

Nikotin

Gregor Hens

S. Fischer Verlag, 2011

Sample Translation by Brian Currid

I've smoked far more than a hundred thousand cigarettes in my life, and each one has meant something to me. Some of them have even tasted good. I've smoked good cigarettes, very good cigarettes, and ghastly ones, dry cigarettes and damp, spicy and even almost sweet cigarettes. I've smoked quickly, and I've smoked slowly and with pleasure. I've bummed cigarettes, stolen and smuggled them; I've conned a few and I've begged for them. I once paid thirteen dollars for a pack at a New York airport. I've thrown away packs that were still half-full, and fished them back out of the trash, only then to make them entirely unusable under the tap. I've smoked cold butts, cigars, cigarillos, bidis, kreteks, joints, and straw. I've missed flights and burned holes in trousers and car seats. I've singed my eyelashes and eyebrows, fallen asleep while smoking, and I've dreamt of cigarettes, relapses and fires, and bitter withdrawal. I've smoked at temperatures way above a hundred and far below zero, in libraries and seminar rooms, on boats and on mountaintops, on the steps of the Aztec pyramids, secretly in an old observatory, in basements and barns and beds and swimming pools, on air mattresses and in thin-walled rubber rafts, at the prime meridian in Greenwich and the 180th parallel on Fiji. I've smoked because I was hungry and I've smoked because I was full. I've smoked because I was happy, and I've smoked because I was feeling down. I've smoked out of loneliness and I've smoked out of friendship, fear and over-confidence. Each cigarette I've ever smoked has served a function – as a sign, as medicine, as a stimulant or a tranquilizer, it was a toy, an accessory, a fetish, something to help pass the

time, to serve as a reminder, a tool of communication, or as an object of meditation. Sometimes it was all this at once. I don't smoke any more, but there are still moments when I can think of nothing but cigarettes. This is just such a moment. I really shouldn't write this book; it's far too risky. But I will not be deterred. I will write about all of this without mystifying, without demonizing. For I regret nothing. Every cigarette I ever smoked was a good cigarette.

There are people I'd love to smoke a cigarette with, friends I haven't seen in a long time, artists I admire. That this will never come to pass is not just a result of my own doing, of my own decision. Most of them no longer smoke. Some are already dead. I would have liked to smoke a cigarette with my grandfather, in whose huge, calloused hand the cigarette always looked so thin and fragile. He died too young. I am convinced that he died because at the hospital where he was taken after a fall they took away his cigarettes. Although he only smoked five to ten cigarettes a day, for sixty years. My grandfather was a very moderate, deliberate person. When he spent entire mornings in his kitchen in a suburb of Koblenz sorting lentils on a newspaper, peeling potatoes, or polishing Easter eggs with a piece of bacon rind, the box of Lux cigarettes with the matchbook stuck inside always sat beside him like a promise.

I've often dreamt of smoking in an art museum. I imagine sitting on one of those smooth wooden benches, warmed by the bright light of the afternoon sun, before a quickly painted, austere group portrait by Frans Hals, for example, and lighting a Kyriazi Freres Fina, an unfiltered oriental cigarette that has unfortunately disappeared from the market. I have no doubt that this would be a moment of absolute clarity for me, perhaps my greatest joy of all.

But this won't ever happen. I don't smoke any more. Yet I can write about it. And circling around the subject of my addiction in my writing, I can ask myself a few questions: How did I become a smoker? What need drove me to it? Did the countless cigarettes I smoked satisfy this need? How did I manage my addiction, with the occasional worry of not being able to satisfy it? Was I afraid of the dangers? Why do I really think I'm going to manage it this time?

There's no need for me to list the reasons that led to my decision. Everyone knows the arguments, the social and the medical ones. Smoking is compulsive behaviour. Those who overcome their compulsions gain freedom. I often failed at my attempts to quit, and I know that I'm just at the beginning. So this time I decided to write my way out of my addiction by telling its story. For the very first time I will give my undivided attention to a structure that almost dominated my entire life, one that I sometimes actually confused with my life. Some of my behavioural patterns, my reflexes and habits of thought I had considered so natural that I never even noticed them at all. It is only now, in retrospect, that I can confront them and begin to understand them.

And something striking occurs to me: I've smoked far more than a hundred thousand cigarettes and yet I cannot say whether the paper crackles when the cigarette is lit, like it used to in cinema commercials. I have obviously never paid attention to it. Not even once.