be able to. Maybe I won't want to at all."

I have no idea what the tall girl is talking about.

She is 5'9, skinny, pale; gorgeous. Her hair isn't washed and her wrists could fit in my palm, the silver iron bracelets around them kiss up and down her forearms as she frantically talks with spasms.

"Excuse me?" I abruptly swallow.

She picks up my empty mug like the porcelain isn't precious, like the plate below it needs no balance. It all clinks as she turns; the jewelry, the morning cup, the pocket watch chain against her hip, the trinkets aback her belt. She continues into the kitchen and says something I can't make out, disappearing around the corner and reappearing, empty handed, without asking if I want a refill. She's blurting out obscenities like we are bored friends.

"It's bullshit, you know? Bullshit! So what if I want to be the fucking pussy-knight who never returns and is never killed? Who cares if I don't want crowns and plaques and sorcerones, whatever, you know?"

I point to the cover of the book I am reading with raised eyebrows, investigating the motive, hoping for a connection. But she hasn't read this, has she? Generalizing, sure, but she doesn't strike

Available online at [«http://fictionaut.com/stories/johnny-dantonio/shooting-smoke--2»](http://fictionaut.com/stories/johnny-dantonio/shooting-smoke--2)

Copyright © 2010 Johnny Dantonio. All rights reserved.

me as one for Selby, at least not Selby in the literary sense, maybe for cult status, and if so, certainly not this one, not the girl with worn flats and ashy ankles.

She keeps using invented words.

“Fucking irradius is what it is, really. You know, I am not going searching anytime soon because I have posture that that scaly, big ass, green, fire-breathing mother fucker is going to be a god damn rock I trip over one day.”

Her flat palms bang to the table top simultaneously with her last word. Her eyes wait for my agreement. I cower a bit and nod, letting her know that she's crazy and wrong and beautiful. She winks and smiles and begins to untie the green apron around her waist, a smock that carries her pens and paper, which I find intriguing as this is a coffee shop that serves coffee and hot cocoa and muffins, nothing more. What are these tools indicative of?

She exits to the kitchen, stage right.

I catch my breath and rustle through my wallet to lay down a leave-me-alone \$5 bill sign, leaving it behind like a land mine to whatever the fuck she thinks she has me pegged to be.

I quickly walk outside, Selby beneath my right armpit, lapels up and my lighter barking before the door closes behind me.

New York in the winter is undeniable.

I turn right at the corner that the bakery ruins, and there she is; her back against the brick, one foot flat against the wall; smoking, sighing, no jacket, no hair tie; just a long, slow exhale; a monster stripped of her fire.

