

Where There's Smoke

For as long as he could remember, writing and cigarettes had been inextricably linked in his life. He began smoking very young, at the age of ten, his elbows propped on the rail of a ferryboat carrying him on a school field trip to the island of Brac. It was a saucy little gypsy girl who first offered him the fruit of temptation – she had stolen the pack from one of the supervisors. Menthols – he had never forgotten the flavor of the first puff, both refreshing and corrosive, even though he can't stand them now. From the get-go he swallowed the smoke like a grown-up, without choking, without coughing, of which he was not a little proud in front of Mara. The brunette by his side was four years older than him. She went to school when the fancy took her. Her voice was already turning husky and her white short-sleeved blouse strained to contain her ample bosom, attracting the boys' gazes and shaking their hitherto dulled senses to life. She was so much more interesting than the other girls in his class, and at the same time he was a little scared of her. The two delinquents hurriedly carried their crime through to completion and chucked their butts almost simultaneously into the deep wake carved by the boat, as if it had undertaken to cut the blue waters of the Adriatic in two – to starboard, the straight line of goodness, to port, the minty flavor of surreptitious sin.

That very night, after getting home at midnight completely exhausted by the outing, he crawled under the bedsheets in the room he shared with his brother and, ceaselessly licking his salty chapped lips, he feverishly scribbled his first piece of fiction. He doesn't know what the story was about anymore. The piece of paper it was on was lost to posterity. Probably about Mara and the cigarette. His older brother threatened to tell their parents if he didn't turn out the light, but he didn't care. He had discovered something that from then on out would never leave him.

Later, his studies distanced him from his family. Mara and her unsettling figure sank into a past that became more foreign to him with each

passing day. Besides, she had stopped coming to school in the middle of that year, the year of the cigarette. She must have gotten married as soon as she hit puberty, as was the rule in her milieu. Ah ! Mara and her reddish-brown braid, her scent of wild berries and sour sweat, what had become of her ? Where is she now ?

When he started writing books, cigarettes accompanied him during every step of his work. The two went hand in hand : reading and smoking, smoking and writing, taking a break and burning one, getting back to work and putting out the butt in an ashtray in some shade of blue – turquoise, agate, aquamarine, lapis-lazuli... Adriatic. One sentence, one rising curl. One word, a falling red ash. The cigarette in one hand, a pen in the other. Balance, plenitude. The best moments of his life...

He is seated on the ledge of a window across the street from his building, absolutely indifferent to the pathetic commotion around him : firemen without water, neighbors in hysterics, cries of despair and curses. Nor is he bothered by the intense heat from the upper floors that have just about stopped burning. Besides, it's snowing. The orangy hue of the fire contrasts strangely with the dirty white of the flakes drifting between the sky and the earth, lost. He doesn't wonder why it's snowing in summer. He just tries to focus on one flake out of many and follow its path down to the ground. A unique flake, as unique as the day of his first cigarette still remained, a day engulfed in a mythical world. Moment after moment, his gaze isolates a new flake and forces itself not to let go – in vain. Suddenly he notices that the flakes have turned dark gray. They stretch out into lumpy twists waltzing in the wind, and rain softly, so random... Say, here's one that's bigger than the others. He catches it in flight and is surprised to find it warm, like a bird caught in a trap. In closing his fist, he has ground the flake into fine bits that adhere to his palm, tracing coal-black symbols he mechanically endeavors to decipher...

In a flash, he understands : these aren't frost crystals but half-charred

bits of paper, still bearing their print ! It's his book collection going up in smoke a hundred feet above, his cherished book collection ! All his books, gathered one by one, some found only after long years of searching, his passion, his pride... What feels like a violent blow to his gut makes him lose his balance. So now his most precious possession must be given up. It's not enough for them to have killed his family in another bombardment, now they need his books too...

He lets himself slide down to the sidewalk. At least this way he's sure not to fall any farther, except into the mass grave, when his turn comes. The ashes fall ceaselessly on his shoulders, his hair; he's covered in them. He leaves them where they are. Now he can feel their heat, as though the pages were still living, pulsating. How could he have thought it was snowing ? His home is burning and by chance he wasn't there when the shell dropped. He guesses from the tone of the interjections around him that there weren't any victims, aside from his beloved books. The idiots in the hills had auto-da-féed them. The one consolation : nobody could accuse him this time of pyromania. Because that is exactly what happened a dozen years before. He had fallen asleep with a book in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. His entire bedroom was burned out, and he had barely escaped. After that, the other people in the building ostracized him for several long months. They looked at him with suspicion and talked behind his back – even though three-quarters of them were inveterate smokers themselves ! But what had bothered him the most was that the young lady on the fifth floor no longer greeted him, and assumed a disapproving look when she passed him in the stairwell. He, the dangerous arsonist on the eighth floor. Even today, just thinking about it, he can't keep himself from breaking into a smile...

Muddled shadows come and go, nothing changes, he is alone. He pulls a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket, takes one out and slides it between his lips. That's when he discovers that he has also lost his lighter in

the disaster. He feels like he's sinking even further into the sidewalk. I miss you, Mara, he murmurs painfully. I haven't thought about you once in thirty years, it's true, but right now, at this very second, if you knew how much I miss you... Forgive me, Mara... Suddenly inspired, he raises his head and sights an impressively big flake drifting through the thick air, still glowing orange. He snatches it with one hand and brings it nimbly to his cigarette. With all his strength he inhales the first puff, which unfurls within him and inhabits him, like a consolation.

Ah, Mara, thank you !, he exclaims. But tell me, what exactly am I smoking here ? Dostoyevsky ? Could be, I did have his complete works... unless it's Dino Buzzati... sober and incisive... I like him a lot... or maybe Danilo Kis ? Yes, I'm voting for Danilo Kis... he too was a big smoker, in fact he died of lung cancer at the age of fifty-four, in exile in Paris because they didn't want him in Belgrade anymore, a great writer who was too free... Yes, the more I think about it, the more I'm convinced : this aftertaste of derision, it must be Kis... this long ash looks a little like he did : thin, dark and smoldering... Thank you, Kis, for this cigarette, I am smoking it to your memory... Thank you Mara, I will never forget you again, I swear... thank you...

He had always liked to read and to smoke, to smoke and to write. At the same time.

Excerpt translated by Martin Hoffman

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