

GRIP: A MEMOIR OF FIERCE ATTRACTIONS BY NINA HAMBERG

EXCERPT - A SYMBOL

At best, my commute across the length of the city, over the Golden Gate Bridge and halfway across Marin County, absorbed an hour each way. Today was clearly going to be much longer. With one hand on the wheel, I groped inside my purse until I found what I was looking for. My cigar.

This wasn't one of those thin cigarillos. They were a waste of time, too dainty and unassuming. The cigar I fired up was eight inches long and extruded smoke like a coal-burning plant. When people asked why I smoked cigars, I'd reply curtly that I enjoyed them. I'd never confess that I barely tolerated their taste any more than I'd admit their real appeal, their satisfying heft in my hand and the way the tobacco crunched when I rolled the body between my fingers. I liked how they acted as an exclamation mark when I gestured with one, underscoring what I was saying and making it seem more important. But most of all, I smoked cigars because it was an open act of rebellion—a little woman waving around the smelly, smoldering symbol of male privilege.

The cigar kept me company on the long crawl through San Francisco. By the time I could see the blue-gray waters of the bay, the orange pillars of the Golden Gate Bridge and the green knolls of the headlands on the other side, I was down to the stump. I yanked open my ashtray but it was full of sunflower seeds husks, the detritus from my real addiction. *What should I do? Could I throw it out the window?* I'd seen men toss butts out of cars lots of times but I hating littering. I was the kind of person who ran after supermarkets fliers when they blew off someone else's windshield. Anyway, a cigar wasn't actually litter, it was plant matter. *Who was going to notice anyway?* I flicked the stogie out my window.

The siren started as soon as it hit the asphalt.