

# THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING

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## LIGHTNESS AND WEIGHT

1

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return, the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (“*das grösste Schwergewicht*”).

A life that disappears once and for all, that does not return, is then like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing.

2

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age the woman longs to be weighed down by the man’s body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life’s most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.

Conversely, the absolute absence of burden to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

What, then, shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

Parmenides posed this very question in the fifth century before Christ. He seems to have seen the world divided into pairs of opposites: light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/nonbeing. One half of the opposition he called positive (light, fineness, warmth, being), the other negative. We might find this division into positive and negative poles childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, heaviness or lightness?

Parmenides responded: lightness is positive, weight negative.

Was he correct or not? That is the question. The only certainty is: the weight/lightness opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all.

3

I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in view of these reflections did I see him clearly. I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do.

He had first met Tereza about three weeks earlier in a small Czech town. They had spent scarcely an hour together. She had accompanied him to the station and waited with him until he boarded the train for Prague. Ten days later she paid him a visit. They made love the day she arrived. That night she came down with a fever, and stayed a whole week in his flat with the flu.

He had come to feel an inexplicable love for this all but complete stranger; she seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent downstream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed.

She stayed with him a week, until she was well again, then went back to her

town, some hundred and twenty-five miles from Prague. And then came the time I have just spoken of and see as the key to his life: Standing by the window, he looked out over the courtyard at the walls opposite him and deliberated.

Should he call her back to Prague for good? He feared the responsibility. If he invited her to come, then come she would, and offer him up her life.

Or should he refrain from approaching her? Then she would remain a waitress in a hotel restaurant of a provincial town and he would never see her again.

Did he want her to come or did he not?

He looked out over the courtyard at the opposite walls, seeking an answer.

He kept recalling her lying on his couch; she reminded him of no one in his former life. She was neither mistress nor wife; she was a child whom he had taken from a bulrush basket that had been daubed with pitch and sent to the riverbank of his bed. She fell asleep. He knelt down next to her. Her feverous breath quickened and she gave out a weak moan. He pressed his face to hers and whispered calming words into her sleep. After a while he felt her breath return to normal and her face rise unconsciously to meet his. He smelled the delicate aroma of her fever and breathed it in, as if trying to glut himself with the intimacy of her body. And all at once he fancied she had been with him for many years and was dying. He had a sudden clear feeling that he would not survive her death. He would lie down beside her and want to die with her. He pressed his face into the pillow beside her head and kept it there for a long time.

Now he was standing at the window trying to call that moment to account. What could it have been if not love declaring itself to him?

But was it love? The feeling of wanting to die beside her was clearly

exaggerated: he had seen her only once before in his life! Was it simply the hysteria of a man who, aware deep down of his inaptitude for love, felt the self-deluding need to simulate it? His unconscious was so cowardly that the best partner it could choose for its little comedy was this miserable provincial waitress with practically no chance at all to enter his life!

Looking out over the courtyard at the dirty walls, he realized he had no idea whether it was hysteria or love.

And he was distressed that in a situation where a real man would instantly have known how to act he was vacillating and therefore depriving the most beautiful moments he had ever experienced (kneeling at her bed and thinking he would not survive her death) of their meaning.

He remained annoyed with himself until he realized that not knowing what he wanted was actually quite natural.

We can never know what to want, because as we live one life we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come.

Was it better to be with Tereza or to remain alone?

There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? That is why life is always like a sketch. No, "sketch" is not quite the word, because a sketch is an outline of something, the groundwork for a picture, whereas the sketch that is our life is a sketch for nothing, an outline with no picture.

*Einmal ist keinmal*, said Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all.

But then one day at the hospital where Tomas worked as a surgeon, during a break between operations, a nurse called him to the telephone. He heard Tereza's voice coming from the receiver. She had phoned him from the railway station. He was overjoyed. Unfortunately he had something on that evening and could not invite her to his place until the next day. The moment he hung up, he reproached himself for not telling her to go straight there. He had time enough to cancel his plans, after all! He tried to imagine what Tereza would do in Prague during the thirty-six long hours before they were to meet, and had half a mind to jump into his car and drive through the streets looking for her.

She arrived the next evening, handbag dangling from her shoulder, looking more elegant than before. She had a thick book under her arm. It was "Anna Karenina." She seemed in a good mood, even a little boisterous, and tried to make him think that she had just happened to drop in, that things had just worked out that way: she was in Prague on business, perhaps (at this point she became rather vague) to find a job.

Later, as they lay naked and spent side by side on the bed, he asked her where she was staying. It was night by then, and he offered to drive her there. Embarrassed, she answered that she still had to find a hotel and had left her suitcase at the station.

Only two days ago he had feared that if he invited her to Prague she would offer him up her life. When she told him her suitcase was at the station, he immediately realized that the suitcase contained her life and that she had left it at the station only until she could offer it up to him.

The two of them got into his car, which was parked in front of the house, and drove to the station. There he claimed the suitcase (it was large and enormously heavy) and took it and her home.

How had he come to make such a sudden decision when for nearly a

fortnight he had wavered so much that he could not even bring himself to send a postcard asking her how she was?

He himself was surprised. He had acted against his principles. Ten years earlier, when he divorced his wife, he had celebrated the event the way others celebrate a marriage. He understood he was not born to live side by side with any woman and could be fully himself only as a bachelor. He tried to design his life in such a way that no woman could move in with a suitcase. That was why his flat had only the one bed. Even though it was wide enough, Tomas would tell his mistresses that he was unable to fall asleep with anyone next to him, and drive them home after midnight. And it was not the flu that kept him from sleeping with Tereza on her first visit. The first night he had slept in his large armchair, and the rest of that week he drove each night to the hospital, where he had a cot in his office.

But this time he fell asleep by her side. When he woke up the next morning, he found Tereza, who was still asleep, holding his hand. Could they have been hand in hand all night? It was hard to believe.

And while she breathed the deep breath of sleep and held his hand (firmly: he was unable to disengage it from her grip), the enormously heavy suitcase stood by the bed.

He refrained from loosening his hand from her grip for fear of waking her, and turned carefully on his side to observe her better.

Again it occurred to him that Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream. He couldn't very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh's daughter hadn't snatched the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it. How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn't taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn't have written his most beautiful tragedy!

Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love.

He had lived a scant two years with his wife, and they had had a son. At the divorce proceedings the judge awarded the infant to its mother and ordered Tomas to pay a third of his salary for its support. He also granted him the right to visit the child every other week.

But each time Tomas was supposed to see him, the child's mother found an excuse to keep him away. He soon realized that bringing them expensive gifts would make things a good deal easier, that he was expected to bribe the mother for the son's love. He saw a future of quixotic attempts to inculcate his views in the boy, views opposed in every way to the mother's. The very thought of it exhausted him. When, one Sunday, the child's mother again cancelled a scheduled visit, Tomas decided on the spur of the moment never to see him again. Why should he feel more for that child, to whom he was bound by nothing but a single improvident night, than for any other? He would be scrupulous about paying support; he just didn't want anybody making him fight for his son in the name of paternal sentiment!

Needless to say, he found no sympathizers. His own parents condemned him roundly: if Tomas refused to take an interest in his son, then they, Tomas's parents, would no longer take an interest in theirs. They made a great show of maintaining good relations with their daughter-in-law and trumpeted their exemplary stance and sense of justice.

Thus in practically no time he managed to rid himself of wife, son, mother, and father. The only thing they bequeathed to him was a fear of women. Tomas desired but feared them. Needing to create a compromise between fear and desire, he devised what he called "erotic friendship." He would tell his mistresses: the only relationship that can make both partners happy is one

in which sentimentality has no place and neither partner makes any claim on the life and freedom of the other.

To insure that erotic friendship never grew into the aggression of love, he would meet each of his long-term mistresses only at intervals. He considered this method flawless and propagated it among his friends: “The important thing is to abide by the rule of threes. Either you see a woman three times in quick succession and then never again or you maintain relations over the years but make sure that the rendezvous are at least three weeks apart.”

The rule of threes enabled Tomas to keep intact his liaisons with some women while continuing to engage in numerous short-term affairs with many others. He was not always understood. The woman who understood him best was Sabina. She was a painter. “The reason I like you,” she would say to him, “is you’re the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster.”

It was Sabina he turned to when he needed to find a job for Tereza in Prague. Following the unwritten rules of erotic friendship, Sabina promised to do everything in her power, and before long she had in fact located a place for Tereza in the darkroom of an illustrated weekly. Although Tereza’s new job did not require any particular qualifications, it raised her status from waitress to member of the press. When Sabina herself introduced Tereza to everyone on the weekly, Tomas knew he had never had a better friend as a mistress than Sabina.

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The unwritten contract of erotic friendship stipulated that Tomas should exclude all love from his life. The moment he violated that clause of the contract, his other mistresses would assume inferior status and become ripe for insurrection.

Accordingly, he rented a room for Tereza and her heavy suitcase. He wanted to be able to watch over her, protect her, enjoy her presence, but felt no need to change his way of life. He did not want word to get out that Tereza was sleeping at his place: spending the night together was the *corpus delicti* of love.

He never spent the night with the others. It was easy enough if he was at their place: he could leave whenever he pleased. It was worse when they were at his and he had to explain that come midnight he would have to drive them home because he was an insomniac and found it impossible to fall asleep in close proximity to another person. Though it was not far from the truth, he never dared tell them the whole truth: after making love he had an uncontrollable craving to be by himself; waking in the middle of the night at the side of an alien body was distasteful to him, rising in the morning with an intruder repellent; he had no desire to be overheard brushing his teeth in the bathroom, nor was he enticed by the thought of an intimate breakfast.

That is why he was so surprised to wake up and find Tereza squeezing his hand tightly. Lying there looking at her, he could not quite understand what had happened. But as he ran through the previous few hours in his mind, he began to sense an aura of hitherto unknown happiness emanating from them.

From that time on they both looked forward to sleeping together. I might even say that the goal of their lovemaking was not so much pleasure as the sleep that followed it. She especially was affected. Whenever she stayed overnight in her rented room (which quickly became only an alibi for Tomas), she was unable to fall asleep; in his arms she would fall asleep no matter how wrought up she might have been. He would whisper impromptu fairy tales about her, or gibberish—words he repeated monotonously, words soothing or comical that turned into vague visions lulling her through the first dreams of the night. He had complete control over her sleep: she dozed off at the second he chose.

While they slept, she held him as on the first night, keeping a firm grip on wrist, finger, or ankle. If he wanted to move without waking her, he had to resort to artifice. After freeing his finger (wrist, ankle) from her clutches, a process that, since she guarded him carefully even in her sleep, never failed to rouse her partially, he would calm her by slipping an object into her hand (a rolled-up pajama top, a slipper, a book), which she then gripped as tightly as if it were a part of his body.

Once, when he had just lulled her to sleep but she had gone no further than dream's antechamber and was therefore still responsive to him, he said to her, "Goodbye, I'm going now." "Where?" she asked in her sleep. "Away," he answered sternly. "Then I'm going with you," she said, sitting up in bed. "No, you can't. I'm going away for good," he said, going out into the hall. She stood up and followed him out, squinting. She was naked beneath her short nightdress. Her face was blank, expressionless, but she moved energetically. He walked through the hall of the flat into the hall of the building (the hall shared by all the occupants), closing the door in her face. She flung it open and continued to follow him, convinced in her dream that he meant to leave her for good and she had to stop him. He walked down the stairs to the first landing and waited for her there. She went down after him, took him by the hand, and led him back to bed.

Tomas came to this conclusion: Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love makes itself felt not in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman).

In the middle of the night Tereza started moaning in her sleep. Tomas woke her up, but when she saw his face she said, with hatred in her voice, "Get away from me! Get away from me!" Then she told him her dream: The

two of them and Sabina had been in a big room together. There was a bed in the middle of the room. It was like a platform in the theatre. Tomas ordered her to stand in the corner while he made love to Sabina. The sight of it caused Tereza intolerable suffering. Hoping to alleviate the pain in her heart by pains of the flesh, she jabbed needles under her fingernails. "It hurt so much," she said, squeezing her hands into fists as if they actually were wounded.

He pressed her to him, and she gradually (trembling violently for a long time) fell asleep in his arms.

Thinking about the dream the next day, he remembered something. He opened a desk drawer and took out a packet of letters Sabina had written to him. He was not long in finding the following passage: "I want to make love to you in my studio. It will be like a stage surrounded by people. The audience won't be allowed up close, but they won't be able to take their eyes off us."

The worst of it was that the letter was dated. It was quite recent, written long after Tereza moved in with Tomas.

"So you've been rummaging in my letters!"

She did not deny it. "Throw me out, then!"

But he did not throw her out. He could picture her pressed against the wall of Sabina's studio jabbing needles up under her nails. He took her fingers between his hands and stroked them, brought them to his lips and kissed them, as if they still had drops of blood on them.

But from that time on everything seemed to conspire against him. Not a day went by without her learning something about his secret life.

At first he denied it all. Then, when the evidence became too blatant, he

argued that his polygamous way of life did not in the least run counter to his love for her. He was inconsistent: first he disavowed his infidelities, then he tried to justify them.

Once as he was saying goodbye after making a date with a woman on the phone, from the next room came a strange sound like the loud chattering of teeth.

By chance, she had come home without his realizing it. She was pouring something from a medicine bottle down her throat, and her hand shook so badly the glass bottle clicked against her teeth.

He pounced on her as if trying to save her from drowning. The bottle fell to the floor, spotting the carpet with valerian drops. She put up a good fight, and he had to keep her in a straitjacket-like hold for a quarter of an hour before he could calm her.

He knew he was in an unjustifiable situation, based as it was on complete inequality.

One evening, before she discovered his letters from Sabina, they had gone to a bar with some friends to celebrate Tereza's new job. She had been promoted at the weekly from darkroom technician to staff photographer. Because he never was much for dancing, one of his younger colleagues took over. They made a splendid couple on the dance floor, and Tomas found her more beautiful than ever. He looked on in amazement at the split-second precision and deference with which Tereza anticipated her partner's will. The dance seemed to him a declaration that her devotion, her ardent desire to satisfy his every whim, was not necessarily bound to his person, that if she hadn't met Tomas she would have been ready to respond to the call of any other man she might have met instead. He had no difficulty imagining Tereza and his young colleague as lovers. And the ease with which he arrived at this fiction wounded him. He realized that Tereza's body was perfectly thinkable coupled with any male body, and the thought put him in a foul

mood. Not until late that night, at home, did he admit to her he was jealous.

This absurd jealousy, grounded as it was in mere hypothesis, proved that he considered her fidelity an unconditional postulate of their relationship. How then could he begrudge her her jealousy of his very real mistresses?

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During the day, she tried (though with only partial success) to believe what Tomas told her and to be as cheerful as she had been before. But her jealousy thus tamed by day burst forth all the more savagely in her dreams, each of which ended in a wail he could silence only by waking her.

Her dreams recurred like themes and variations or episodes in a television series. For example, she repeatedly dreamed of cats jumping at her face and digging their claws into her skin. We need not look far for an interpretation: in Czech slang, the word "cat" means a pretty woman. Tereza saw herself threatened by women—all women. All women were potential mistresses for Tomas, and she feared them all.

In another cycle she was being sent to her death. Once, when he woke her as she screamed in terror in the dead of night, she told him about it. "I was at a large indoor swimming pool. There were about twenty of us. All women. We were naked and had to march around the pool. There was a pannier hanging from the ceiling and a man standing in the pannier. The man wore a broad-brimmed hat shading his face, but I could see it was you. You kept giving us orders. Shouting at us. We had to sing as we marched, sing and do knee bends. If one of us did a bad knee bend, you would shoot her with a pistol and she would fall dead into the pool. Which made everybody laugh and sing even louder. You never took your eyes off us, and the minute we did something wrong you would shoot. The pool was full of corpses floating just below the surface. And I knew I lacked the strength to do the next knee bend and you were going to shoot me!"

In a third cycle she was dead.

Lying in a hearse as big as a furniture van, she was surrounded by dead women. There were so many of them that the back door would not close and several legs dangled out.

“But I’m not dead!” Tereza cried. “I can still feel!”

“So can we,” the corpses said, laughing.

They laughed the same laugh as the live women who used to tell her cheerfully that it was perfectly normal that one day she would have bad teeth, faulty ovaries, and wrinkles, because they all had bad teeth, faulty ovaries, and wrinkles. Laughing the same laugh, they told her that she was dead and it was perfectly all right!

Suddenly she felt a need to urinate. “You see,” she cried. “I need to pee. That’s proof positive I’m not dead!”

But they only laughed again. “Needing to pee is perfectly normal!” they said. “You’ll go on feeling that kind of thing for a long time yet. Like a person who has an arm cut off and keeps feeling it’s there. We may not have a drop of pee left in us, but we keep needing to pee.”

Tereza huddled against Tomas in bed. “And the way they talked to me! Like old friends, people who’d known me forever. I was appalled at the thought of having to stay with them forever.”

All languages that derive from Latin form the word “compassion” by combining the prefix meaning “with” (*com*) and the root meaning “suffering” (Late Latin, *passio*). In other languages—Czech, Polish, German, and Swedish, for instance—this word is formed by combining the prefix “with” and the word that means “feeling” (Czech, *sou-cit*; Polish, *współ-*

*czucie*; German, *Mit-gefühl*; Swedish, *med-känsla*).

In languages that derive from Latin, “compassion” means: we cannot look on coolly as others suffer; or, we sympathize with those who suffer. Another word with approximately the same meaning, “pity” (French, *pitié*; Italian, *pietà*; etc.), connotes a certain condescension toward the sufferer. “To take pity on a woman” means that we are better off than she, that we stoop to her level, lower ourselves.

That is why the word “compassion” generally inspires suspicion; it indicates what is considered an inferior, second-rate sentiment that has little to do with love. To love someone out of compassion means not really to love.

In languages that form the word “compassion” not from the root “suffering” but from the root “feeling,” the word is used in almost the same way, but to contend that it indicates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to tolerate the other’s misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion—joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion (in the sense of *soucit*, *współczucie*, *Mitgefühl*, *medkänsla*) therefore signifies the greatest degree of affective imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme.

By revealing to Tomas her dream about jabbing needles under her fingernails, Tereza unwittingly revealed that she had gone through his desk. If Tereza had been any other woman, Tomas would never have spoken to her again. Aware of that, Tereza said to him, “Throw me out!” But instead of throwing her out he seized her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, because at that moment he himself felt the pain under her fingernails as surely as if the nerves of her fingers led straight to his own brain.

Anyone who has failed to benefit from the Devil’s gift of compassion will

condemn Tereza coldly for her deed, because privacy is sacred and drawers containing intimate correspondence are not to be opened. But because compassion was Tomas's fate (or curse), he felt that he himself had knelt before the open desk drawer, unable to tear his eyes from Sabina's letter. He understood Tereza, and not only was he incapable of being angry with her, he loved her all the more.

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Her gestures grew abrupt and unsteady. Two years had elapsed since she discovered he was unfaithful, and things had grown worse. There was no way out.

Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships? He was. It would have torn him apart. He lacked the strength to control his taste for other women. Besides, he failed to see the need. No one knew better than he how little his exploits threatened Tereza. Why, then, give them up? He saw no more reason for that than to deny himself soccer matches.

But was it still a matter of pleasure? Even as he set out to visit another woman, he found her distasteful and promised himself he would not see her again. He constantly had Tereza's image before his eyes, and the only way he could erase it was by quickly getting drunk. Ever since meeting Tereza, he had been unable to make love to other women without alcohol. But alcohol on his breath was a sure sign to Tereza of infidelity.

He was caught in a trap: even on his way to see them he found them distasteful, but one day without them and he was back on the phone, eager to make contact.

He still felt most comfortable with Sabina. He knew she was discreet and would not divulge their rendezvous. Her studio greeted him like a memento of his past, his idyllic bachelor past.

Perhaps he himself did not realize how much he had changed: he was now afraid to come home late, because Tereza would be waiting up for him. Then one day Sabina caught him glancing at his watch during intercourse and trying to hasten its conclusion.

Afterward, still naked and lazily walking across the studio, she stopped before an easel with a half-finished painting and watched him sidelong as he threw on his clothes.

When he was fully dressed except for one bare foot, he looked around the room and then got down on all fours to continue the search under a table.

"You seem to be turning into the theme of all my paintings," she said. "The meeting of two worlds. A double exposure. Showing through the outline of Tomas the libertine, incredibly, the face of a romantic lover. Or, the other way around, through a Tristan, always thinking of his Tereza, I see the beautiful, betrayed world of the libertine."

Tomas straightened up and distractedly listened to Sabina's words.

"What are you looking for?" she asked

"A sock."

She searched all over the room with him, and again he got down on all fours to look under the table.

"Your sock isn't anywhere to be seen," said Sabina. "You must have come without it."

"How could I have come without it?" cried Tomas, looking at his watch. "I wasn't wearing only one sock when I came, was I?"

"It's not out of the question. You've been very absent-minded lately. Always rushing somewhere, looking at your watch. It wouldn't surprise me in the

least if you forgot to put on a sock.”

He was just about to put his shoe on his bare foot. “It’s cold out,” Sabina said. “I’ll lend you one of my stockings.”

She handed him a long white fashionable, wide-mesh stocking.

He knew very well she was getting back at him for glancing at his watch while making love to her. She had hidden his sock somewhere. It was indeed cold out, and he had no choice but to take her up on the offer. He went home wearing a sock on one foot and a wide-mesh stocking rolled down over his ankle on the other.

He was in a quandary: in his mistresses’ eyes, he bore the stigma of his love for Tereza; in Tereza’s eyes, the stigma of his exploits with the mistresses.

11

To assuage Tereza’s suffering, he married her (they could finally get rid of the room, which she had not lived in for quite some time) and gave her a puppy.

It was born to a Saint Bernard owned by a colleague. The sire was a neighbor’s German shepherd. No one wanted the little mongrels, and his colleague was loath to kill them.

Looking over the puppies, Tomas knew that the ones he rejected would have to die. He felt like the president of the republic standing before four prisoners condemned to death and empowered to pardon only one of them. At last he made his choice: a bitch whose body seemed reminiscent of the German shepherd and whose head came from its Saint Bernard mother. He took it home to Tereza, who picked it up and pressed it to her breast. The puppy immediately peed on her blouse.

Then they tried to come up with a name for it. Tomas wanted the name to be a clear indication that the dog was Tereza’s, and he thought of the book she was clutching under her arm when she arrived unannounced in Prague. He suggested they call the puppy Tolstoy.

“It can’t be Tolstoy,” Tereza said. “It’s a girl. How about Anna Karenina?” “It can’t be Anna Karenina,” said Tomas. “No woman could possibly have so funny a face. It’s much more like Karenin. Yes, Anna’s husband. That’s just how I’ve always pictured him.”

“But won’t calling her Karenin affect her sexuality?”

“It is entirely possible,” said Tomas, “that a female dog addressed continually by a male name will develop lesbian tendencies.”

Strangely enough, Tomas’s words came true. Though bitches are usually more affectionate to their masters than to their mistresses, Karenin proved an exception, deciding that he was in love with Tereza. Tomas was grateful to him for it. He would stroke the puppy’s head and say, “Well done, Karenin! That’s just what I wanted you for. Since I can’t cope with her by myself, you must help me.”

But even with Karenin’s help Tomas failed to make Tereza happy. He became aware of his failure some years later, on approximately the tenth day after his country was occupied by Russian tanks. It was August of 1968, and Tomas was receiving daily phone calls from a hospital in Zurich. The director there, a physician who had struck up a friendship with Tomas at an international conference, was worried about him and kept offering him a job.

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If Tomas rejected the Swiss doctor’s offer without a second thought, it was for Tereza’s sake. He assumed she would not want to leave. She had spent the whole first week of the occupation in a kind of trance that almost

resembled happiness. After roaming the streets with her camera, she would hand the rolls of film to foreign journalists, who actually fought over them. Once, when she went too far and took a closeup of an officer pointing his revolver at a group of people, she was arrested and kept overnight at Russian military headquarters. There they threatened to shoot her, but no sooner had they let her go than she was back in the streets with her camera.

That is why Tomas was surprised when, on the tenth day of the occupation, she said to him, "Why is it you don't want to go to Switzerland?"

"Why should I?"

"They could make it hard for you here."

"They can make it hard for anybody," replied Tomas with a wave of the hand. "What about you? Could you live abroad?"

"Why not?"

"You've been out there risking your life for this country. How can you be so nonchalant about leaving it?"

"Now that Dubček is back, things have changed," said Tereza.

It was true. The general euphoria had lasted no longer than the first week. The representatives of the country had been hauled away like criminals by the Russian Army, no one knew where they were, everyone feared for the men's lives, and hatred for the Russians drugged people like alcohol. It was a drunken carnival of hate. Czech towns were decorated with thousands of hand-painted posters bearing ironic texts, epigrams, poems, and cartoons of Brezhnev and his soldiers, jeered at by one and all as a circus of illiterates. But no carnival can go on forever. In the meantime, the Russians had forced the Czech representatives to sign a compromise agreement in Moscow. When Dubček returned with them to Prague, he gave a speech over the

radio. He was so devastated after his six-day imprisonment he could hardly talk; he kept stuttering and gasping for breath, making long pauses between sentences, pauses lasting nearly thirty seconds.

The compromise saved the country from the worst: the executions and mass deportations to Siberia that had terrified everyone. But one thing was clear: the country would have to bow to the conqueror. Forever and ever, it will stutter, stammer, and gasp for air like Alexander Dubček. The carnival was over. Workaday humiliation had begun.

Tereza had explained all this to Tomas, and he knew that it was true. But he also knew that underneath it all hid still another, more fundamental truth, the reason she wanted to leave Prague: she had never really been happy before the carnival.

The days she walked through the streets of Prague taking pictures of Russian soldiers and looking danger in the face were the best of her life. They were the only time when the television series of her dreams had been interrupted and she had enjoyed a few happy nights. The Russians had brought equilibrium to her in their tanks, and now that the carnival was over she feared her nights again and wanted to escape them. She now knew there were conditions under which she could feel strong and fulfilled, and she longed to go off into the world and seek those conditions somewhere else.

"It doesn't bother you that Sabina has also emigrated to Switzerland?" Tomas asked.

"Geneva isn't Zurich," said Tereza. "She'll be much less of a difficulty there than she was in Prague."

A person who longs to leave the place where he lives is an unhappy person. That is why Tomas accepted Tereza's wish to emigrate as the culprit accepts his sentence, and one day he and Tereza and Karenin found themselves in the largest city in Switzerland.

He bought a bed for their empty flat (they had no money yet for other furniture) and threw himself into his work with the frenzy of a man of forty beginning a new life.

He made several telephone calls to Geneva. A show of Sabina's work had opened there by chance a week after the Russian invasion, and in a wave of sympathy for her tiny country Geneva's patrons of the arts bought up all her paintings.

"Thanks to the Russians, I'm a rich woman," she said, laughing into the telephone. She invited Tomas to come and see her new studio, and assured him it did not differ greatly from the one he had known in Prague.

He would have been only too glad to visit her, but he was unable to find an excuse to explain his absence to Tereza. And so Sabina came to Zurich. She stayed at a hotel. Tomas went to see her after work. He phoned first from the reception desk, then went upstairs. When she opened the door, she stood before him on her beautiful long legs wearing nothing but panties and bra. And a black bowler hat. She stood there staring, mute and motionless. Tomas did the same. Suddenly he realized how touched he was. He removed the bowler from her head and placed it on the bedside table. Then they made love without saying a word.

Leaving the hotel for his flat (which by now had acquired a table, chairs, couch, and a carpet), he thought happily that he carried his way of living with him as a snail carries his house. Tereza and Sabina represented the two poles of his life, separate and irreconcilable yet equally appealing.

But the fact that he carried his life-support system with him everywhere like a part of his body meant that Tereza went on having her dreams.

They had been in Zurich for six or seven months when he came home late

one evening to find a letter on the table telling him she had left for Prague. She had left because she lacked the strength to live abroad. She knew she was supposed to bolster him up but did not know how to go about it. She had been silly enough to think that going abroad would change her. She thought that after what she had been through during the invasion she would stop being petty and grow up, grow wise and strong, but she had overestimated herself. She was weighing him down and would do so no longer. She had drawn the necessary conclusions before it was too late. And she apologized for taking Karenin with her.

He took some sleeping pills but still did not close his eyes until morning. Luckily it was Saturday and he could stay at home. For the hundred and fiftieth time, he went over the situation: The borders between his country and the rest of the world were no longer open. No telegrams or telephone calls could bring her back. The authorities would never let her travel abroad. Her departure was staggeringly definitive.

The realization that he was utterly powerless was like the blow of a sledgehammer, yet it was curiously calming as well. No one was forcing him into a decision. He felt no need to stare at the walls of the houses across the courtyard and ponder whether to live with her or not. Tereza had made the decision herself.

He went to a restaurant for lunch. He was depressed, but as he ate his original desperation waned, lost its strength, and soon all that was left was melancholy. Looking back on the years he had spent with Tereza, he came to feel that their story could have had no better ending. If someone had invented the story, this is how he would have had to end it. One day, Tereza came to him uninvited. One day, she left the same way. She came with a heavy suitcase. She left with a heavy suitcase.

He paid the bill, left the restaurant, and started walking through the streets, his melancholy growing more and more beautiful. He had spent seven years of his life with Tereza, and now he realized that those years were more attractive in retrospect than when he was living them.

His love for Tereza was beautiful, but it was also tiring: he had constantly had to hide things from her, sham, dissemble, make amends, buck her up, calm her down, give her evidence of his feelings, play the defendant to her jealousy, her suffering, and her dreams, feel guilty, make excuses and apologies. Now what was tiring had disappeared and only the beauty remained.

Saturday evening found him for the first time strolling alone through Zurich, breathing in the heady smell of his freedom. New adventures hid around each corner. The future was again a secret. He was on his way back to the bachelor life, the life he had once felt destined for, the life that would let him be what he actually was.

For seven years he had lived bound to her, his every step subject to her scrutiny. She might as well have chained iron balls to his ankles. Suddenly his step was much lighter. He soared. He had entered Parmenides' magic field: he was enjoying the sweet lightness of being.

(Did he feel like phoning Sabina in Geneva? Getting in touch with one or another of the women he had met during his months in Zurich? No, not in the least. Perhaps he sensed that any woman would make his memory of Tereza unbearably painful.)

This curious melancholic fascination lasted until Sunday evening. On Monday everything changed. Tereza forced her way into his thoughts: he imagined her sitting there writing her farewell letter; he felt her hands trembling; he saw her lugging her heavy suitcase in one hand and leading

Karenin on his leash with the other; he pictured her unlocking their Prague flat, and suffered the utter abandonment breathing her in the face as she opened the door.

During those two beautiful days of melancholy, his compassion had taken holiday. It had slept the sound Sunday sleep of a miner who, after a hard week's work, needs to gather strength for his Monday shift.

Instead of the patients he was treating, Tomas saw Tereza. He tried to remind himself, Don't think about her! Don't think about her! He said to himself, "I'm sick with compassion. It's good that she's gone and that I'll never see her again, though it's not Tereza I need to be free of—it's that sickness, compassion, which I thought I was immune to until she infected me with it."

On Saturday and Sunday, he felt the sweet lightness of being rise up to him out of the depths of the future. On Monday he was hit by a weight the likes of which he had never known. The tons of steel of the Russian tanks were nothing compared with it. For there is nothing heavier than compassion. Not even one's own pain weighs so heavy as the pain one feels with someone, for someone, a pain intensified by the imagination and prolonged by a hundred echoes.

He kept warning himself not to give in to compassion, and compassion listened with bowed head and a seemingly guilty conscience. Compassion knew it was being presumptuous, yet it quietly stood its ground, and on the fifth day after her departure Tomas informed the director of his hospital (the man who had phoned him daily in Prague after the Russian invasion) that he had to return at once. He was ashamed. He knew that the move would appear irresponsible, inexcusable to the man. He had thought to unbosom himself and tell him the story of Tereza and the letter she had left on the table for him. But in the end he did not. From the Swiss doctor's point of view, Tereza's move could only appear hysterical and abhorrent. And Tomas

refused to allow anyone the opportunity to think ill of her.

The director of the hospital was in fact offended.

Tomas shrugged his shoulders and said, “*Es muss sein. Es muss sein.*”

It was an allusion. The last movement of Beethoven’s last quartet is based on the following two motifs:

*Grave*



*Muss es sein?*  
Must it be?

*Allegro*



*Es muss sein!*  
It must be!



*Es muss sein!*  
It must be!

To make the meaning of the words absolutely clear, Beethoven introduced the movement with a phrase, “*der schwer gefasste Entschluss,*” which is commonly translated as “the difficult resolution.”

This allusion to Beethoven was actually Tomas’s first step back to Tereza, because she was the one who had induced him to buy records of the Beethoven quartets and sonatas.

The allusion was even more pertinent than he had thought, because the Swiss doctor was a great music lover. Smiling serenely, he asked, in the melody of Beethoven’s motif, “*Muss es sein?*”

“*Ja, es muss sein!*” Tomas said again.

16

Unlike Parmenides, Beethoven apparently viewed weight as something positive. Since the German word “*schwer*” means both “difficult” and “heavy,” Beethoven’s “difficult resolution” may also be construed as a “heavy resolution” or a “weighty resolution.” The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of Fate (“*Es muss sein!*”); necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound together: necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value.

This is a conviction born of Beethoven’s music, and although we cannot ignore the possibility (or even probability) that it owes its origin more to Beethoven’s commentators than to Beethoven himself, we all more or less share it: we believe that the greatness of man stems from the fact that he bears his fate as Atlas bore the heavens on his shoulders. Beethoven’s hero is a lifter of metaphysical weights.

Tomas approached the Swiss border. I imagine a gloomy, shock-headed Beethoven personally conducting the local firemen’s brass band in a farewell to emigration, an “*Es Muss Sein*” march.

Then Tomas crossed the Czech border and was welcomed by columns of Russian tanks. He had to stop his car and wait half an hour before they passed. A terrifying soldier in the black uniform of the armored forces stood at the crossroads directing traffic as if every road in the country belonged to him and him alone.

“*Es muss sein!*” Tomas repeated to himself, but then he began to doubt. Did it

really have to be?

Yes, it was unbearable for him to stay in Zurich imagining Tereza living on her own in Prague.

But how long would he have been tortured by compassion? All his life? A year? Or a month? Or only a week?

How could he have known? How could he have gauged it?

Any schoolboy can do experiments in the physics laboratory to test various scientific hypotheses. But man, because he has only one life to live, cannot conduct experiments to test whether to follow his passion (compassion) or not.

It was with these thoughts in mind that Tomas opened the door to his flat. Karenin made the homecoming easier by jumping up on him and licking his face. The desire to fall into Tereza's arms (he could still feel it while getting into his car in Zurich) had completely disintegrated. He fancied himself standing opposite her in the midst of a snowy plain, the two of them shivering from the cold.

17

From the very beginning of the occupation, Russian military airplanes had flown over Prague all night long. Tomas, no longer accustomed to the noise, was unable to fall asleep.

Twisting and turning beside the slumbering Tereza, he recalled something she had told him a long time before in the course of an insignificant conversation. They had been talking about his friend Z when she announced, "If I hadn't met you, I'd certainly have fallen in love with him."

Even then, her words had left Tomas in a strange state of melancholy, and

now he realized it was only a matter of chance that Tereza loved him and not his friend Z. Apart from her consummated love for Tomas, there were, in the realm of possibility, an infinite number of unconsummated loves for other men.

We all reject out of hand the idea that the love of our life may be something light, or weightless; we presume that our love is what must be, that without it our life would no longer be the same; we feel that Beethoven himself, gloomy and awe-inspiring, is playing the "*Es muss sein*" to our own great love.

Tomas often thought of Tereza's remark about his friend Z, and came to the conclusion that the love story of his life exemplified not "*Es muss sein*" but, rather, "*Es könnte auch anders sein*," or "It could just as well be otherwise."

Seven years earlier, a complicated neurological case happened to have been discovered at the hospital in Tereza's town. They called in for consultation the chief surgeon of Tomas's hospital in Prague, but the chief surgeon happened to be suffering from sciatica, and because he could not move he sent Tomas in his place. The town had several hotels, but Tomas happened to be given a room in the one where Tereza was employed. He happened to have had enough free time before his train left to stop at the hotel restaurant. Tereza happened to be on duty, and happened to be serving Tomas's table. It had taken six chance happenings to push Tomas toward Tereza, as if he would have had little inclination to go to her on his own.

He had gone back to Prague because of her. So fateful a decision resting on so fortuitous a love, a love that would not even have existed had it not been for the chief surgeon's sciatica seven years earlier! And that woman, that personification of absolute fortuity, now again lay asleep beside him, breathing deeply.

It was late at night. His stomach started acting up, as it tended to do in times of psychic stress.

Once or twice her breathing turned into mild snores. Tomas felt no compassion. All he felt was the pressure in his stomach and the despair of having returned.

## SOUL AND BODY

1

The first time Tereza went to Tomas's flat, her insides began to rumble. And no wonder: she had had nothing to eat since breakfast but a quick sandwich on the platform before boarding the train. She had concentrated on the daring journey ahead of her and forgotten about food. But when we ignore the body we are more easily victimized by it. She felt terrible standing there in front of Tomas listening to her belly speak out. She felt like crying. Fortunately, after the first ten seconds, Tomas put his arms around her and made her forget her ventral voices.

2

The situation brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience.

A long time ago, man would listen in amazement to the sound of regular beats in his chest, never suspecting what they were. He was unable to identify himself with so alien and unfamiliar an object as the body. The body was a cage, and inside that cage was something that looked, listened, feared, thought, and marvelled; that something, that remainder left over after the body had been accounted for, was the soul.

Today, of course, the body is no longer unfamiliar: we know that the beating in our chest is the heart and that the nose is the nozzle of a hose sticking out of the body to take oxygen to the lungs. The face is nothing but an

instrument panel registering all the body mechanisms: digestion, sight, hearing, respiration, thought.

Ever since man has learned to give each part of the body a name, the body has given him less trouble. He has also learned that the soul is nothing more than the gray matter of the brain in action. The old duality of body and soul has become shrouded in scientific terminology, and we can laugh at it as merely an obsolete prejudice.

But just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble, and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away.

3

Tereza tried to see herself through her body. That is why, from girlhood on, she would stand before the mirror so often. And because she was afraid her mother would catch her at it, every peek into the mirror had a tinge of secret vice.

It was not vanity that drew her to the mirror; it was amazement at seeing her own "I." She forgot she was looking at the instrument panel of her body mechanisms; she thought she saw her soul shining through the features of her face. She forgot that the nose was merely the nozzle of a hose that took oxygen to the lungs; she saw it as the true expression of her nature.

Staring at herself for long stretches of time, she was occasionally upset at the sight of her mother's features in her face. She would stare all the more doggedly at her image in an attempt to wish them away and keep only what was hers alone. Each time she succeeded was a time of intoxication: her soul would rise to the surface of her body like a crew charging up from the bowels of a ship, spreading out over the deck, waving at the sky, and singing in jubilation.

She took after her mother, and not only physically. I sometimes have the feeling that her entire life was merely a continuation of her mother's, much as the course of a ball on the billiard table is merely the continuation of the player's arm movement.

Where and when did it begin, the movement that later turned into Tereza's life?

Perhaps at the time when Tereza's grandfather, a Prague businessman, began extolling the beauty of his daughter, Tereza's mother, for all to hear. When she was three or four, he would tell her she was the image of Raphael's Madonna. Tereza's four-year-old mother never forgot it. When as an adolescent she sat at her desk in school, she would not listen to the teachers; she would think about which paintings she was like.

Then came the time for her to marry. She had nine suitors. They all knelt round her in a circle. Standing in the middle like a princess, she did not know which one to choose. One was the handsomest, another the wittiest, the third was the richest, the fourth the most athletic, the fifth from the best family, the sixth recited verse, the seventh travelled widely, the eighth played the violin, and the ninth was the most manly. But they all knelt in the same way, they all had the same calluses on their knees.

The reason she finally chose the ninth was not so much that he was the most manly as that when she whispered, "Be careful, very careful," to him during their lovemaking he was purposely careless, and she had to marry him after failing to find a doctor willing to perform an abortion. And so Tereza was born. Numerous relatives gathered from all corners of the country to lean over the pram and talk baby talk. Tereza's mother talked no baby talk. She did not talk at all. She thought about the eight other suitors, all of whom seemed better than the ninth.

Like her daughter, Tereza's mother frequently looked in the mirror. One day she discovered wrinkles near her eyes and decided her marriage made no sense. At about that time she met an unmanly man who had several charges of fraud on his record, not to mention two failed marriages. Now she hated those suitors with their callused knees. She had a passionate desire to be the one to kneel for a change. She went down on her knees before her new swindler friend and left her husband and Tereza to fend for themselves.

The most manly of men became the most downcast. He became so downcast that nothing meant anything to him anymore. He said openly what was on his mind, and the Communist police, shocked by his rash statements, arrested him, brought him to trial, and sentenced him to a long term in prison. They closed up his flat and sent Tereza to stay with her mother.

The most downcast of men died after a short spell behind bars, and Tereza and her mother went to live in a small town near the mountains with her mother's swindler. The swindler worked in an office, her mother in a shop. Her mother gave birth to three more children. Then she looked in the mirror again and discovered she was old and ugly.

When Tereza's mother realized she had lost everything, she initiated a search for the culprit. Anyone would do: her first husband, manly and unloved, who had failed to heed her whispered warning; her second husband, unmanly and much loved, who had dragged her away from Prague to a small town and kept her in a state of permanent jealousy by going through one woman after another. But she was powerless against either. The only person who belonged to her and had no means of escape, the hostage who could do penance for all the culprits, was Tereza.

Indeed, was she not the principal culprit determining her mother's fate? She, the absurd encounter of the sperm of the most manly of men and the egg of

the most beautiful of women? Yes, it was in that fateful second, which was named Tereza, that the botched long-distance race, her mother's life, had begun.

Tereza's mother never stopped reminding her that being a mother meant sacrificing everything. Her words had the ring of truth, backed as they were by the experience of a woman who had lost everything because of her child. Tereza would listen and believe that being a mother was the highest value in life and that being a mother was a great sacrifice. If a mother was sacrifice personified, then being a daughter was guilt, with no possibility of redress.

6

Of course, Tereza did not know the story of the night when her mother whispered "Be careful" into the ear of her father. Her guilty conscience was as vague as original sin. But she did what she could to rid herself of it. Her mother took her out of school at the age of fifteen, and Tereza went to work as a waitress, handing over all her earnings. She was willing to do anything to gain her mother's love. She ran the household, took care of her siblings, and spent all day Sunday cleaning house and doing the family wash. It was a pity, because she had been the brightest in her class. She yearned for something higher, but in the small town there was nothing higher for her. Whenever she did the clothes, she kept a book next to the tub. As she turned the pages, the wash water dripped all over them.

At home there was no such thing as shame. Her mother marched about in the flat in her underwear, sometimes braless and sometimes, on summer days, stark naked. Her stepfather did not walk about naked, but he did go into the bathroom every time Tereza was in the bath. Once, she locked herself in and her mother was furious. "Who do you think you are, anyway? Do you think he's going to bite off a piece of your beauty?"

(Hatred for her daughter obviously outweighed suspicion of her husband.

Her daughter's guilt was infinite and included the husband's infidelities. Tereza's desire to be emancipated and insist on her rights—like the right to lock herself in the bathroom—was more objectionable to Tereza's mother than the possibility of her husband's taking a prurient interest in Tereza.)

Once, her mother decided to go naked in the winter when the lights were on. Tereza quickly ran to pull the curtains so that no one could see her from across the street. She heard her mother's laughter behind her. The following day her mother had some friends over: a neighbor, a woman she worked with, a local schoolmistress, and two or three other women in the habit of getting together regularly. Tereza and the sixteen-year-old son of one of them came in at one point to say hello, and her mother immediately took advantage of their presence to tell how Tereza had tried to protect her mother's modesty. She laughed, and all the women laughed with her. "Tereza can't reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and breaks wind," she said. Tereza turned bright red, but her mother would not stop. "What's so terrible about that?" and in answer to her own question she broke wind loudly. All the women laughed again.

7

Tereza's mother blew her nose noisily, talked to people in public about her sex life, and enjoyed demonstrating her false teeth. She was remarkably skillful at loosening them with her tongue, and in the midst of a broad smile would cause the uppers to drop down over the lowers in such a way as to give her face a sinister expression.

Her behavior was but a single grand gesture, a casting off of youth and beauty. In the days when she had had nine suitors kneeling round her in a circle, she guarded her nakedness apprehensively, as though trying to express the value of her body in terms of the modesty she accorded it. Now she had not only lost that modesty, she had radically broken with it, ceremoniously using her new immodesty to draw a dividing line through her life and

proclaim that youth and beauty were overrated and worthless.

Tereza appears to me a continuation of the gesture by which her mother cast off her life as a young beauty, cast it far behind her.

(And if Tereza has a nervous way of moving, if her gestures lack a certain easy grace, we must not be surprised: her mother's grand, wild, and self-destructive gesture has left an indelible imprint on her.)

8

Tereza's mother demanded justice. She wanted to see the culprit penalized. That is why she insisted that her daughter remain with her in the world of immodesty, where youth and beauty mean nothing, where the world is nothing but a vast concentration camp of bodies, one like the next, with souls invisible.

Now we can better understand the meaning of Tereza's secret vice, her long looks and frequent glances in the mirror. It was a battle with her mother. It was a longing to be a body unlike other bodies, to find that the surface of her face reflected the crew of the soul charging up from belowdecks. It was not an easy task: her soul—her sad, timid, self-effacing soul—lay concealed in the depths of her bowels, and was ashamed to show itself.

So it was the day she first met Tomas. Weaving its way through the drunks in the hotel restaurant, her body sagged under the weight of the beers on the tray, and her soul lay somewhere at the level of the stomach or pancreas. Then Tomas called to her. That call meant a great deal, because it came from someone who knew neither her mother nor the drunks with their daily stereotypically scabrous remarks. His outsider status raised him above the rest.

Something else raised him above the others as well: he had an open book on his table. No one had ever opened a book in that restaurant before. In

Tereza's eyes, books were the emblems of a secret brotherhood. For she had but a single weapon against the world of crudity surrounding her: the books she took out of the municipal library, and, above all, the novels. She had read any number of them, from Fielding to Thomas Mann. They not only offered the possibility of an imaginary escape from a life she found unsatisfying; they also had meaning for her as physical objects: she loved to walk down the street with a book under her arm. It had the same significance for her as an elegant cane for the dandy a century ago. It differentiated her from others.

(Comparing the book to the elegant cane of the dandy is not absolutely precise. A dandy's cane did more than make him different; it made him modern and up to date. The book made Tereza different, but old-fashioned. Of course, she was too young to see how old-fashioned she looked to others. The young men walking by with transistor radios pressed to their ears seemed silly to her. It never occurred to her they were modern.)

And so the man who called to her was simultaneously a stranger and a member of the secret brotherhood. He called to her in a kind voice, and Tereza felt her soul rushing up to the surface through her blood vessels and pores to show itself to him.

9

After Tomas had returned to Prague from Zurich, he began to feel uneasy at the thought that his acquaintance with Tereza was the result of six improbable fortuities.

But is not an event in fact more significant and noteworthy the greater the number of fortuities necessary to bring it about?

Chance and chance alone has a message for us. Everything that occurs out of necessity, everything expected, repeated day in and day out, is mute. Only chance can speak to us. We read its message much as gypsies read the images

made by coffee grounds at the bottom of a cup.

Tomas appeared to Tereza in the hotel restaurant as chance in the absolute. There he sat, poring over an open book, when suddenly he raised his eyes to her, smiled, and said, “A cognac, please.”

At that moment, the restaurant radio happened to be playing music. On her way behind the counter to pour the cognac, Tereza turned the volume up. She recognized Beethoven. She had known him from the time a string quartet from Prague had visited her town. Tereza (who, as we know, yearned for “something higher”) went to the concert. The hall was nearly empty. The only other people in the audience were the local pharmacist and his wife. And although the quartet of musicians onstage faced only a trio of listeners down below, they were kind enough not to cancel the concert, and gave a private performance of the last three Beethoven quartets.

Then the pharmacist invited the musicians to dinner and asked the girl in the audience to come along with them. From then on, Beethoven became Tereza’s image of the world on the other side, the world she yearned for. Rounding the counter with Tomas’s cognac, she tried to read chance’s message: How was it possible that at the very moment she was taking an order of cognac for a stranger she found attractive, at that very moment she heard Beethoven?

Necessity knows no magic formulas—they are all left to chance. If a love is to be unforgettable, fortuities must immediately start fluttering down to it like birds to Francis of Assisi’s shoulders.

**H**e called her back to pay for the cognac. He closed his book (the emblem of the secret brotherhood), and she thought of asking him what he was reading.

“Can you have it charged to my room?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said “What number are you in?”

He showed her his key, which was attached to a piece of wood with a red 6 drawn on it.

“That’s odd,” she said. “Six.”

“What’s so odd about that?” he asked.

She had suddenly recalled that the house where they had lived in Prague before her parents were divorced was No. 6. But she answered something else (which we may credit to her wiles): “You’re in Room Six, and my shift ends at six.”

“Well, my train leaves at seven,” said the stranger.

She did not know how to respond, so she gave him the bill for his signature and took it over to the reception desk. When she finished work, the stranger was no longer at his table. Had he understood her discreet message? She left the restaurant in a state of excitement.

Opposite the hotel was a barren little park, as wretched as only the park of a dirty little town can be. But for Tereza it had always been an island of beauty: it had grass, four poplars, benches, a weeping willow, and a few forsythia bushes.

He was sitting on a yellow bench that afforded a clear view of the restaurant entrance. The very same bench she had sat on the day before with a book in her lap! She knew then (the birds of fortuity had begun alighting on her shoulders) that this stranger was her fate. He called out to her, invited her to sit next to him. (The crew of her soul rushed up to the deck of her body.) Then she walked him to the station, and he gave her his card as a farewell gesture. “If ever you should happen to come to Prague . . .”

Much more than the card he slipped her at the last minute, it was the call of all those fortuities (the book, Beethoven, the number six, the yellow park bench) which gave her the courage to leave home and to change her fate. It may well have been those few fortuities (quite modest, by the way—even drab; just what one would expect from so lacklustre a town) which set her love in motion and provided her with a source of energy she had still not yet exhausted at the end of her days.

Our day-to-day life is bombarded with fortuities—or, to be more precise, with the accidental meetings of people and events we call coincidences. “Coincidence” means the unexpected happening of two events at the same time—they meet: Tomas appears in the hotel restaurant at the same time the radio is playing Beethoven. We do not even notice the great majority of such coincidences. If the seat Tomas occupied had been occupied instead by the local butcher, Tereza never would have noticed that the radio was playing Beethoven (though the meeting of Beethoven and the butcher would also have been an interesting coincidence). But her nascent love inflamed her sense of beauty, and she would never forget that music. Whenever she heard it, she would be touched. Everything going on around her at that moment would be haloed by the music and take on its beauty.

Early in the novel that Tereza clutched under her arm when she went to visit Tomas, Anna meets Vronsky under curious circumstances: they are at the railway station when someone is run over by a train. At the end of the novel Anna throws herself under a train. This symmetrical composition—the same motif appears at the beginning and at the end—may seem quite “novelistic” to you, and I am willing to agree, but only on condition that you refrain from reading such notions as “fictive,” “fabricated,” and “untrue to life” into the word “novelistic.” Because human lives are composed in precisely such a fashion.

They are composed like music. Guided by his sense of beauty, an individual transforms a fortuitous occurrence (Beethoven’s music, death under a train) into a motif, which then assumes a permanent place in the composition of the individual’s life. Anna could have chosen another way to take her life. But the motif of death and the railway station, unforgettably bound up with the birth of love, enticed her in her hour of despair with its dark beauty. Without realizing it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty even in times of greatest distress.

It is wrong, then, to chide the novel for being fascinated by mysterious coincidences (like the meeting of Anna, Vronsky, the railway station, and death, or the meeting of Tomas, Tereza, Beethoven, and the cognac), but it is right to chide man for being blind to such coincidences in his daily life. For he thereby deprives his life of a dimension of beauty.

Impelled by the birds of fortuity fluttering down on her shoulders, she took a week’s leave and, without word to her mother, boarded the train to Prague. During the journey, Tereza made frequent trips to the toilet to look in the mirror and beg her soul not to abandon the deck of her body for a moment on this most crucial day of her life. Scrutinizing herself on one such trip, she had a sudden scare: she felt a scratch in her throat. Could she be coming down with something on this most crucial day of her life?

But there was no turning back. So she phoned him from the station, and the moment he opened the door her stomach started rumbling terribly. She was mortified. She felt as though she were carrying her mother in her stomach and her mother had guffawed to spoil her meeting with Tomas.

For the first few seconds she was afraid he would throw her out because of the crude noises she was making, but then he put his arms around her. She was grateful to him for ignoring her rumbles and kissed him passionately, her

eyes misting. Before the first minute was up, they were making love. She screamed while making love. She had a fever by then. She had come down with the flu. The nozzle of the hose supplying oxygen to the lungs was stuffed up and red.

When she travelled to Prague a second time, it was with a heavy suitcase. She had packed all her things, determined never again to return to the small town. He had invited her to come to his place the following evening. That night she had slept in a cheap hotel. In the morning she carried her heavy suitcase to the station, left it there, and roamed the streets of Prague the whole day with “Anna Karenina” under her arm. Not even after she rang the doorbell and he opened the door would she part with it. It was like a ticket into Tomas’s world. She realized that she had nothing but that miserable ticket, and the thought brought her nearly to tears. To keep from crying, she talked too much and too loudly, and she laughed. And again he took her in his arms almost at once and they made love. She had entered a mist in which nothing could be seen and only her scream could be heard.

13

**I**t was no sigh, no moan; it was a real scream. She screamed so loud that Tomas had to turn his head away from her face, afraid that her voice so close to his ear would rupture his eardrum. The scream was not an expression of sensuality. Sensuality is the total mobilization of the senses: an individual observes the partner intently, straining to catch every sound. But her scream aimed at crippling the senses, preventing all seeing and hearing. What was screaming, in fact, was the naïve idealism of her love trying to banish all contradictions, banish the duality of body and soul, banish perhaps even time.

Were her eyes closed? No, but they were not looking anywhere. She kept them fixed on the void of the ceiling. At times she twisted her head violently from side to side.

When the scream died down, she fell asleep at his side, clutching his hand. She held his hand all night.

Even at the age of eight, she would fall asleep by pressing one hand into the other and making believe she was holding the hand of the man whom she loved, the man of her life. So if in her sleep she pressed Tomas’s hand with such tenacity, we can understand why: she had been training for it since childhood.

14

**A** young woman forced to keep drunks supplied with beer, and siblings with clean underwear—instead of being allowed to pursue “something higher”—stores up great reserves of vitality, a vitality never dreamed of by university students yawning over their books. Tereza had read a good deal more than they, and learned a good deal more about life, but she would never realize it. The difference between the university graduate and the autodidact lies not so much in the extent of knowledge as in the extent of vitality and self-confidence. The élan with which Tereza flung herself into her new Prague existence was both frenzied and precarious. She seemed to be expecting someone to come up to her any day and say, “What are you doing here? Go back where you belong!” All her eagerness for life hung by a thread: Tomas’s voice. For it was Tomas’s voice that had once coaxed forth her timorous soul from its hiding place in her bowels.

Tereza had a job in a darkroom, but it was not enough for her. She wanted to take pictures, not develop them. Tomas’s friend Sabina lent her three or four collections of famous photographers, then invited her to a café and explained over the open books what made each of the pictures interesting. Tereza listened with silent concentration—the kind few professors ever glimpse on their students’ faces.

Thanks to Sabina, Tereza came to understand the ties between photography

and painting, and she made Tomas take her to every exhibition that opened in Prague. Before long, her own pictures were appearing in the illustrated weekly where she worked, and finally she left the darkroom for the staff of professional photographers.

On the evening of that day, she and Tomas went out to a bar with friends to celebrate her promotion. Everyone danced. Tomas began to mope. Back at home, after some prodding from Tereza, he admitted that he had been jealous watching her dance with a colleague of his.

“You mean you were really jealous?” she asked him ten times or more, incredulously, as though someone had just informed her she had been awarded a Nobel Prize.

Then she put her arm around his waist and began dancing across the room. The step she used was not the one she had shown off in the bar. It was more like a village polka—a wild romp that sent her legs flying in the air and her torso bouncing all over the room, with Tomas in tow.

Before long, unfortunately, she began to be jealous herself, and Tomas saw her jealousy not as a Nobel Prize but as a burden, a burden he would be saddled with until not long before his death.

While she marched around the pool naked with a large group of other naked women, Tomas stood over them in a pannier hanging from the pool's arched roof, shouting at them, making them sing and do knee bends. The moment one of them did a faulty knee bend, he would shoot her. Let me return to this dream. Its horror did not begin with Tomas's first pistol shot; it was horrifying from the outset. Marching naked in formation with a group of naked women was for Tereza the quintessential image of horror. When she lived at home, her mother forbade her to lock the bathroom door. What she meant by her injunction was: Your body is just like all other

bodies; you have no right to shame; you have no reason to hide something that exists in millions of identical copies. In her mother's world all bodies were the same and marched one behind another in formation. Since childhood Tereza had seen nudity as a sign of concentration-camp uniformity, a sign of humiliation.

There was yet another horror at the very beginning of the dream: all the women had to sing! Not only were their bodies identical, identically worthless, not only were their bodies mere resounding soulless mechanisms—the women rejoiced over it! Theirs was a joyful solidarity of the soulless. The women were pleased at having thrown off the ballast of the soul—that laughable conceit, that illusion of uniqueness—to become one like another. Tereza sang with them but did not rejoice. She sang because she was afraid that if she did not sing the women would kill her.

But what was the meaning of the fact that Tomas shot at them, toppling one after another into the pool, dead?

The women, overjoyed by their sameness, their lack of diversity, were in fact celebrating their imminent demise, which would render their sameness absolute. So Tomas's shots were merely the joyful climax to their morbid march. After every report of his pistol, they burst into joyous laughter, and as each corpse sank beneath the surface they sang even louder.

But why was Tomas the one doing the shooting? And why was he out to shoot Tereza with the rest of them?

Because he was the one who sent Tereza to join them. That was what the dream was meant to tell Tomas, what Tereza was unable to tell him herself. She had come to him to escape her mother's world, a world where all bodies were equal. She had come to him to make her body unique, irreplaceable. But he, too, had drawn an equal sign between her and the rest of them: he kissed them all alike, stroked them all alike, made no, absolutely no,

distinction between Tereza's body and the other bodies. He had sent her back into the world she tried to escape, sent her to march naked with the other naked women.

16

She would dream three series of dreams in succession. The first was of cats going berserk and referred to the sufferings she had gone through in her lifetime; the second was images of her execution and came in countless variations; the third was of her life after death, when humiliation turned into a never-ending state.

The dreams left nothing to be deciphered. The accusation they levelled at Tomas was so clear that his only reaction was to hang his head and stroke her hand without a word.

The dreams were eloquent, but they were also beautiful. That aspect seems to have escaped Freud in his theory of dreams. Dreaming is not merely an act of communication (or coded communication, if you like); it is also an aesthetic activity, a game of the imagination, a game that is a value in itself. Our dreams prove that to imagine—to dream about things that have not happened—is among mankind's deepest needs. Herein lies the danger: if dreams were not beautiful, they would quickly be forgotten. But Tereza kept coming back to her dreams, running through them in her mind, turning them into legends. Tomas lived under the hypnotic spell cast by the excruciating beauty of Tereza's dreams.

“Dear Tereza, sweet Tereza, what am I losing you to?” he once said to her as they sat face to face in a wine tavern. “Every night, you dream of death as if you really wished to quit this world. . . .”

It was day; reason and will power were back in place. A drop of red wine ran slowly down her glass as she answered. “There's nothing I can do about it,

Tomas. Oh, I understand. I know you love me. I know your infidelities are no great tragedy. . . .”

She looked at him with love in her eyes, but she feared the night ahead, feared her dreams. Her life was split. Day and night were competing for her.

17

Anyone whose goal is “something higher” must expect someday to suffer vertigo. What is vertigo? Fear of falling? Then why do we feel it even when the observation tower comes equipped with a sturdy handrail? No, vertigo is something other than the fear of falling. It is the voice of the emptiness below us which tempts and lures us, it is the desire to fall, against which, terrified, we defend ourselves.

The naked women marching around the swimming pool, the corpses in the hearse rejoicing that she, too, was dead—these were the “down below” that she had feared and fled once before but that mysteriously beckoned her. These were her vertigo: she heard a sweet (almost joyous) summons to renounce her fate and soul. The solidarity of the soulless calling her. And in times of weakness she was ready to heed the call and return to her mother. She was ready to dismiss the crew of her soul from the deck of her body; ready to descend to a place among her mother's friends and laugh when one of them broke wind noisily; ready to march around the pool naked with them and sing.

18

True, Tereza fought with her mother until the day she left home, but let us not forget that she never stopped loving her. She would have done anything for her if her mother had asked in a loving voice. The only reason she found the strength to leave was that she never heard that voice.

When Tereza's mother realized that her aggressiveness no longer had any power over her daughter, she started writing her querulous letters, complaining about her husband, her boss, her health, her children, and assuring Tereza she was the only person she had in the world. Tereza thought that at last, after twenty years, she was hearing the voice of her mother's love, and felt like going back. All the more so because she felt so weak, so debilitated by Tomas's infidelities. They exposed her powerlessness, which in turn led to vertigo, the insuperable longing to fall.

One day her mother phoned to say that she had cancer and only a few months to live. The news transformed into rebellion Tereza's despair at Tomas's infidelities. She had betrayed her mother, she told herself reproachfully, and for a man who did not love her. She was willing to forget everything her mother had done to torture her. She was in a position to understand her now; they were in the same situation: her mother loved her stepfather just as Tereza loved Tomas, and her stepfather tortured her mother with his infidelities just as Tomas galled Tereza with his. The cause of her mother's malice was that she had suffered so.

Tereza told Tomas that her mother was ill and that she would be taking a week off to go and see her. Her voice was full of spite.

Sensing that the real reason calling her back to her mother was vertigo, Tomas opposed the trip. He rang up the hospital in the small town. Meticulous records of the incidence of cancer were kept throughout the country, so he had no trouble finding out that Tereza's mother had never been suspected of having the disease nor had she even seen a doctor for over a year.

Tereza obeyed Tomas and did not go to visit her mother. Several hours after the decision, she fell in the street and injured her knee. She began to teeter as she walked, fell almost daily, bumped into things or, at the very least, dropped objects.

She was in the grip of an insuperable longing to fall. She lived in a constant state of vertigo.

"Pick me up" is the message of a person who keeps falling. Tomas kept picking her up, patiently.

19

"I want to make love to you in my studio. It will be like a stage surrounded by people. The audience won't be allowed up close, but they won't be able to take their eyes off us."

As time passed, the image lost some of its original cruelty and began to excite Tereza. She would whisper the details to him while they made love.

Then it occurred to her that there might be a way to avoid the condemnation she saw in Tomas's infidelities: all he had to do was to take her along, take her with him when he went to see his mistresses! Maybe then her body would again become the first and only among all others. Her body would become his second, his assistant, his alter ego.

"I'll undress them for you, give them a bath, bring them in to you . . ." she would whisper to him as they pressed together. She yearned for the two of them to merge into a hermaphrodite. Then the other women's bodies would be their playthings.

20

Oh, to be the alter ego of his polygamous life! Tomas refused to understand, but she could not get it out of her head, and tried to cultivate her friendship with Sabina. Tereza began by offering to do a series of photographs of Sabina.

Sabina invited Tereza to her studio, and at last she saw the spacious room and its centerpiece: the large, square platform-like bed.

“I feel awful that you’ve never been here before,” said Sabina as she showed her the pictures leaning against the wall. She even pulled out an old canvas, of a steelworks under construction, which she had done during her school days, a period when the strictest realism had been required of all students (art that was not realistic was said to sap the foundations of socialism). In the spirit of the times, she had tried to be stricter than her teachers and had painted in a style concealing the brushstrokes and closely resembling color photography.

“Here is a painting I happened to drip red paint on. At first I was terribly upset, but then I started enjoying it. The trickle looked like a crack, it turned the building site into a battered old backdrop, a backdrop with a building site painted on it. I began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. And that’s how I began my first cycle of paintings. I called it ‘Behind the Scenes.’ Of course, I couldn’t show them to anybody. I’d have been kicked out of the Academy. On the surface there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop’s cracked canvas, there lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract.”

After pausing for a moment, she added, “On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth.”

Tereza listened to her with the remarkable concentration that few professors ever see on the face of a student and began to perceive that all Sabina’s paintings, past and present, did indeed treat the same idea—that they all featured the confluence of two themes, two worlds, that they were all double exposures, so to speak. A landscape showing an old-fashioned table lamp shining through it. An idyllic still-life of apples, nuts, and a tiny candlelit Christmas tree showing a hand ripping through the canvas.

She felt a rush of admiration for Sabina, and because Sabina treated her as a

friend it was an admiration free of fear and suspicion and quickly turned into friendship.

Tereza nearly forgot she had come to take photographs. Sabina had to remind her. Tereza finally looked away from the paintings, only to see the bed set in the middle of the room like a platform.

21

Next to the bed stood a small table, and on the table a model of a human head, the kind hairdressers put wigs on. Sabina’s wig stand sported a bowler hat rather than a wig. “It used to belong to my grandfather,” she said with a smile.

It was the kind of hat—black, hard, round—that Tereza had seen only on the screen, the kind of hat Chaplin wore. She smiled back, picked it up, and, after studying it for a time, said, “Would you like me to take your picture in it?”

Sabina laughed for a long time at the idea. Tereza put down the bowler hat, picked up her camera, and started taking pictures.

When she had been at it for almost an hour, she suddenly said, “What would you say to some nude shots?”

“Nude shots?” Sabina laughed.

“Yes,” said Tereza, repeating her proposal more boldly. “Nude shots.”

“That calls for a drink,” said Sabina, and opened a bottle of wine.

Tereza felt her body going weak; she was suddenly tongue-tied. Sabina, meanwhile, strode back and forth, wine in hand, going on about her grandfather, who had been the mayor of a small town; Sabina had never known him; all he’d left behind was this bowler hat and a picture showing a

raised platform with several small-town dignitaries on it; one of them was Grandfather; it wasn't at all clear what they were doing up there on the platform; maybe they were officiating at some ceremony, unveiling a monument to a fellow-dignitary who had also once worn a bowler hat at public ceremonies.

Sabina went on and on about the bowler hat and her grandfather until, emptying her third glass, she said, "I'll be right back," and disappeared into the bathroom.

She came out in her bathrobe. Tereza picked up her camera and put it to her eye. Sabina threw open the robe.

22

The camera served Tereza as both a mechanical eye through which to observe Tomas's mistress and a veil by which to conceal her face from her.

It took Sabina some time before she could bring herself to slip out of the robe entirely. The situation she found herself in was proving a bit more difficult than she had expected. After several minutes of posing she went up to Tereza and said, "Now it's my turn to take your picture. Strip!"

Sabina had heard the command "Strip!" so many times from Tomas it was engraved in her memory. Thus, Tomas's mistress had just given Tomas's command to Tomas's wife. The two women were joined by the same magic word. That was Tomas's way of unexpectedly turning an innocent conversation with a woman into an erotic situation. Instead of stroking, flattering, pleading, he would issue a command, issue it abruptly, unexpectedly, softly yet firmly and authoritatively, and at a distance; at such moments, he never touched the woman he was addressing. He often used it on Tereza as well, and even though he said it softly, even though he

whispered it, it was a command, and obeying never failed to arouse her. Hearing the word now made her desire to obey even stronger, because doing a stranger's bidding is a special madness, a madness all the more heady in this case because the command came not from man but from a woman.

Sabina took the camera from her, and Tereza took off her clothes. There she stood before Sabina, naked and disarmed. Literally disarmed: deprived of the apparatus she had been using to cover her face and aim at Sabina like a weapon. She was completely at the mercy of Tomas's mistress. This beautiful submission intoxicated Tereza. She wished that the moments she stood naked opposite Sabina would never end.

I think that Sabina, too, felt the strange enchantment of the situation: her lover's wife standing oddly compliant and timorous before her. But after clicking the shutter two or three times, almost frightened by the enchantment and eager to dispel it, she burst into loud laughter.

Tereza followed suit, and the two of them got dressed.

23

All previous crimes of the Russian empire had been committed under the cover of a discreet shadow. The deportation of half a million Lithuanians, the murder of hundreds of thousands of Poles, the liquidation of the Crimean Tatars remain in our memory, but no photographic documentation exists; sooner or later they will therefore be proclaimed as fabrications. Not so the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia, of which both stills and motion pictures are stored in archives throughout the world.

Czech photographers were acutely aware that they were the ones who could best do the only thing left to do: preserve the face of violence for the distant future. Seven days in a row, Tereza roamed the streets photographing Russian soldiers and officers in compromising situations. The Russians did

not know what to do. They had been carefully briefed about how to behave if someone fired at them or threw stones, but they had received no directives about what to do when someone aimed a lens.

She shot roll after roll and gave about half the film, undeveloped, to foreign journalists (the borders were still open, and reporters passing through were grateful for any kind of document). Many of her photographs turned up in the Western press. They were pictures of tanks, of threatening fists, of houses destroyed, of corpses covered with bloodstained red-white-and-blue Czech flags, of young men on motorcycles racing full speed round the tanks and waving Czech flags on long staffs, of young girls in unbelievably short skirts provoking the miserable sexually famished Russian soldiers by kissing random passersby before their eyes. As I have said, the Russian invasion was not only a tragedy; it was a carnival of hate filled with a curious (and no longer explicable) euphoria.

24

She took some fifty prints with her to Switzerland, prints she had made herself with all the care and skill she could muster. She offered them to a high-circulation illustrated magazine. The editor gave her a kind reception (all Czechs still wore the halo of their misfortune, and the good Swiss were touched); he offered her a seat, looked through the prints, praised them, and explained that because certain time had elapsed since the events they hadn't the slightest chance ("not that they aren't very beautiful!") of being published.

"But it's not over yet in Prague!" Tereza protested, and tried to explain to him in her bad German that at this very moment, even with the country occupied, with everything against them, workers' councils were forming in the factories, the students were going out on strike demanding the departure of the Russians, and the whole country was saying aloud what it thought. "That's what's so unbelievable! And nobody here cares anymore."

The editor was glad when an energetic woman came into the office and interrupted the conversation. The woman handed him a folder and said, "Here's the nudist-beach article."

The editor was delicate enough to fear that a Czech who photographed tanks would find pictures of naked people on a beach frivolous. He laid the folder at the far end of the desk and quickly said to the woman, "How would you like to meet a Czech colleague of yours? She's brought me some marvellous pictures."

The woman shook Tereza's hand and picked up her photographs. "Have a look at mine in the meantime," she said.

Tereza leaned over to the folder and took out the pictures.

Almost apologetically the editor said to Tereza, "Of course, they're completely different from your pictures."

"Not at all," said Tereza. "They're the same."

Neither the editor nor the photographer understood her, and even I find it difficult to explain what she had in mind when she compared a nude beach to the Russian invasion. Looking through the pictures, she stopped for a time at one that showed a family of four standing in a circle: a naked mother leaning over her children, her giant tits hanging low like a goat's or cow's, and the husband leaning the same way on the other side, his penis and scrotum looking very much like an udder in miniature.

"You don't like them, do you?" asked the editor.

"They're good photographs."

"She's shocked by the subject matter," said the woman. "I can tell just by looking at you that you've never set foot on a nude beach."

“No,” said Tereza.

The editor smiled. “You see how easy it is to guess where you’re from? The Communist countries are awfully puritanical.”

“There’s nothing wrong with the naked body,” the woman said with maternal affection. “It’s normal. And everything that’s normal is beautiful!”

The image of her mother marching around the flat naked flashed through Tereza’s mind. She could still hear the laughter behind her back when she ran and pulled the curtains to stop the neighbors from seeing her naked mother.

25

The photographer invited Tereza to the magazine’s cafeteria for a cup of coffee. “Those pictures of yours, they’re very interesting. I couldn’t help noticing what a terrific sense of the female body you have. You know what I mean. The girls with the provocative poses!”

“The ones kissing passersby in front of the Russian tanks?”

“Yes. You’d be a topnotch fashion photographer, you know? You’d have to get yourself a model first—someone, like you, who’s looking for a break. Then you could make a portfolio of photographs and show them to the agencies. It would take some time before you made a name for yourself, naturally, but I can do one thing for you here and now: introduce you to the editor in charge of our garden section. He might need some shots of cactuses and roses and things.”

“Thank you very much,” Tereza said sincerely, because it was clear that the woman sitting opposite her was full of good will.

But then she said to herself, “Why take pictures of cactuses?” She had no

desire to go through in Zurich what she’d been through in Prague: battles over job, career, over every picture published. She had never been ambitious out of vanity. All she had ever wanted was to escape from her mother’s world. Yes, she saw it with absolute clarity: no matter how enthusiastic she was about taking pictures, she could just as easily have turned her enthusiasm to any other endeavor. Photography was nothing but a way of getting at “something higher” and living beside Tomas.

She said, “My husband is a doctor. He can support me. I don’t need to take pictures.”

The photographer replied, “I don’t see how you can give it up after the beautiful work you’ve done.”

Yes, the pictures of the invasion were something else again. She had not done them for Tomas. She had done them out of passion. But not passion for photography. She’d done them out of passionate hatred. The situation would never recur. And these photographs, which she had made out of passion, were the ones nobody wanted because they were out of date. Only cactuses had perennial appeal. And cactuses were of no interest to her.

She said, “You’re too kind, really, but I’d rather stay at home. I don’t need a job.”

The woman said, “But will you be fulfilled sitting at home?”

Tereza said, “More fulfilled than by taking pictures of cactuses.”

The woman said, “Even if you take pictures of cactuses, you’re leading *your* life. If you only live for your husband, you have no life of your own.”

All of a sudden Tereza felt annoyed. “My husband is my life, not cactuses.”

The woman responded in kind. “You mean you think of yourself as happy?”

Tereza, still annoyed, said, “Of course I’m happy!”

The woman said, “The only kind of woman who can say that is very—” She stopped short.

Tereza finished it for her. “Limited. That’s what you mean, isn’t it?”

The woman regained control of herself and said, “Not limited. Anachronistic.”

“You’re right,” said Tereza wistfully. “That’s just what my husband says about me.”

26

**B**ut Tomas spent days on end at the hospital, and she was at home alone. At least she had Karenin and could take him on long walks! Home again, she would pore over her German and French grammars. But she felt sad and had trouble concentrating. She kept coming back to the speech Dubček had given over the radio after his return from Moscow. Although she had completely forgotten what he said, she could still hear his quavering voice. She thought about how foreign soldiers had arrested him, the head of an independent state, in his own country, held him for four days somewhere in the Ukrainian mountains, informed him he was to be executed—as, a decade before, they had executed his Hungarian counterpart, Imre Nagy—then packed him off to Moscow, ordered him to have a bath and shave, to change his clothes and put on a tie, apprised him of the decision to commute his execution, instructed him to consider himself head of state once more, sat him at a table opposite Brezhnev, and forced him to act.

He returned, humiliated, to address his humiliated nation. He was so humiliated he could not even speak. Tereza would never forget those awful pauses in the middle of his sentences. Was he that exhausted? Ill? Had they drugged him? Or was it only despair? If nothing was to remain of Dubček,

then at least those awful long pauses when he seemed unable to breathe, when he gasped for air before a whole nation glued to its radios—at least those pauses would remain. Those pauses contained all the horror that had befallen their country.

It was the seventh day of the invasion. She heard the speech in the editorial offices of a newspaper that had been transformed overnight into an organ of the resistance. Everyone present hated Dubček at that moment. They reproached him for compromising; they felt humiliated by his humiliation; his weakness offended them.

Thinking in Zurich of those days, she no longer felt any aversion to the man. The word “weak” no longer sounded like a verdict. Any man confronted with superior strength is weak, even if he has an athletic body like Dubček’s. The very weakness that at the time had seemed unbearable and repulsive, the weakness that had driven Tereza and Tomas from the country, suddenly attracted her. She realized that she belonged among the weak, in the camp of the weak, in the country of the weak, and that she had to be faithful to them exactly because they were weak and gasped for breath in the middle of sentences.

She felt attracted by their weakness as by vertigo. She felt attracted by it because she felt weak herself. Again she began to feel jealous and again her hands shook. When Tomas noticed it, he did what he usually did: he took her hands in his and tried to calm them by pressing hard. She tore them away from him.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

“Nothing.”

“What do you want me to do for you?”

“I want you to be old. Ten years older. Twenty years older!”

What she meant was: I want you to be weak. As weak as I am.

27

Karenin was not overjoyed by the move to Switzerland. Karenin hated change. Dog time cannot be plotted along a straight line; it does not move on and on, from one thing to the next. It moves in a circle like the hands of a clock, which—they, too, unwilling to dash madly ahead—turn round and round the face, day in and day out, following the same path. In Prague, when Tomas and Tereza bought a new chair or moved a flowerpot, Karenin would look on in displeasure. It disturbed his sense of time. It was as though they were trying to dupe the hands of the clock by changing the numbers on its face.

Nonetheless, he soon managed to reestablish the old order and old rituals in the Zurich flat. As in Prague, he would jump up on their bed and welcome them to the day, accompany Tereza on her morning shopping jaunt, and make certain he got the other walks coming to him as well.

He was the timepiece of their lives. In periods of despair, Tereza would remind herself she had to hold on because of him, because Karenin was weaker than she, weaker perhaps even than Dubček and their abandoned homeland.

One day when they came back from a walk, the phone was ringing. She picked up the receiver and asked who it was.

It was a woman's voice, speaking German and asking for Tomas. It was an impatient voice, and Tereza felt there was a hint of derision in it. When she said that Tomas wasn't there and she didn't know when he'd be back, the woman on the other end of the line started laughing and, without saying goodbye, hung up.

Tereza knew it did not mean a thing. It could have been a nurse from the

hospital, a patient, a secretary, anyone. But still she was upset and unable to concentrate on anything. It was then that she realized she had lost the last bit of strength she had had at home: she was absolutely incapable of tolerating this absolutely insignificant incident

Being in a foreign country means walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, and friends and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood. In Prague she was dependent on Tomas only when it came to the heart; here she was dependent on him for everything. What would happen to her here if he abandoned her? Would she have to live her whole life in fear of losing him?

She told herself: Their acquaintance had been based on an error from the start. The copy of "Anna Karenina" under her arm amounted to false papers; it had given Tomas the wrong idea. In spite of their love, they had made each other's life a hell. The fact that they loved each other was merely proof that the fault lay not in themselves, in their behavior or inconstancy of feeling, but, rather, in their incompatibility: he was strong and she was weak. She was like Dubček, who made a thirty-second pause in the middle of a sentence; she was like her country, which stuttered, gasped for breath, could not speak.

But when the strong were too weak to hurt the weak, the weak had to be strong enough to leave.

And, having told herself all this, she pressed her face against Karenin's furry head and said, "Sorry, Karenin. It looks as though you're going to have to move again."

28

Sitting crushed into a corner of the train compartment with her heavy suitcase above her head and Karenin squeezed against her legs, she kept

thinking about the cook at the hotel restaurant where she had worked when she lived with her mother. The cook would take every opportunity to give her a slap on the behind, and never tired of asking her in front of everyone when she would give in and go to bed with him. It was odd that he was the one who came to mind. He had always been the prime example of everything she loathed. And now all she could think of was looking him up and telling him, "You used to say you wanted to sleep with me. Well, here I am."

She longed to do something that would prevent her from turning back to Tomas. She longed to destroy brutally the past seven years of her life. It was vertigo. A heady, insuperable longing to fall.

We might also call vertigo the intoxication of the weak. Aware of his weakness, a man decides to give in rather than stand up to it. He is drunk with weakness, wishes to grow even weaker, wishes to fall down in the middle of the main square in front of everybody, wishes to be down, lower than down.

She tried to talk herself into settling outside of Prague and giving up her profession as a photographer. She would go back to the small town from which Tomas's voice had once lured her.

But once in Prague she found she had to spend some time taking care of various practical matters and began putting off her departure.

On the fifth day, Tomas suddenly turned up. Karenin jumped all over him, so it was a while before they had to make any overtures to each other.

They felt they were standing on a snow-covered plain, shivering with cold.

Then they moved together like lovers who had never kissed before.

"Has everything been all right?" he asked.

"Yes," she answered.

"Have you been to the magazine?"

"I've given them a call."

"Well?"

"Nothing yet. I've been waiting."

"For what?"

She made no response. She could not tell him that she had been waiting for him.

29

Now we return to a moment we already know about. Tomas was desperately unhappy and had a bad stomach ache. He did not fall asleep until very late at night.

Soon thereafter Tereza awoke. (There were Russian airplanes circling over Prague, and it was impossible to sleep for the noise.) Her first thought was that he had come back because of her; because of her, he had changed his destiny. Now he would no longer be responsible for her; now she was responsible for him.

The responsibility, she felt, seemed to require more strength than she could muster.

But all at once she recalled that just before he had appeared at the door of their flat the day before, the church bells had chimed six o'clock. On the day they first met, her shift had ended at six. She saw him sitting there in front of her on the yellow bench and heard the bells in the belfry chime six. No, it was not superstition, it was a sense of beauty that cured her of her depression

and imbued her with a new will to live. The birds of fortuity had alighted once more on her shoulders. There were tears in her eyes, and she was unutterably happy to hear him breathing at her side.

## WORDS MISUNDERSTOOD

1

Geneva is a city of fountains large and small, of parks where music once rang out from the bandstands. Even the university is hidden among trees. Franz had just finished his afternoon lecture. As he left the building, the sprinklers were spouting jets of water over the lawn and he was in a capital mood. He was on his way to see his mistress. She lived only a few streets away.

He often stopped in for a visit, but only as a friend, never as a lover. If he made love to her in her Geneva studio, he would be going from one woman to the other, from wife to mistress and back, in a single day, and because in Geneva husband and wife sleep together in the French style, in the same bed, he would be going from the bed of one woman to the bed of another in the space of several hours. And that, he felt, would humiliate both mistress and wife and, in the end, him as well.

The feeling he had for this woman, with whom he had fallen in love several months before, was so precious to him that he tried to create an independent space for her in his life, a restricted zone of purity. He was often invited to lecture at foreign universities, and now he accepted all offers. But because there were not enough of them to satisfy his newfound wanderlust, he took to inventing congresses and symposia as a means of justifying the absences to his wife. His mistress, who had a flexible schedule, accompanied him on all speaking engagements, real and imagined. So it was that within a short span of time he introduced her to many European cities and one in America.

“How would you like to go to Palermo ten days from now?” asked Franz.

“I prefer Geneva,” she answered. She was standing in front of her easel, examining a work in progress.

“How can you live without seeing Palermo?” asked Franz in an attempt at levity.

“I have seen Palermo,” she said.

“You have?” he said, with a hint of jealousy.

“A friend of mine once sent me a postcard from there. It’s taped up over the toilet. Haven’t you noticed?”

Then she told him a story. “Once upon a time, in the early part of the century, there lived a poet. He was so old he had to be accompanied on walks by his amanuensis. ‘Master,’ his amanuensis said one day, ‘look what’s up in the sky! It’s the first airplane ever to fly over the city!’ ‘I have my own picture of it,’ said the poet to his amanuensis, without raising his eyes from the ground. Well, I have my own picture of Palermo. It has the same hotels and cars as all cities. And my studio always has new and different pictures.”

Franz was sad. He had grown so accustomed to linking their love life to foreign travel that his “Let’s go to Palermo!” was an unambiguous erotic message and her “I prefer Geneva” could have only one meaning: his mistress no longer desired him.

How could he be so unsure of himself with her? She had not given him the slightest cause for worry! In fact, she was the one who had taken the erotic initiative shortly after they met. He was a good-looking man; he was at the peak of his scholarly career; he was even feared by his colleagues for the arrogance and tenacity he displayed during professional meetings and colloquia. Then why did he worry daily that his mistress was about to leave him?

The only explanation I can suggest is that for Franz love was not an extension of public life but its antithesis. It meant a longing to put himself at the mercy of his partner. He who gives himself up like a prisoner of war must give up his weapons as well. And, deprived of any defense against a possible blow, he cannot help wondering when the blow will fall. That is why I can say that for Franz love meant the constant expectation of a blow.

While Franz attended to his anguish, his mistress put down her brush and went into the next room. She returned with a bottle of wine. She opened it without a word and poured out two glasses.

Immediately he felt relieved and slightly ridiculous. The “I prefer Geneva” did not mean she refused to make love; quite the contrary, it meant she was tired of limiting their lovemaking to foreign cities.

She raised her glass and emptied it in one swig. Franz did the same. He was naturally overjoyed that her refusal to go to Palermo was actually a call to love, but he was a bit sorry as well: his mistress seemed determined to violate the zone of purity he had introduced into their relationship; she had failed to understand his apprehensive attempts to save their love from banality and separate it radically from his conjugal home.

The ban on making love with his painter mistress in Geneva was actually a self-inflicted punishment for having married another woman. He felt it as a kind of guilt or defect. Even though his conjugal sex life was hardly worth mentioning, he and his wife still slept in the same bed, awoke in the middle of the night to each other’s heavy breathing, and inhaled the smells of each other’s bodies. True, he would rather have slept by himself, but the marriage bed is still the symbol of the marriage bond, and symbols, as we know, are inviolable.

Each time he lay down next to his wife in that bed, he thought of his mistress imagining him lying down next to his wife in that bed, and each time he thought of her he felt ashamed. That was why he wished to separate

the bed he slept in with his wife as far as possible in space from the bed he made love in with his mistress.

His mistress poured herself another glass of wine, drank it down, and then, still silent and with a curious nonchalance, as if completely unaware of Franz’s presence, slowly removed her blouse. She was behaving like an acting student whose improvisation assignment is to make the class believe she is alone in a room and no one can see her.

Standing there in her skirt and bra, she suddenly (as if recalling only then that she was not alone in the room) fixed Franz with a long stare.

That stare bewildered him; he could not understand it. All lovers unconsciously establish their own rules of the game, which from the outset admit no transgression. The stare she had just fixed on him fell outside their rules; it had nothing in common with the looks and gestures that usually preceded their lovemaking. It was neither provocative nor flirtatious—simply interrogative. The problem was, Franz had not the slightest notion what it was asking.

Next she stepped out of her skirt and, taking Franz by the hand, turned him in the direction of a large mirror propped against the wall. Without letting go of his hand, she looked into the mirror with the same long questioning stare, training it first on herself, then on him.

Near the mirror stood a wig stand with an old black bowler hat on it. She bent over, picked up the hat, and put it on her head. The image in the mirror was instantaneously transformed: suddenly it was a woman in her undergarments, a beautiful, distant, indifferent woman with a terribly out-of-place bowler hat on her head, holding the hand of a man in a gray suit and tie.

Again he had to smile at how poorly he understood his mistress. When she took her clothes off, it wasn’t so much erotic provocation as an odd little

caper, a happening à deux. His smile beamed understanding and consent.

He waited for his mistress to respond in kind, but she did not. Without letting go of his hand, she stood staring into the mirror, first at herself, then at him.

The time for the happening had come and gone. Franz was beginning to feel that the caper (which, in and of itself, he was happy to think of as charming) had dragged on too long. So he gently took the brim of the bowler hat between two fingers, lifted it off Sabina's head with a smile, and laid it back on the wig stand. It was as though he were erasing the mustache a naughty child had drawn on a picture of the Virgin Mary.

For several more seconds she remained motionless, staring at herself in the mirror. Then Franz covered her with tender kisses and asked her once more to go with him in ten days to Palermo. This time she said yes unquestioningly, and he left.

He was in an excellent mood again. Geneva, which he had cursed all his life as the metropolis of boredom, now seemed beautiful and full of adventure. Outside in the street he looked back up at the studio's broad window. It was late spring and hot. All the windows were shaded with striped awnings. Franz walked to the park. At its far end the golden cupolas of the Orthodox church rose up like gilded cannonballs kept from imminent collapse and suspended in the air by some invisible power. Everything was beautiful. Then he went down to the embankment and took the public-transport boat to the north bank of the lake, where he lived.

Sabina was now by herself. She went back to the mirror, still in her underwear. She put the bowler hat back on her head and had a long look at herself. She was amazed at the number of years she had spent pursuing one lost moment.

Once, during a visit to her studio many years before, the bowler hat had caught Tomas's fancy. He set it on his head and looked at himself in the large mirror that, as in the Geneva studio, leaned against the wall. He wanted to see what he would have looked like as a nineteenth-century mayor. When Sabina started undressing, he put the hat on her head. There they stood in front of the mirror (they always stood in front of the mirror while she undressed), watching themselves. She stripped to her underwear but still had the hat on her head. And all at once she realized they were both excited by what they saw in the mirror.

What could have excited them so? A moment before, the hat on her head had seemed nothing but a joke. Was excitement really a mere step away from laughter?

Yes. When they looked at each other in the mirror that time, all she saw for the first few seconds was a comic situation. But suddenly the comic became veiled by excitement: the bowler hat no longer signified a joke; it signified violence—violence against Sabina, against her dignity as a woman. She saw her bare legs and thin panties with her pubic triangle showing through. The lingerie enhanced the charm of her femininity, while the hard masculine hat denied it, violated and ridiculed it. The fact that Tomas stood beside her fully dressed meant that the essence of what they both saw was far from good clean fun (if it had been fun he was after, he, too, would have had to strip and don a bowler hat); it was humiliation. But instead of spurning it she proudly, provocatively played it for all it was worth, as if submitting of her own free will to public rape; and suddenly, unable to wait any longer, she pulled Tomas down to the floor. The bowler hat rolled under the table, and they began thrashing about on the rug at the foot of the mirror.

But let us return to the bowler hat.

First, it was a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather, the mayor of a small Bohemian town during the nineteenth century.

Second, it was a memento of her father. After the funeral her brother appropriated all their parents' property, and she, refusing out of sovereign contempt to fight for her rights, announced sarcastically that she was taking the bowler hat as her sole inheritance.

Third, it was a prop for her love games with Tomas.

Fourth, it was a sign of her originality, which she consciously cultivated. She could not take much with her when she emigrated, and taking this bulky, impractical thing meant giving up other, more practical ones.

Fifth, now that she was abroad the hat was a sentimental object. When she went to visit Tomas in Zurich, she took it along and had it on her head when he opened the hotel-room door. But then something she had not reckoned with happened: the hat, no longer jaunty or sexy, turned into a monument to time past. They were both touched. They made love as they never had before. This was no occasion for obscene games. For this meeting was not a continuation of their erotic rendezvous, each of which had been an opportunity to think up some new little vice; it was a recapitulation of time, a hymn to their common past, a sentimental summary of an unsentimental story that was disappearing in the distance.

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina's life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus' ("You can't step twice into the same river") riverbed. The bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another semantic river: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like

a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. The reason Tomas and Sabina were touched by the sight of the bowler hat in a Zurich hotel and made love almost in tears was that its black presence was not merely a reminder of their love games but also a memento of Sabina's father and of her grandfather, who lived in a century without airplanes and cars.

Now, perhaps, we are in a better position to understand the abyss separating Sabina and Franz: he listened eagerly to the story of her life and she was equally eager to hear the story of his, but although they had a clear understanding of the logical meaning of the words they exchanged, they failed to hear the semantic susurrus of the river flowing through them.

And so when she put on the bowler hat in his presence Franz felt uncomfortable, as if someone had spoken to him in a language he did not know. It was neither obscene nor sentimental, merely an incomprehensible gesture—what made him feel uncomfortable was its very lack of meaning.

While people are fairly young and the musical composition of their lives is still in its opening bars, they can go about writing it together and exchange motifs (the way Tomas and Sabina exchanged the motif of the bowler hat), but if they meet when they are older, like Franz and Sabina, their musical compositions are more or less complete, and every motif, every object, every word means something different to each of them.

If I were to make a record of all Sabina and Franz's conversations, I could compile a long lexicon of their misunderstandings. Let us be content, instead, with a short dictionary.

#### A SHORT DICTIONARY OF MISUNDERSTOOD WORDS

OMAN: Being a woman is a fate Sabina did not choose. What we have not

W chosen we cannot consider either our merit or our failure. Sabina believed that she had to assume the correct attitude to her unchosen fate. To rebel against being born a woman seemed as foolish to her as to take pride in it.

During one of their first times together, Franz announced to her, in an oddly emphatic way, “Sabina, you are a *woman*.” She could not understand why he accentuated the obvious with the solemnity of a Columbus who has just sighted land. Not until later did she understand that the word “woman,” on which he had placed such uncommon emphasis, did not, in his eyes, signify one of the two human sexes; it represented a *value*. Not every woman was worthy of being called a woman.

But if Sabina was, in Franz’s eyes, a *woman*, then what was his wife, Marie-Claude? More than twenty years earlier, several months after Franz met Marie-Claude, she had threatened to take her life if he abandoned her. Franz was bewitched by the threat. He was not particularly fond of her, but he was very much taken with her love. He felt himself unworthy of so great a love, and felt he owed her a low bow.

He bowed so low that he married her. And even though Marie-Claude never recaptured the emotional intensity that accompanied her suicide threat, in his heart he kept its memory alive with the thought that he must never hurt her and must always respect the woman in her.

It is an interesting formulation. Not “respect Marie-Claude” but “respect the woman in Marie-Claude.”

But if Marie-Claude is herself a woman, then who is that other woman hiding in her, the one he must always respect? The Platonic ideal of a woman, perhaps?

No. His mother. It never would have occurred to him to say he respected the woman in his mother. He worshipped his mother and not some woman

inside her. His mother and the Platonic ideal of womanhood were one and the same.

When he was twelve, she suddenly found herself alone, abandoned by Franz’s father. The boy suspected something serious had happened, but his mother muted the drama with mild, insipid words so as not to upset him. The day his father left, Franz and his mother went into town together, and as they left home Franz noticed that her shoes did not match. He was in a quandary: he wanted to point out her mistake, but was afraid he would hurt her. So during the two hours they spent walking through the city together he kept his eyes fixed on her feet. It was then he had his first inkling of what it means to suffer.

**FIDELITY AND BETRAYAL:** He loved her from the time he was a child until the time he accompanied her to the cemetery; he loved her in his memories as well. That is what made him feel that fidelity deserved pride of place among the virtues: fidelity gave a unity to lives that would otherwise splinter into thousands of fleeting impressions.

Franz often spoke about his mother to Sabina, perhaps even with a certain unconscious ulterior motive: he assumed that Sabina would be charmed by his ability to be faithful, that it would win her over.

What he did not know was that Sabina was charmed more by betrayal than by fidelity. The word “fidelity” reminded her of her father, a small-town puritan, who spent his Sundays painting away at canvases of woodland sunsets and roses in vases. Thanks to him, she started drawing as a child. When she was fourteen, she fell in love with a boy her age. Her father was so frightened that he would not let her out of the house by herself for a year. One day, he showed her some Picasso reproductions and made fun of them. If she couldn’t love her fourteen-year-old schoolboy, she could at least love Cubism. After completing school, she went off to Prague with the euphoric feeling that now at last she could betray her home.

Betrayal. From tender youth we are told by father and teacher that betrayal is the most heinous offense imaginable. But what is betrayal? Betrayal means breaking ranks. Betrayal means breaking ranks and going off into the unknown. Sabina knew of nothing more magnificent than going off into the unknown.

Though a student at the Academy of Fine Arts, she was not allowed to paint like Picasso. It was the period when so-called Socialist Realism was prescribed, and the school manufactured portraits of Communist statesmen. Her longing to betray her father remained unsatisfied: Communism was merely another father, a father equally strict and limited, a father who forbade her love (the times were puritanical) and Picasso, too. And if she married a second-rate actor, it was only because he had a reputation for being eccentric and was unacceptable to both fathers.

Then her mother died. The day following her return to Prague from the funeral, she received a telegram saying that her father had taken his life because of grief.

Suddenly she felt pangs of conscience: Was it really so terrible that her father had painted vases filled with roses and hated Picasso? Was it really so reprehensible that he was afraid of his fourteen-year-old daughter's coming home pregnant? Was it really so laughable that he could not go on living without his wife?

And again she felt a longing to betray: betray her own betrayal. She announced to her husband (whom she now considered a difficult drunk rather than an eccentric) that she was leaving him.

But if we betray B, for whom we betrayed A, it does not necessarily follow that we thereby have placated A. The life of the divorcée painter did not in the least resemble the life of the parents she had betrayed. The first betrayal is irreparable. It calls forth a chain reaction of further betrayals, each of which takes us further and further away from the point of our original

betrayal.

**M**USIC: For Franz, music was the art that came closest to Dionysian beauty, in the sense of intoxication. No one can get really drunk on a novel or a painting, but who can help getting drunk on Beethoven's Ninth, Bartók's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, or the Beatles' White Album? Franz made no distinction between "classical" music and "pop." He found the distinction old-hat and hypocritical. He loved rock as much as Mozart.

He considered music a liberating force: it liberated him from loneliness, introversion, the dust of the library; it opened the door of his body and allowed his soul to step out into the world to make friends. He loved to dance and regretted that Sabina did not share his passion.

They were sitting together at a restaurant, and loud music with a heavy beat poured out of a nearby speaker as they ate. "It's a vicious circle," Sabina said. "People are going deaf because music is played louder and louder. But because they're going deaf it has to be played louder still."

"Don't you like music?" Franz asked.

"No," said Sabina, and then added, "though in a different era . . ." She was thinking of the days of Johann Sebastian Bach, when music was like a rose blooming on a boundless snow-covered plain of silence.

Noise masked as music had pursued her since early childhood. During her years at the Academy of Fine Arts, students had been required to spend whole summer vacations at a youth camp. They lived in common quarters and worked together on a steelworks construction site. Music roared out of loudspeakers on the site from five in the morning to nine at night. She felt like crying, but the music was cheerful, and there was nowhere to hide—not in the latrine or under the bedclothes: everything was in range of the

loudspeakers. The music was like a pack of hounds that had been sicked on her.

At the time, she had thought that only in the Communist world could such musical barbarism reign supreme. Abroad, she discovered that the transformation of music into noise was a planetary process by which mankind was entering the historical phase of total ugliness. The total ugliness to come had made itself felt first as omnipresent acoustical ugliness: cars, motorcycles, electric guitars, drills, loudspeakers, sirens. The omnipresence of visual ugliness would soon follow.

After dinner, they went upstairs to their room and made love, and as Franz fell asleep his thoughts began to lose coherence. He recalled the noisy music at dinner and said to himself, "Noise has one advantage. It drowns out words." And suddenly he realized that all his life he had done nothing but talk, write, lecture, concoct sentences, search for formulations and amend them, so in the end no words were precise, their meanings were obliterated, their content lost, they turned into trash, chaff, dust, sand; prowling through his brain, tearing at his head, they were his insomnia, his illness. And what he yearned for at that moment, vaguely but with all his might, was unbounded music, absolute sound, a pleasant and happy all-encompassing, overpowering, window-rattling din to engulf, once and for all, the pain, the futility, the vanity of words. Music was the negation of sentences, music was the anti-word. He yearned for one long embrace with Sabina, yearned never to say another sentence, another word, to let his orgasm fuse with the orgiastic thunder of music. And lulled by that blissful imaginary uproar, he fell asleep.

**L**IGHT AND DARKNESS: Living for Sabina meant seeing. Seeing is limited by two borders: strong light, which blinds, and total darkness. Perhaps that was what motivated Sabina's distaste for all extremism. Extremes mean borders beyond which life ends, and a passion for extremism, in art and in politics, is a veiled longing for death.

In Franz, the word "light" did not evoke the picture of a landscape basking in the soft glow of day; it evoked the source of light itself: the sun, a light bulb, a spotlight. Franz's associations were familiar metaphors: the sun of righteousness, the lambent flame of the intellect, and so on.

Darkness attracted him as much as light. He knew that nowadays turning out the light before making love was considered laughable, and so he always left a small lamp burning over the bed. At the moment he penetrated Sabina, however, he closed his eyes. The pleasure suffusing his body called for darkness. That darkness was pure, perfect, thoughtless, visionless; that darkness was without end, without borders; that darkness was the infinite we each carry within us. (Yes, if you're looking for infinity, just close your eyes!)

And at the moment he felt pleasure suffusing his body Franz himself disintegrated and dissolved into the infinity of his darkness, himself becoming infinite. But the larger a man grows in his own inner darkness, the more his outer form diminishes. A man with closed eyes is a wreck of a man. Then Sabina found the sight of Franz distasteful, and to avoid looking at him she, too, closed her eyes. But, for her, darkness did not mean infinity; for her, it meant a disagreement with what she saw, the negation of what was seen, the refusal to see.

**S**abina once allowed herself to be taken along to a gathering of fellow-émigrés. As usual, they were hashing over whether they should or should not have taken up arms against the Russians. In the safety of emigration,

they all naturally came out in favor of fighting. Sabina said, “Then why don’t you go back and fight?”

That was not the thing to say. A man with artificially waved gray hair pointed a long index finger at her. “That’s no way to talk. You’re all responsible for what happened. You, too. How did you oppose the Communist regime? All you did was paint pictures. . . .”

Assessing the populace, checking up on it, is a principal and never-ending social activity in Communist countries. If a painter is to have an exhibition, an ordinary citizen to receive a visa to a country with a seacoast, a soccer player to join the national team, then a vast array of recommendations and reports must be garnered (from the concierge, colleagues, the police, the local Party organization, the pertinent trade union) and added up, weighed, and summarized by special officials. These reports have nothing to do with artistic talent, kicking ability, or maladies that respond well to salt sea air; they deal with one thing only: the “citizen’s political profile” (in other words, what the citizen says, what he thinks, how he behaves, how he acquits himself at meetings or May Day parades). Because everything (day-to-day existence, promotion at work, vacations) depends on the outcome of the assessment process, everyone (whether he wants to play soccer for the national team, have an exhibition, or spend his holidays at the seaside) must behave in such a way as to deserve a favorable assessment.

That was what ran through Sabina’s mind as she listened to the gray-haired man speak. He didn’t care whether his fellow-countrymen were good kickers or painters (none of the Czechs at the émigré gathering ever showed any interest in what Sabina painted), only whether they had opposed Communism actively or just passively, really and truly or just for appearances’ sake, from the very beginning or just since emigration.

Because she was a painter, she had an eye for detail and a memory for the physical characteristics of the people in Prague who had a passion for

assessing the others. All of them had index fingers slightly longer than their middle fingers and pointed them at whomever they happened to be talking to. In fact, President Novotný, who had ruled the country for the fourteen years preceding 1968, sported the very same barber-induced gray waves and had the longest index finger of all the inhabitants of Central Europe.

When the distinguished émigré heard from the lips of a painter whose pictures he had never seen that he resembled Communist President Novotný, he turned scarlet, then white, then scarlet again, then white once more; he tried to say something, did not succeed, and fell silent. Everyone else kept silent until Sabina stood up and left.

It made her unhappy, and down in the street she asked herself why she should bother to maintain contact with Czechs. What bound her to them? The landscape? If each of them were asked to say what the name of his native country evoked in him, the images that came to mind would be so different as to rule out all possibility of unity.

Or the culture? But what was that? Music? Dvořák and Janáček? Yes. But what if a Czech had no feeling for music? Then the essence of being Czech vanished into thin air.

Or great men? Jan Hus? None of the people in that room had ever read a line of his works. The only thing they were all able to understand was the flames, the glory of the flames when he was burned at the stake, the glory of the ashes. So for them the essence of being Czech came down to ashes and nothing more. The only things that held them together were their defeats and the reproaches they addressed to one another.

She was walking fast. She was more disturbed by her own thoughts than by her break with the émigrés. She knew she was being unfair. There were other Czechs, after all, people quite different from the man with the long index finger. The embarrassed silence that followed her little speech did not by any means indicate they were all against her. No, they were probably bewildered

by the sudden hatred, the lack of understanding they were all subjected to in emigration. Then why wasn't she sorry for them? Why didn't she see them for the woeful and abandoned creatures they were?

We know why. After she betrayed her father, life opened up before her, a long road of betrayals, each one attracting her as vice and victory. She *would not* keep ranks! She *refused* to keep ranks. Always with the same people, with the same speeches! That was why she was so stirred by her own injustice. But it was not an unpleasant feeling; quite the contrary. Sabina had the impression that she had just scored a victory and someone invisible was applauding her for it.

Then suddenly the intoxication gave way to anguish: The road had to end somewhere! Sooner or later she would have to put an end to her betrayals! Sooner or later she would have to stop herself!

It was evening and she was hurrying through the railway station. The train to Amsterdam was in. She found her coach. Guided by a friendly guard, she opened the door to her compartment and found Franz sitting on a *courette*. He rose to greet her; she threw her arms around him and smothered him with kisses. She had an overwhelming desire to tell him, like the most banal of women, Don't let me go, hold me tight, make me your plaything, your slave, be strong! But they were words she could not say.

The only thing she said when he released her from his embrace was "You don't know how happy I am to be with you." That was the most her reserved nature allowed her to express.

A SHORT DICTIONARY OF MISUNDERSTOOD WORDS (*continued*)

**P**ARADES: People in Italy or France have it easy. When their parents force them to go to church, they get back at them by joining the Party

(Communist, Maoist, Trotskyist, etc.). Sabina, however, was first sent to church by her father, then forced by him to attend meetings of the Communist Youth League. He was afraid of what would happen if she stayed away.

When she marched in the obligatory May Day parades, she could never keep in step, and the girl behind her would shout at her and purposely tread on her heels. When the time came to sing, she never knew the words of the songs and would merely open and close her mouth. But the other girls would notice and report her. From her youth on, she hated parades.

Franz had studied in Paris, and because he was extraordinarily gifted his scholarly career was assured from the time he was twenty. At twenty, he knew he would live out his life within the confines of his university office, one or two libraries, and two or three lecture halls. The idea of such a life made him feel suffocated. He learned to step out of his life the way one steps out of a house into the street.

And so as long as he lived in Paris he took part in every possible demonstration. How nice it was to celebrate something, demand something, protest against something, to be out in the open, to be with others. The parades filing down the Germain or from the Place de la République to the Bastille fascinated him. He saw the marching, shouting crowd as the image of Europe and its history. Europe was the Grand March. The march from revolution to revolution, from struggle to struggle, ever onward.

I might put it another way: Franz felt his book life to be unreal. He yearned for real life, for the touch of people walking side by side with him, for their shouts. It never occurred to him that what he considered unreal (the work he did in the solitude of the office or library) was in fact his real life, whereas the parades he imagined to be reality were nothing but theatre, dance, carnival—in other words, a dream.

During her student years, Sabina lived in a dormitory. On May Day, all the students had to report early in the morning for the parade. Student officials would comb the building to insure that no one was missing. Sabina hid in the lavatory. Not until long after the building was empty would she go back to her room. It was quieter than anywhere she could remember. The only sound was the parade music echoing in the distance. It was as though she had found refuge inside a shell and the only sound she could hear was the sea of an inimical world.

A year or two after emigrating, she happened to be in Paris on the anniversary of the Russian invasion of her country. A protest march had been scheduled, and she felt driven to take part. Fists raised high, the young Frenchmen shouted out slogans condemning Soviet imperialism. She liked the slogans, but to her surprise she found herself unable to shout along with them. She lasted no more than a few minutes in the parade.

When she told her French friends about it, they were amazed. “You mean you don’t want to fight the occupation of your country?” She would have liked to tell them that behind Communism, Fascism, behind all occupations and invasions, lurks a more basic, pervasive evil, and that the image of that evil was a parade of people marching by with raised fists and shouting identical syllables in unison. But she knew she would never be able to make them understand. Embarrassed, she changed the subject.

**T**HE BEAUTY OF NEW YORK: Franz and Sabina would walk the streets of New York for hours at a time. The view changed with each step, as if they were following a winding mountain path surrounded by breathtaking scenery: a young man kneeling in the middle of the sidewalk praying; a few steps away, a beautiful black woman leaning against a tree; a man in a black suit directing an invisible orchestra while crossing the street; a fountain spurting water and a group of construction workers sitting on the rim eating lunch; strange iron ladders running up and down buildings with ugly red façades, so ugly that they were beautiful; and, next door, a huge glass

skyscraper backed by another, itself topped by a small Arabian pleasure dome with turrets, galleries, and gilded columns.

She was reminded of her paintings. There, too, incongruous things came together: a steelworks construction site superimposed on a kerosene lamp; an old-fashioned lamp with a painted-glass shade shattered into tiny splinters and rising up over a desolate landscape of marshland.

Franz said, “Beauty in the European sense has always had a premeditated quality to it. We’ve always had an aesthetic intention and a long-range plan. That’s what enabled Western man to spend decades building a Gothic cathedral or a Renaissance piazza. The beauty of New York rests on a completely different base. It’s unintentional. It arose independent of human design, like a stalagmitic cavern. Forms which are in themselves quite ugly turn up fortuitously, without design, in such incredible surroundings that they sparkle with a sudden wondrous poetry.”

Sabina said, “Unintentional beauty. Yes. Another way of putting it might be ‘beauty by mistake.’ Before beauty disappears entirely from the earth, it will go on existing for a while by mistake. ‘Beauty by mistake’—the final phase in the history of beauty.”

And she recalled her first mature painting, which came into being because some red paint had dripped on it by mistake. Yes, her paintings were based on “beauty by mistake,” and New York was the secret but authentic homeland of her painting.

Franz said, “Perhaps New York’s unintentional beauty is much richer and more varied than the excessively strict and composed beauty of human design. But it’s not our European beauty. It’s an alien world.”

Didn’t they then at last agree on something?

No. There is a difference. Sabina was very much attracted by the alien quality

of New York's beauty. Franz found it fascinating but frightening; it made him feel homesick for Europe.

**S**ABINA'S COUNTRY: Sabina understood Franz's distaste for America. He was the embodiment of Europe: his mother was Viennese, his father French, and he himself was Swiss.

Franz greatly admired Sabina's country. Whenever she told him about herself and her friends from home, Franz heard the words "prison," "persecution," "enemy tanks," "emigration," "pamphlets," "banned books," "banned exhibitions," and he felt a curious mixture of envy and nostalgia.

He made a confession to Sabina. "A philosopher once wrote that everything in my work is unverifiable speculation and called me a 'pseudo-Socrates.' I felt terribly humiliated and made a furious response. And just think, that laughable episode was the greatest conflict I've ever experienced! The pinnacle of the dramatic possibilities available to my life! We live in two different dimensions, you and I. You came into my life like Gulliver entering the land of the Lilliputians."

Sabina protested. She said that conflict, drama, and tragedy didn't mean a thing; there was nothing inherently valuable in them, nothing deserving of respect or admiration. What was truly enviable was Franz's work and the fact that he had the peace and quiet to devote himself to it.

Franz shook his head. "When society is rich, its people don't need to work with their hands; they can devote themselves to activities of the spirit. We have more and more universities and more and more students. If students are going to earn degrees, they've got to come up with dissertation topics. And since dissertations can be written about everything under the sun, the number of topics is infinite. Sheets of paper covered with words pile up in archives sadder than cemeteries, because no one ever visits them, not even on All Souls' Day. Culture is perishing in overproduction, in an avalanche of

words, in the madness of quantity. That's why one banned book in your former country means infinitely more than the billions of words spewed out by our universities."

It is in this spirit that we may understand Franz's weakness for revolution. First he sympathized with Cuba, then with China, and when the cruelty of their regimes began to appall him he resigned himself with a sigh to a sea of words with no weight and no resemblance to life. He became a professor in Geneva (where there are no demonstrations), and in a burst of abnegation (in womanless, paradeless solitude) he published several scholarly books, all of which received considerable acclaim. Then one day along came Sabina. She was a revelation. She came from a land where revolutionary illusion had long since faded but where the thing he admired most in revolution remained: life on a large scale; a life of risk, daring, and the danger of death. Sabina had renewed his faith in the grandeur of human endeavor. Superimposing the painful drama of her country on her person, he found her even more beautiful. The trouble was that Sabina had no love for that drama. The words "prison," "persecution," "banned books," "occupation," "tanks" were ugly, without the slightest trace of romance. The only word that evoked in her a sweet, nostalgic memory of her homeland was the word "cemetery."

**C**EMETERY: Cemeteries in Bohemia are like gardens. The graves are covered with grass and colorful flowers. Modest tombstones are lost in the greenery. When the sun goes down, the cemetery sparkles with tiny candles. It looks as though the dead are dancing at a children's ball. Yes, a children's ball, because the dead are as innocent as children. No matter how brutal life becomes, peace always reigns in the cemetery. Even in wartime, in Hitler's time, in Stalin's time, through all occupations. When she felt low, she would get into the car, leave Prague far behind, and walk through one or another of the country cemeteries she loved so well. Against a backdrop of blue hills, they were as beautiful as a lullaby.

For Franz, a cemetery was an ugly dump of stones and bones.

“I’d never drive. I’m scared stiff of accidents! Even if they don’t kill you, they mark you for life!” And, so saying, the sculptor made an instinctive grab for the finger he had nearly chopped off one day while whittling away at a wood statue. It was a miracle the finger had been saved.

“What do you mean?” said Marie-Claude in a raucous voice. She was in top form. “I was in a serious accident once, and I wouldn’t have missed it for the world. And I’ve never had more fun than when I was in that hospital! I couldn’t sleep a wink, so I just read and read, day and night.”

They all looked at her in amazement. She basked in it. Franz reacted with a mixture of disgust (he knew that after the accident in question his wife had fallen into a deep depression and complained incessantly) and admiration (her ability to transform everything she experienced was a sign of true vitality).

“It was there that I began to divide books into day books and night books,” she went on. “Really, there are books meant for daytime reading and books that can be read only at night.”

Now they all looked at her in amazement and admiration—all, that is, but the sculptor, who was still holding his finger and wrinkling his face at the memory of the accident.

Marie-Claude turned to him and asked, “Which category would you put Stendhal in?”

The sculptor had not heard the question and shrugged his shoulders uncomfortably. An art critic standing next to him said he thought of Stendhal as daytime reading.

Marie-Claude shook her head and said in her raucous voice, “No, no, you’re wrong! You’re wrong! Stendhal is a night author!” Franz’s participation in the debate on night art and day art was disturbed by the fact that he was expecting Sabina to show up at any minute. They had spent many days pondering whether or not she should accept the invitation to this cocktail party. It was a party Marie-Claude was giving for all painters and sculptors who had ever exhibited in her private gallery. Ever since Sabina had met Franz, she had avoided his wife. But because they feared being found out, they came to the conclusion that it would be more natural and therefore less suspicious for her to come.

While throwing unobtrusive looks in the direction of the entrance hall, Franz heard his eighteen-year-old daughter, Marie-Anne, holding forth at the other end of the room. Excusing himself from the group presided over by his wife, he made his way to the group presided over by his daughter. Some were in chairs, others standing, but Marie-Anne was cross-legged on the floor. Franz was certain that Marie-Claude would soon switch to the carpet on her side of the room, too. Sitting on the floor when you had guests was at the time a gesture signifying simplicity, informality, liberal politics, hospitality, and a Parisian way of life. The passion with which Marie-Claude sat on all floors was such that Franz began to worry she would take to sitting on the floor of the shop where she bought her cigarettes.

“What are you working on now, Alain?” Marie-Anne asked the man at whose feet she was sitting. Alain was so naïve and sincere as to try to give the gallery owner’s daughter an honest answer. He started explaining his new approach to her—a combination of photography and oil—but he had scarcely got through three sentences when Marie-Anne began whistling a tune. The painter was speaking slowly and with great concentration and did not hear the whistling.

“Will you tell me why you’re whistling?” Franz whispered.

“Because I don’t like to hear people talk about politics,” she answered out loud.

And in fact two men standing in the same circle were discussing the coming elections in France. Marie-Anne, who felt it her duty to direct the proceedings, asked the men whether they were planning to go to the Rossini opera an Italian company was putting on in Geneva the following week. Meanwhile, Alain, the painter, sank into greater and greater detail about his new approach to painting. Franz was ashamed for his daughter. To put her in her place, he announced that whenever she went to the opera she complained terribly of boredom.

“You’re awful,” said Marie-Anne, trying to punch him in the stomach from a sitting position. “The star tenor is so handsome. So handsome. I’ve seen him twice now, and I’m in love with him.”

Franz could not get over how much like her mother his daughter was. Why couldn’t she be like him? But there was nothing he could do about it. She was not like him. How many times had he heard Marie-Claude proclaim she was in love with this or that painter, singer, writer, politician, and once even with a racing cyclist? Of course, it was all mere cocktail-party rhetoric, but he could not help recalling now and then that more than twenty years ago she had gone about saying the same thing about him and threatening him with suicide to boot.

At that point, Sabina entered the room. Marie-Claude walked up to her. While Marie-Anne went on about Rossini, Franz trained his attention on what the two women were saying. After a few friendly words of greeting, Marie-Claude lifted the ceramic pendant from Sabina’s neck and said in a very loud voice, “What is that? How ugly!”

Those words made a deep impression on Franz. They were not meant to be combative; the raucous laughter immediately following them made it clear that by rejecting the pendant Marie-Claude did not wish to jeopardize her

friendship with Sabina. But it was not the kind of thing she usually said.

“I made it myself,” said Sabina.

“That pendant is ugly, really!” Marie-Claude repeated very loudly. “You shouldn’t wear it.” Franz knew that his wife didn’t care whether the pendant was ugly or not. An object was ugly if she willed it ugly, beautiful if she willed it beautiful. Pendants worn by her friends were a priori beautiful. And even if she did find them ugly, she would never say so, because flattery had long since become second nature to her.

Why, then, did she decide that the pendant Sabina had made herself was ugly?

Franz suddenly saw the answer plainly: Marie-Claude proclaimed Sabina’s pendant ugly because she could afford to do so.

Or, to be more precise: Marie-Claude proclaimed Sabina’s pendant ugly to make it clear that she could afford to tell Sabina her pendant was ugly.

Sabina’s exhibition the year before had not been particularly successful, so Marie-Claude did not set great store by Sabina’s favor. Sabina, however, had every reason to set store by Marie-Claude’s. Yet that was not at all evident from her behavior.

Yes, Franz saw it plainly: Marie-Claude had taken advantage of the occasion to make it clear to Sabina (and others) what the real balance of power was between the two of them.

**T**HE OLD CHURCH IN AMSTERDAM: There are houses running along one side of the street, and behind the large ground-floor shopfront windows

all the whores have little rooms and plushly pillowed armchairs in which they sit up close to the glass wearing bras and panties. They look like big, bored cats.

On the other side of the street is a gigantic Gothic cathedral dating from the fourteenth century.

Between the whores' world and God's world, like a river dividing two empires, stretches an intense smell of urine.

Inside the Old Church, all that is left of the Gothic style is the high, bare white walls, the columns, the vaulting, and the windows. There is not a single image on the walls, not a single piece of statuary anywhere. The church is as empty as a gymnasium, except in the very center, where several rows of chairs have been arranged in a large square around a miniature podium for the minister. Behind the chairs are wooden booths, stalls for wealthy burghers.

The chairs and stalls seem to have been placed there without the slightest concern for the shape of the walls or the position of the columns, as if wishing to express their indifference to or disdain for Gothic architecture. Centuries ago, Calvinist faith turned the cathedral into a hangar, its only function being to keep the prayers of the faithful safe from rain and snow.

Franz was fascinated by it: the Grand March of History had passed through this gigantic hall!

Sabina recalled how, after the Communist coup, all the castles in Bohemia were nationalized and many of them turned into manual-training centers, retirement homes, and also cowsheds. She had visited one of the cowsheds: hooks for iron rings had been hammered into the stucco walls, and cows tied to the rings gazed dreamily out the windows at the castle grounds, now overrun by chickens.

"It's the emptiness of it all that fascinates me," said Franz. "People collect altars, statues, paintings, chairs, carpets, and books, and then comes a time of joyful relief and they throw it all out like so much refuse from yesterday's dinner table. Can't you just picture Hercules' broom sweeping out this cathedral?"

"The poor had to stand, while the rich had stalls," said Sabina, pointing to them. "But there was something that bound the bankers to the beggars: a hatred of beauty."

"What is beauty?" said Franz, and he saw himself attending a recent gallery preview at his wife's side, and at her insistence. The endless vanity of speeches and words, the vanity of culture, the vanity of art.

When Sabina was working in the student brigade, her soul poisoned by the cheerful marches issuing incessantly from the loudspeakers, she borrowed a motorcycle one Sunday and headed for the hills. She stopped at a tiny remote village she had never seen before, leaned the motorcycle against the church, and went in. A Mass happened to be in progress. Religion was persecuted by the regime, and most people gave the church a wide berth. The only people in the pews were old men and old women, because they did not fear the regime. They feared only death.

The priest intoned words in a singsong voice, and the people repeated them after him in unison. It was a litany. The same words kept coming back, like a wanderer who cannot tear his eyes away from the countryside or like a man who cannot take leave of life. She sat in one of the last pews, closing her eyes to hear the music of the words, opening them to stare up at the blue vault dotted with large gold stars. She was entranced.

What she had unexpectedly met there in the village church was not God; it was beauty. She knew perfectly well that neither the church nor the litany was beautiful in and of itself, but they were beautiful compared to the construction site, where she spent her days amid the racket of the

loudspeaker music. The Mass was beautiful because it appeared to her in a sudden, mysterious revelation as a world betrayed.

From that time on she had known that beauty is a world betrayed. The only way we can encounter it is if its persecutors have overlooked it somewhere. Beauty hides behind the scenes of the May Day parade. If we want to find it, we must demolish the scenery.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been fascinated by a church,” said Franz.

It was neither Protestantism nor asceticism that made him so enthusiastic; it was something else, something highly personal, something he did not dare discuss with Sabina. He thought he heard a voice telling him to seize Hercules’ broom and sweep all of Marie-Claude’s previews, all of Marie-Anne’s singers, all lectures and symposia, all useless speeches, vain words—sweep them all out of his life. The great empty space of Amsterdam’s Old Church had appeared to him in a sudden and mysterious revelation as the image of his own liberation.

**S**TRENGTH: Stroking Franz’s arms in bed in one of the many hotels where they made love, Sabina said, “The muscles you have! They’re unbelievable!”

Franz took pleasure in her praise. He climbed out of bed, got down on his haunches, grabbed a heavy oak chair by one leg, and lifted it slowly into the air. “You never have to be afraid,” he said. “I can protect you, no matter what. I used to be a judo champion.”

When he raised the hand with the heavy chair above his head, Sabina said, “It’s good to know you’re so strong.”

But deep down she said to herself, Franz may be strong, but his strength is directed outward; when it comes to the people he lives with, the people he loves, he’s weak. Franz’s weakness is called goodness. Franz would never give

Sabina orders. He would never command her, as Tomas had, to lay the mirror on the floor and walk back and forth on it naked. Not that he lacked sensuality: he simply lacked the strength to give orders. There are things that can be accomplished only by violence. Physical love is unthinkable without violence.

Sabina watched Franz walk across the room with the chair above his head; the scene struck her as grotesque and filled her with an odd sadness. Franz set the chair down on the floor opposite Sabina and sat in it. “I enjoy being strong, of course,” he said, “but what good do these muscles do me in Geneva? They’re like an ornament, a peacock feather. I’ve never fought anyone in my life.”

Sabina proceeded with her melancholy musings: What if she had a man who ordered her about? A man who wanted to master her? How long would she put up with him? Not five minutes! From which it follows that no man was right for her. Strong or weak.

“Why don’t you ever use your strength on me?” she said.

“Because love means renouncing strength,” said Franz softly.

Sabina realized two things: first, that Franz’s words were noble and just; second, that they disqualified him from her love life.

LIVING IN TRUTH: Such is the formula set forth by Kafka somewhere in the diaries or letters. Franz couldn't quite remember where. But it captivated him. What does it mean to live in truth? Putting it negatively is easy enough: it means not lying, not hiding, and not dissembling. From the time he met Sabina, however, Franz had been living in lies. He told his wife about nonexistent conferences in Amsterdam and lectures in Madrid; he was afraid to walk through the streets of Geneva with Sabina. And he enjoyed the lying and hiding; it was all so new to him. He was as excited as a teacher's pet who has plucked up the courage to play truant.

For Sabina, living in truth, lying neither to ourselves nor to others, was possible only away from the public: the moment someone keeps an eye on what we do, we involuntarily make allowances for that eye, and nothing we do is truthful. Having a public, keeping a public in mind, means living in lies. Sabina despised literature in which people give away all kinds of intimate secrets about themselves and their friends. A man who loses his privacy loses everything, Sabina thought. And a man who gives it up of his own free will is a monster. That was why Sabina did not suffer in the least from having to keep her love secret. On the contrary, only by doing so could she live in truth.

Franz, on the other hand, was certain that the division of life into private and public spheres is the source of all lies: a person is one thing in private and something quite different in public. For Franz, living in truth meant breaking down the barriers between the private and the public. He was fond of quoting André Breton on the desirability of living "in a glass house" into which everyone can look and there are no secrets.

When he heard his wife telling Sabina, "That pendant is ugly!" he knew he could no longer live in lies and had to stand up for Sabina. He had not done so only because he was afraid of betraying their secret love. The day after the cocktail party, he was supposed to go to Rome with Sabina for the weekend. He could not get "That pendant is ugly!" out of his mind, and it made him

see Marie-Claude in a completely new light. Her aggressiveness—invulnerable, noisy, and full of vitality—relieved him of the burden of goodness he had patiently borne all twenty-three years of their marriage. He recalled the enormous inner space of the Old Church in Amsterdam and again felt the strange incomprehensible ecstasy that void had evoked in him.

He was packing his overnight bag when Marie-Claude came into the room, chatting about the guests at the party, energetically endorsing the views of some and laughing off the views of others.

Franz looked at her for a long time and said, "There isn't any conference in Rome."

She did not see the point. "Then why are you going?"

"I've had a mistress for nine months," he said. "I don't want to meet her in Geneva. That's why I've been travelling so much. I thought it was time you knew about it."

After the first few words he lost his nerve. He turned away so as not to see the despair on Marie-Claude's face, the despair he expected his words to produce.

After a short pause he heard her say, "Yes, I think it's time I knew about it." Her voice was so firm that Franz turned in her direction. She did not look at all disturbed; in fact, she looked like the very same woman who had said the day before in a raucous voice, "That pendant is ugly!"

She continued, "Now that you've plucked up the courage to tell me you've been deceiving me for nine months, do you think you can tell me who she is?"

He had always reminded himself he had no right to hurt Marie-Claude and should respect the woman in her. But where had the woman in her gone? In other words, what had happened to the mother image he mentally linked

with his wife? His mother, sad and wounded, his mother, wearing unmatched shoes, had departed from Marie-Claude—or perhaps not; perhaps she had never been inside Marie-Claude at all. The whole thing came to him in a flash of hatred.

“I have no reason to hide it from you,” he said.

If he had not succeeded in wounding her with his infidelity, he was certain the revelation of who her rival was would do the trick. Looking her straight in the eye, he told her about Sabina.

A while later, he met Sabina at the airport. As the plane gained altitude, he felt lighter and lighter. At last, he told himself, after nine months he was living in truth.

8

Sabina felt as though Franz had pried open the door of their privacy. As though she were peering into the heads of Marie-Claude, of Marie-Anne, of Alain, the painter, of the sculptor who held on to his finger—of all the people she knew in Geneva. Now she would willy-nilly become the rival of a woman who did not interest her in the least. Franz would ask for a divorce, and she would take Marie-Claude’s place in his large conjugal bed. Everyone would follow the process from a greater or lesser distance, and she would be forced to playact before them all; instead of being Sabina, she would have to act the role of Sabina, decide how best to act the role. Once her love had been publicized, it would gain weight, become a burden. Sabina cringed at the very thought of it.

They had supper at a restaurant in Rome. She drank her wine in silence.

“You’re not angry, are you?” Franz asked.

She assured him she was not. She was still confused and unsure whether to

be happy or not. She recalled the time they met in the sleeping compartment of the Amsterdam express, the time she had wanted to go down on her knees before him and beg him to hold her, squeeze her, never let her go. She had longed to come to the end of the dangerous road of betrayals. She had longed to call a halt to it all.

Try as she might to intensify that longing, summon it to her aid, lean on it, the feeling of distaste only grew stronger.

They walked back to the hotel through the streets of Rome. Because the Italians around them were making a racket, shouting and gesticulating, they could walk along in silence without hearing their silence.

Sabina spent a long time washing in the bathroom; Franz waited for her under the blanket. As always, the small lamp was lit.

When she came out, she turned it off. It was the first time she had done so. Franz should have paid better attention. He did not notice it, because light did not mean anything to him. As we know, he made love with his eyes shut.

In fact, it was his closed eyes that made Sabina turn out the light. She could not stand those lowered eyelids a moment longer. The eyes, as the saying goes, are the windows of the soul. Franz’s body, which thrashed about on top of hers with closed eyes, was therefore a body without a soul. It was like a newborn animal, still blind and whimpering for the teat. Muscular Franz in coitus was like a gigantic puppy suckling at her breasts. He actually had her nipple in his mouth as if he were sucking milk! The idea that he was a mature man below and a suckling infant above, that she was therefore having intercourse with a baby, bordered on the disgusting. No, she would never again see his body moving desperately over hers, would never again offer him her breast, bitch to whelp. Today was the last time, irrevocably the last time!

She knew, of course, that she was being supremely unfair, that Franz was the best man she had ever had—he was intelligent, he understood her paintings,

he was handsome and good—but the more she thought about it, the more she longed to ravish his intelligence, defile his kindheartedness, and violate his powerless strength.

That night she made love to him with greater frenzy than ever before, aroused by the realization that this was the last time. Making love, she was far, far away. Once more she heard the golden horn of betrayal beckoning her in the distance, and she knew she would not hold out. She sensed an expanse of freedom before her, and the boundlessness of it excited her. She made mad, unrestrained love to Franz as she never had before.

Franz sobbed as he lay on top of her; he was certain he understood: Sabina had been quiet all through dinner and said not a word about his decision, but this was her answer. She had made a clear show of her joy, her passion, her consent, her desire to live with him forever.

He felt like a rider galloping off into a magnificent void, a void of no wife, no daughter, no household, the magnificent void swept clean by Hercules' broom, a magnificent void he would fill with his love.

Each was riding the other like a horse, and both were galloping off into the distance of their desires, drunk on the betrayals that freed them. Franz was riding Sabina and had betrayed his wife; Sabina was riding Franz and had betrayed Franz.

For twenty years Franz had seen his mother—a poor, weak creature who needed his protection—in his wife. This image was deeply rooted in him, and he could not rid himself of it in two days. On the way home his conscience began to bother him; he was afraid that Marie-Claude had fallen apart after he left and that he would find her terribly sick at heart. Stealthily he unlocked the door and went into his room. He stood there for a moment and listened. Yes, she was at home. After a moment's hesitation he went into

her room, ready to greet her as usual.

“What?” she exclaimed, raising her eyebrows in mock surprise. “You? Here?”

“Where else can I go?” he wanted to say (genuinely surprised), but he said nothing.

“Let's set the record straight, shall we? I have nothing against your moving in with her at once.”

When he made his confession on the day he left for Rome, he had no precise plan of action. He expected to come home and talk it all out in a friendly atmosphere so as not to harm Marie-Claude any more than necessary. It never occurred to him that she would calmly and coolly urge him to leave.

Even though it facilitated things, he could not help feeling disappointed. He had always been afraid of wounding her and had voluntarily stuck to a stultifying discipline of monogamy, and now, after some twenty years, he suddenly learned that it had all been superfluous and that he had given up scores of women because of a misunderstanding!

That afternoon, he gave his lecture, then went straight to Sabina's from the university. He had decided to ask her whether he could spend the night. He rang the doorbell, but no one answered. He went and sat at the café across the street and stared long and hard at the entrance to her building.

Evening came, and he did not know where to turn. All his life he had shared his bed with Marie-Claude. If he went home to Marie-Claude, where should he sleep? He could, of course, make up a bed on the sofa in the next room. But wouldn't that be merely an eccentric gesture? Wouldn't it look like a sign of ill will? He wanted to remain friendly with her, after all! Yet, getting into bed with her was out of the question. He could just hear her asking him ironically why he didn't prefer Sabina's bed. He took a room in a hotel.

The next day, he rang Sabina's doorbell morning, noon, and night. The day after, he paid a visit to the concierge, who had no information and referred him to the owner of the flat. He phoned her and found out that Sabina had given notice two days before. During the next few days, he returned at regular intervals, still hoping to find her in, but one day he found the door open and three men in overalls loading the furniture and paintings into a van parked outside. He asked them where they were taking the furniture.

They replied that they were under strict instructions not to reveal the address.

He was about to offer them a few francs for the secret address when suddenly he felt he lacked the strength to do it. His grief had broken him utterly. He understood nothing, had no idea what had happened; all he knew was that he had been waiting for it to happen ever since he had met Sabina. What must be must be. Franz did not oppose it.

He found a small flat for himself in the old part of town. When he knew his wife and daughter were away, he went back to his former home to fetch his clothes and most essential books. He was careful to remove nothing that Marie-Claude might miss.

One day, he saw her through the window of a café. She was sitting with two women, and her face, long riddled with wrinkles from her unbridled gift for grimaces, was in a state of animation. The women were listening closely and laughing continually. Franz could not get over the feeling that she was telling them about him. Surely she knew that Sabina had disappeared from Geneva at the very time Franz decided to live with her. What a funny story it would make! He was not the least bit surprised at becoming a butt to his wife's friends.

When he got home to his new flat, where every hour he could hear the bells of Saint-Pierre, he found that the department store had delivered a new desk he had bought. He immediately forgot about Marie-Claude and her friends.

He even forgot about Sabina for the time being. He sat down at the desk. He was glad to have picked it out himself. For twenty years he had lived among furniture not of his own choosing. Marie-Claude had taken care of everything. At last he had ceased to be a little boy; for the first time in his life, he was on his own. The next day, he hired a carpenter to make a bookcase for him. He spent several days designing it and deciding where it should stand.

And at some point he realized, to his great surprise, that he was not particularly unhappy. Sabina's physical presence was much less important than he had suspected. What was important was the golden footprint, the magic footprint that she had left on his life and that no one could ever remove. Just before disappearing from his horizon, she had slipped him Hercules' broom and he had used it to sweep everything he despised out of his life. A sudden happiness, a feeling of bliss, the joy that came of freedom and a new life—these were the gifts she had left him.

Actually, he had always preferred the unreal to the real. Just as he felt better at demonstrations (which, as I have pointed out, are all playacting and dreams) than in a lecture hall full of students, so he was happier with Sabina the invisible goddess than with the Sabina who had accompanied him throughout the world and whose love he constantly feared losing. By giving him the unexpected freedom of a man living on his own, she provided him with a halo of seductiveness. He became very attractive to women, and one of his students fell in love with him.

And so within an amazingly short period the backdrop of his life had changed completely. Until recently he had lived in a large upper-middle-class flat with a servant, a daughter, and a wife; now he lived in a tiny flat in the old part of town, where almost every night he was joined by his young student mistress. He did not need to squire her through the world from hotel to hotel; he could make love to her in his own flat, in his own bed, with his own books and his ashtray on the bedside table!

She was a modest girl and not particularly pretty, but she admired Franz in the way Franz had only recently admired Sabina. He found it not unpleasant. And if he did perhaps feel that trading Sabina for a student with glasses was something of a comedown, his innate goodness saw to it that he cared for her and lavished on her the paternal love that had never had a true outlet before, given that Marie-Anne had always behaved less like his daughter than like a copy of Marie-Claude.

One day, he paid a visit to his wife. He told her he would like to remarry. Marie-Claude shook her head.

“But a divorce won’t make any difference to you! You won’t lose a thing! I’ll give you all the property!”

“I don’t care about property,” she said.

“Then what do you care about?”

“Love,” she said with a smile.

“Love?” Franz asked in amazement.

“Love is a battle,” said Marie-Claude, still smiling. “And I plan to go on fighting. To the end.”

“Love is a battle?” said Franz. “Well, I don’t feel at all like fighting.” And he left.

10

After four years in Geneva, Sabina settled in Paris, but she could not escape her melancholy. If someone had asked her what had come over her, she would have been hard pressed to find words for it.

When we want to give expression to a dramatic situation in our lives, we

tend to use metaphors of heaviness. We say that something has become a great burden to us. We either bear the burden or fail and go down with it; we struggle with it, win or lose. And Sabina—what *had* come over her? Nothing. She had left a man because she felt like leaving him. Had he persecuted her? Had he tried to take revenge on her? No. Her drama was drama not of heaviness but of lightness. What fell to her lot was not the burden but the unbearable lightness of being.

Until that time, her betrayals had filled her with excitement and joy, because they opened up new paths to new adventures of betrayal. But what if the paths came to an end? One could betray one’s parents, husband, country, love, but when parents, husband, country, and love were gone—what was left to betray?

Sabina felt emptiness all around her. What if that emptiness was the goal of all her betrayals?

Naturally, she had not realized it until now. How could she have? The goals we pursue are always veiled. A girl who longs for marriage longs for something she knows nothing about. The boy who hankers after fame has no idea what fame is. The thing that gives our every move its meaning is always totally unknown to us. Sabina was unaware of the goal that lay behind her longing to betray. The unbearable lightness of being—was that the goal? Her departure from Geneva brought her considerably closer to it.

Three years after moving to Paris she received a letter from Prague. It was from Tomas’s son. Somehow or other he had found out about her and got hold of her address, and now he was writing to her as his father’s “closest friend.” He informed her of the deaths of Tomas and Tereza. For the past few years they had been living in a village, where Tomas was employed as a driver at a collective farm. From time to time they would drive over to the next town and spend the night in a cheap hotel. The road there wound through some hills, and their pickup had crashed and hurtled down a steep

incline. Their bodies had been crushed to a pulp. The police determined later that the brakes were in disastrous condition.

She could not get over the news. The last link to her past had been broken.

According to her old habit, she decided to calm herself by taking a walk in a cemetery. The Montparnasse Cemetery was the closest. It was all tiny houses—miniature chapels over each grave. Sabina could not understand why the dead would want to have imitation palaces built over them. The cemetery was vanity transmogrified into stone. Instead of growing more sensible in death, the inhabitants of the cemetery were sillier than they had been in life. Their monuments were meant to display how important they were. There were no fathers, brothers, sons, or grandmothers buried there—only public figures, the bearers of titles, degrees, and honors; even the postal clerk celebrated his chosen profession, his social significance: his dignity.

Walking along a row of graves, she noticed people gathering for a burial. The funeral director had an armful of flowers and was giving one to each mourner. He handed one to Sabina as well. She joined the group. They made a long detour past many monuments before they came to the grave, free for the moment of its heavy gravestone. She leaned over the hole. It was extremely deep. She dropped in the flower. It sailed down to the coffin in graceful somersaults. In Bohemia the graves were not so deep. In Paris the graves were deeper, just as the buildings were taller. Her eye fell on the stone, which lay next to the grave. It chilled her, and she hurried home.

She thought about that stone all day. Why had it horrified her so?

She answered herself: When graves are covered with stones, the dead can no longer get out.

But the dead can't get out anyway! What difference does it make whether they're covered with soil or stones?

The difference is that if a grave is covered with a stone it means we don't want the deceased to come back. The heavy stone tells the deceased, "Stay where you are!"

That made Sabina think about her father's grave. There was soil above his grave, with flowers growing out of it and a maple tree reaching down to it, and the roots and flowers offered his corpse a path out of the grave. If her father had been covered with a stone, she would never have been able to communicate with him after he died, and hear his voice in the trees pardoning her.

What was it like in the cemetery where Tereza and Tomas were buried?

Once more she started thinking about them. From time to time they would drive over to the next town and spend the night in a cheap hotel. That passage in the letter had caught her eye. It meant they were happy. And again she pictured Tomas as if he were one of her paintings: Don Juan in the foreground, a specious stage set by a naïve designer, and through a crack in the set—Tristan. He died as Tristan, not as Don Juan. Sabina's parents had died in the same week, Tomas and Tereza in the same second. Suddenly she missed Franz terribly.

When she told Franz about her cemetery walks he gave a shiver of disgust and called cemeteries dumps of stones and bones. A gulf of misunderstanding had immediately opened between them. Not until that day at the Montparnasse Cemetery did she see what he meant. She was sorry to have been so impatient with him. Perhaps if they had stayed together longer Sabina and Franz would have begun to understand the words they used. Gradually, timorously, their vocabularies would have come together, like bashful lovers, and the music of one would have begun to intersect with the music of the other. But it was too late now.

Yes, it was too late, and Sabina knew she would leave Paris, move on, and on again, because were she to die here they would cover her up with a stone, and

in the mind of a woman for whom no place is home the thought of an end to all flight is unbearable.

All Franz's friends knew about Marie-Claude; they all knew about the girl with the oversized glasses. But no one knew about Sabina. Franz was wrong when he thought his wife had told her friends about her. Sabina was a beautiful woman, and Marie-Claude did not want people going about comparing their faces.

Because Franz was so afraid of being found out, he had never asked for any of Sabina's paintings or drawings or even a snapshot of her. As a result, she disappeared from his life without a trace. There was not a scrap of tangible evidence to show that he had spent the most wonderful year of his life with her.

Which only increased his desire to remain faithful to her.

Sometimes when they were alone in his flat together, the girl would lift her eyes from a book, throw him an inquiring glance, and say, "What are you thinking about?"

Sitting in his armchair, staring up at the ceiling, Franz always found some plausible response, but in fact he was thinking of Sabina.

Whenever he published an article in a scholarly journal, the girl was the first to read it and discuss it with him. But all he could think of was what Sabina would have said about it. Everything he did he did for Sabina, the way Sabina would have liked to see it done.

It was a perfectly innocent form of infidelity and one eminently suited to Franz, who would never have done his bespectacled student mistress any harm. He nourished the cult of Sabina more as religion than as love.

Indeed, according to the theology of that religion it was Sabina who had sent him the girl. Between his earthly love and his unearthly love, therefore, there was perfect peace. And if love sublime must (for theological reasons) contain a strong dose of the inexplicable and incomprehensible (we have only to recall all the misunderstood words and the long lexicon of misunderstandings!), his earthly love rested on true understanding.

The student mistress was much younger than Sabina, and the musical composition of her life had scarcely been outlined; she was grateful to Franz for the motifs he gave her. Franz's Grand March was now her creed as well. Music was now her Dionysian intoxication. They often went dancing together. They lived in truth, and nothing they did was secret. They sought out the company of friends, colleagues, students, and strangers, and enjoyed sitting, drinking, and chatting with them. They took frequent excursions to the Alps. Franz would bend over, the girl would hop onto his back, and off he would run through the meadows, declaiming at the top of his voice a long German poem his mother had taught him as a child. The girl laughed with glee, admiring his legs, shoulders, and lungs as she clasped his neck.

The only thing she could not quite fathom was the curious sympathy he had for the countries occupied by the Russian empire. On the anniversary of the invasion, they attended a memorial meeting organized by a Czech group in Geneva. The room was nearly empty. The speaker had artificially waved gray hair. He read a long speech that bored even the few enthusiasts who had come to hear it. His French was grammatically correct but heavily accented. From time to time, to stress a point, he would raise his index finger, as if threatening the audience.

The girl with the glasses could barely suppress her yawns, while Franz smiled blissfully at her side. The longer he looked at the pleasing gray-haired man with the admirable index finger, the more he saw him as a secret messenger, an angelic intermediary between him and his goddess. He closed his eyes and dreamed. He closed his eyes as he had closed them over Sabina's body in

fifteen European hotels and one in America. ♦

*(Translated, from the Czech, by Michael Henry Heim.)*

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*Milan Kundera was an author of poetry, essays, and fiction, including “The Joke” and “The Unbearable Lightness of Being.”*