

## thrice great hermes

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by stanley lieber

vidya wanted a cigarette. there was no explaining it. smoking was not something he did, but the craving was real. familiar. somehow comforting, like recognizing yourself, and not someone else, in the mirror. still, he demurred.

a blister had formed in the roof of his mouth. he pushed at it with his tongue, probing carefully along its edges. the shape reminded him of a small kidney bean. it hurt, kind of.

vidya got out of bed, wadding up his soggy sheets and transferring them to the washer. mom would be up, soon, asking him the usual questions about how he had slept. eyes drifting carelessly to the sounds emanating from the washer. he really didn't want to talk about it.

the snow outside refused to melt. walking into town was going to be a nuisance. accordingly, vidya conceived a plan. a doomed plan.

"mom, can i take the truck," he asked when she woke up, already knowing the answer. "all right, then, well, thanks anyway."

vidya got on the phone with james, deftly maneuvering him into thinking it was his own idea for vidya to come over. he had to get out of the house. mom was okay with it, just be back before dark. vidya said okay, and slammed the storm door behind him.

walking to the mailbox vidya counted the cigarettes he saw on the ground. there were quite a lot of them. he felt the urge to pick one up and smoke it, but unfortunately he had nothing on hand to light it with.

unfortunately? what was he thinking. this increasingly familiar urge had edged out the usual distractions, interests, preoccupations, peccadillos, and the heretofore impervious sense of focus that typically comprised the workings of his mind. he was no longer sure that he would recognize himself in the mirror. as these thoughts coalesced, his trust in himself seeming, increasingly, to be misplaced, james drove up, smiling like an idiot, and waved him into the van.

his brother's van. rose-hulman alumni. some kind of technology guy. all vidya could remember about him was a story james had shared where his brother had met morris day, backstage at a show, and morris day had dismissed him, derisively, as a "fat fuck." well, that he was.

the van's interior was roomier, more comfortable than vidya had expected. adjustable leather seats, a mcintosh turntable mounted convincingly on some sort of mobile stabilizer, crushed velour armrests. james touched a button on the dash and a can of cherry pepsi emerged from the center console.

"got any cigarettes," vidya said, sounding deflated, and even looking a bit deflated, as his cheeks sagged and his shoulders drooped against his seat. his friend paused for what might have amounted to three seconds, before he depressed another switch and a small door opened in the ceiling, out of which fell a white pack of silk cut, james' brother's signature brand. vidya stared at the package and then discreetly deposited it in his bag.

vidya didn't smoke. vidya smoked.

vidya didn't smoke.

his mouth hurt.