

## BLACK CIGARETTES

By W. Whitten

Dragging on a black cigarette in front of a no-smoking sign, blonde hair falling on the shoulders of her fox fur coat, Sophie grins at the camera. The photo, recently liberated from a bulging shoebox at the bottom of his closet, is tacked above the desk. It is one artifact from the untidy record of his sister's life. Gould imagines he can smell her dirty hair, can feel the bite of the cigarette smoke at the back of his throat. Sophie – a suicide at 27 - has been dead for four years. Sometimes, he acts like she died the day before.

The proofs of her next book lie open in front of him. Gould stands, walks to the window, pushes the curtain aside. There is an endless back and forth between her art and his life. When the pages of her manuscript crackle or tear beneath his fingers he hears the breath returning to her lungs, imagines her stirring awake as if from a dream.

He looks through the sooty glass at the endless stream of cars and trucks flowing from the Holland Tunnel and thinks that the City is just like her: fickle, faithless and wanton. It welcomes with open arms its own despoilers. And they never stop arriving; a mad succession of feckless husbands, each more depraved and vulgar than the last and each carrying in his heart a desire to erase every trace of his predecessors.

He falls asleep in his clothes, wakes to the sob of bells from St. Vilnius, shuffles to the bathroom and weeps as he shaves.

At the foot of his bed he kneels and mouths the words: *Without you, without your onslaughts, without your uprootings, I should remain inert, stagnant, puerile, ignorant. You who batter me and dress my wounds, you who resist me and yield to me...*

Gould heads down to the street, pauses on the stoop of his building and squints in the direction of the Avenue of the Americas. He pats his upper body in search of eyeglasses. A dark figure comes toward him on the sidewalk. Twenty yards away, he hears the sound of heels clicking. The hair, the face beneath it take shape and a memory surfaces; weeks ago he'd made vague plans to meet his friend Jonathan, a painter, for lunch.

The heels stop clicking. Gould pulls on his glasses. Like an anxious bird, Jonathan - with his great nose, his shiny black eyes - cocks his head and stares at Gould. "You don't look so good."

"I am old and ill and poor..."

"You're 28 years old, Gould."

Sophie had left LA in a hurry, leaving behind a string of unpaid debts and an outstanding warrant for driving under the influence. She'd moved in with Gould in his place on the Upper West Side. Walking home from the seminary one evening, he'd taken a detour through Riverside Park. Illumined by the setting sun, impoverished fisherman cast lines from the banks of the Hudson in an attempt to catch poisoned fish. As he crossed Riverside Drive he'd had a premonition. Something was wrong. He ran all the way to the apartment on Broadway.

The bathroom door was locked. There was a note on the kitchen table. *Don't open the door. Call the Paramedics. Let them deal with it. I don't want you to see me. I'm like a convict who's counted the steps around his cell and found no way out. The isolation I feel is a weight that can never be lifted. Burn my poems, burn my letters...*

A month later he resigned just before taking holy orders. The very sight of a church made him sick.

To Jonathan, standing beside him, Gould does indeed look much older than his age and appears even more unhealthy than usual. And somehow, he seems smaller, as if he's shrunk. But, could he be poor? He didn't think so. His sister's books sell steadily.

Gould: "You don't understand anything."

"I have to run an errand, Gould. Why don't you come with me?"

The lampposts that line the streets are covered in peeling silver paint. In the flower shops delivery boys carry bundles of dried poppies, branches of dogwood. Behind bulletproof glass bank tellers dream of emptying the drawers and filling their pockets with cash. Gould turns away from Jonathan and watches the passing traffic. He thinks of beehives, of anthills. Of all the silent paths of the world that remain open. An idea comes to him: the streets had not been made by men, but by sentient cars and trucks that had driven over the stone and earth continuously for thousands of years, until the great escarpments that came to be known as 'city blocks' were formed. For a moment the image seems worth jotting down in his notebook. And then it dawns on him: it is exactly the sort of idea his sister would have had. Her mind contaminates his. It's always been that way.

They walk to the uptown C train at Spring Street, traversing a neighborhood full of tourists and overpriced restaurants. It bears no trace of its previous incarnation as an artists' ghetto. As they jostle past German and French families, Jonathan talks. Only and always about himself, about his travels. He's been everywhere in the last six months: Moscow, Paris, Istanbul, Shanghai. Gould feels conspicuous. Would someone overhear Jonathan's inane patter and assume Gould was his submissive sidekick?

Down the steps, into the crypt-like subway entrance. The smell of urine – rat or human – accompanies them through the turnstiles and onto a waiting train. It is midday and the train is full of riders unlike the typical rush hour commuter. An emaciated man wearing a suit jacket and pajama bottoms pushes an empty wheelchair. Another sleeps on the bench next to the conductor's booth surrounded by garbage bags. Still another limps through the car shaking a can filled with coins. He is loud, his grievances are legitimate.

They climb the steps into sunlight at 86<sup>th</sup> Street. Gould, in his grey London Fog raincoat, black slacks and white shirt, has difficulty keeping up with his friend. His skin feels too tight, somehow he cannot stand up straight, he cannot take a full step...

Jonathan rattles on. He specializes in portraits of forgotten rock musicians. His subjects are aged, obscure, yet, somehow seminal figures. "Angels" is the name of the ongoing series. In another time when the past had less purchase on the present these sorts of men would be considered little more than symbols of wasted promise. Yet, they are proof that the ultimate career move consists in merely staying alive. Jonathan throws around the word 'authentic' a lot. He would often say in defense of his own one-note project: 'Look at Chuck Close. Look at Philip Glass.'

Their friendship, Gould thinks, is like an amputated limb. Painful, phantom sensations are all that remain.

Jonathan usually finds the subjects of his portraits on the Internet. He buys these men (they are mostly men) dinner or more than likely gets

them drunk or high, then photographs them – resplendent in their dyed hair, their eyeliner, their outdated clothes and jewelry – and paints their portrait from the photograph. When he sells the paintings they receive ‘free publicity’ while the cash from the sales flows directly into his bank account.

His interest in these decrepit musicians, he assures anyone who asks, is a form of love, of devotion. His paintings, he insists, are ex voto offerings. Like his subjects he is intemperate in all things and conducts his career in a haphazard way without a thought to the future. No contracts are drawn up, nothing is ever signed.

However annoying or vapid Gould might find his friend to be, he draws an inescapable conclusion; *Jonathan is a success, I am not.*

They stop in front of an enormous, new hi-rise. For it to have been built some grand old edifice must have been torn down. History has been outlawed in the City. Any obscenity is possible. The building is a mirror, a great expanse of glass the color of late winter sky rising thirty or forty stories into the air.

It is the home of Jonathan’s friends - Nina and Albert.

In the lobby they wait while the doorman speaks into a telephone. “Two gentlemen - your friend Jonathan and another. Yes, OK. I’ll send them right up.”

In the elevator – the walls are made of the same glass as the building’s façade - Jonathan adopts a distracted tone. “Albert recently left Nina. They live apart but remain close.”

Gould closes his eyes to escape the mirrored walls, to avoid his reflection.

“I’m trying to sell them another painting.” Jonathan coughs into his hand. Dandruff sprinkles his shoulders, bits of food are lodged in his teeth. “She’s kind of famous, really rolling in the money.” He is always poorly washed and disheveled, yet the women he encounters rarely seem able to resist him. Gould sees this as more proof that Grace always comes from outside. It has nothing to do with actions or good works.

The elevator door opens. Jonathan steers Gould toward the first apartment on the right. He knocks. A woman opens the door.

“Nina this is Gould.”

Gould reminds himself that if a person truly understands humility then humiliation is impossible. He bows. “Forgive me; I’m uninvited.”

“Never mind.” With a monarch’s aplomb, she stands to one side and waives them in.

The loft is enormous with white-painted walls and tall, light-filled windows. Like a museum, sculptures, paintings, photographs are strategically placed throughout. It has been a long time since Gould has been in a rich person’s home. Years, perhaps.

Jonathan at her elbow, Nina walks to a window. Together they survey Central Park. Framed by white curtains, her narrow, upturned face is reflected in the glass. She wears a sort of boiler suit - like a workman’s - made from some diaphanous, lavender material.

Another man: tall, thin with a mole at the end of his nose – Albert Gould assumes – sits at a coffee table eating from a plate of scrambled eggs. The sonorous clinking of heavy cutlery against the dish rings through the loft. Barefoot, he wears a cheap-looking, dark sport coat over a white t-shirt and grass-stained blue jeans.

Gould finds a chair. He stares into his hands.

“I’m a video artist and a sculptor. Are you interested in art?” He looks up. A bleached blonde wraith - tall, slim, elegant with a full mouth and enameled black fingernails - stands over him. Her pale skin is the same color as her hair.

Gould feels as if the air is being siphoned from the room. He can’t understand it at first. Finally, he remembers: it is desire. Like all misfortune it comes as a surprise.

His eyes remain downcast. “What interests me is the end of the world, the overthrow of equilibrium, of being fulfilled at last.” Beneath thinning black hair his scalp shines under the bright light.

She smiles: “Is there a place for art at the end of the world?”

Gould holds his chin between thumb and forefinger. “I don’t know. Anyone can buy a book or a record album for five dollars. To pick up a piece of art one must open a line of credit.”

“You might be exaggerating the state of things, just a bit...”

Gould clears his throat. “You’re right, you’re right. I’m out of my depth.”

She carefully rolls up one sleeve, then the other. “It’s like this Gould, when I’ve hit a dry spell it feels like I’ll never be able to create again. It almost feels as if I’ve been struck blind. Lately, when I pick up my camera, I may as well be holding a hammer or a rake. I need something new to inspire me, to jolt me out of my blankness.” She looks like a woman who has suffered, who is continuing to suffer. “Jonathan says you once were a priest...”

Gould gravely shakes his head, as if in pity of her ignorance. “No, no I was never ordained.”

Her voice is vague. “But, you came close...”

Gould grimaces as if in pain - the discussion mortifies him. “At the last moment I realized I would follow a different path.”

Her eyes are moist. “Was there a woman? Or, perhaps a man?”

Gould looks toward the window and wonders if the day could end without disaster. On his way home he would be mugged by teenagers or a rat would run across his feet and he would fall face first onto the subway tracks. Anything might happen. “I was like a hypochondriac finally diagnosed with a serious illness – playacting at something had not prepared me in any way for...”

She waves away his words like they are smoke or a bad smell: “I just assumed it had to be a love affair.”

He bites the inside of his cheek. “My sister was the great love of my life. There was no one else”.

“Yes...” Her mind is racing, she looks past him. “Your sister...I’d like to talk to you about her...”

Gould shifts in his chair. “Sophie believed that human activity had no value at all. That the body, the world should be abjured, never celebrated or enjoyed. And one could only get close to God only by becoming nothing.” He stares at his open palm. “When she was off the dope, she was a full-fledged Cathar.”

Nina stands straight, her eyebrows lift. “I’m a great fan of her poems. I own all of her books. In fact, I’ve often thought of doing a piece inspired by her...”

Gould absentmindedly runs a finger over his unevenly shaved upper lip. “Apocatastasis, universal salvation, I swore to her that was where

everything led.” He lifts his thumb and middle finger and massages the outside corners of his eyes. “That she had nothing to fear. That when I couldn’t protect her, God certainly would.” Eyes closed, he shakes his head: “Can you imagine being so wrong about something?”

Nina runs her hands through her hair, takes a deep breath.

Gould removes a handkerchief from the pocket of his raincoat and wipes his forehead. His words come out softly in a long exhalation of breath, like a sigh: “Now that she’s dead I’ve become her pimp. Ransacking her notebooks, diaries and letters. I feel like a medieval Italian melting down classical bronze statuary in order to make...” His shoulders slump, “...coins, to make pennies.”

By the window, Jonathan pushes aside the dark hair that covers his forehead. He lifts his arm, points. “Hey, look. A red-tailed hawk.”

Albert stops eating. In the silence Gould can hear Nina’s labored breathing. She clenches and unclenches her fists. It’s as if she is experiencing an attack of some kind.

Jonathan remains motionless, arm extended. Albert rises to his feet. He is at least six feet five. Head tilted, he walks diagonally, as if on a slant, toward the window.

The light is fading. Gould stares at a lamp on the floor next to the couch Albert has just vacated. Its pedestal and shade are made of blue glass with bulbs cleverly placed so the designs which decorate it light the ceiling like letters.

He balls the handkerchief in his fist and imagines stuffing it down his throat like a yogi. Instead, he walks to the door and leaves.

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As if eluding pursuers, Gould darts between cars, sprints across intersections, cuts through the lobbies of buildings. Breathless, he stops at the subway station at 72nd Street, a certain satisfaction spreading through his chest like smoke. Passive aggression! Gratitude of flight!

He imagines their conversation, their discomfiture. *Why had he left? I didn’t understand a single word he said.* Of course Jonathan would attempt to reassure them; *Gould lives in the shadow of his sister’s genius. It’s an unbearable weight.*

In front of him a woman passes through the turnstiles. Like Nina, she is blonde, luminous; she lights the space around her. Her overcoat is black. Her feet move lightly over the stained cement. He turns up the collar of his raincoat and imagines kissing her, imagines all the seasons beginning and ending on her lips.

Inside the pocket of his coat is a package of Djarum. He pulls it out, lights one of the thin black cylinders. Exhaling smoke through his nostrils his mind returns to the couplet that had been troubling him for weeks:

*I kissed Leon Bloy a century too late*

*I had loved another in his place – coked up to the gills.*

The smoke grows around him, encases him. He looks up at silver, imbricated clouds sliding across the sun. Snow is imminent. He’d consulted her notebook a dozen times. He’d eventually inserted the word *another* thinking she’d left it out. The line simply hadn’t rung true. Puffing on the cigarette he realizes, thanks to his inability to decipher her sloppy,

recalcitrant hand, he'd been wrong. He understands at last.

*I kissed Leon Bloy a century too late  
and loved in his place a coked up girl.*

He smiles, puts his hands in his pockets and walks away from the subway station. A snowflake lands on the sleeve of his coat. The wind lifts his thinning hair. The Beaux-Arts façade of the Dorilton at 71<sup>st</sup> and Broadway looms above him. He sighs. The poem she wrote about the Dorilton, about meeting and leaving a married man who lived there is called *Pleasure is No Fun*. It is her City, where grandeur abounds, where the blocks alternate like strophes in a poem that she is still writing...

Admit she is the light illuminating all facts, admit she is the point on the horizon that all lines follow, Gould reasons, and his struggle to be himself will end.

“You think you’re chasing me and I won’t have you. It’s the opposite. I’m the one who loves you, who wants you for life.”

The slow-falling snow presents the illusion of a weightless world. The wind is the sound of turning pages. In the solitude of her books.