Ignorance

The Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera was born in Brno and has lived in France for almost thirty years. He is the author of the novels *The Joke*, *Life is Elsewhere*, *Farewell Waltz*, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Immortality*, and the short-story collection *Laughable Loves* – all originally in Czech. His most recent novels – *Slowness*, *Identity* and *Ignorance*, as well as his non-fiction works *The Art of the Novel* and *Testaments Betrayed* – were originally written in French.

by the same author

fiction

THE JOKE
LAUGHABLE LOVES
LIFE IS ELSEWHERE
FAREWELL WALTZ
THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING
THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING
IMMORTALITY
SLOWNESS
IDENTITY

non-fiction

THE ART OF THE NOVEL
TESTAMENTS BETRAYED

plays

JACQUES AND HIS MASTER

Milan Kundera

Ignorance

Translated from the French by
Linda Asher

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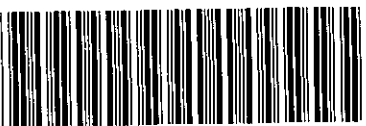
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Ignorance

1

"What are you still doing here?" Her tone wasn't harsh, but it wasn't kindly, either; Sylvie was indignant.

"Where should I be?" Irena asked.

"Home!"

"You mean this isn't my home anymore?"

Of course she wasn't trying to drive Irena out of France or implying that she was an undesirable alien: "You know what I mean!"

"Yes, I do know, but aren't you forgetting that I've got my work here? My apartment? My children?"

"Look, I know Gustaf. He'll do anything to help you get back to your own country. And your daughters, let's not kid ourselves! They've already got their own lives. Good Lord, Irena, it's so fascinating, what's going on in your country! In a situation like that, things always work out."

"But Sylvie! It's not just a matter of practical things, the job, the apartment. I've been living here for twenty years now. My life is here!"

"Your people have a revolution going on!"

Sylvie spoke in a tone that brooked no objection. Then she said no more. By her silence she meant to tell Irena that you don't desert when great events are happening.

"But if I go back to my country, we won't see each other anymore," said Irena, to put her friend in an uncomfortable position.

That emotional demagognery miscarried. Sylvie's voice warmed: "Darling, I'll come see you! I promise, I promise!"

They were seated across from each other, over two empty coffee cups. Irena saw tears of emotion in Sylvie's eyes as her friend bent toward her and gripped her hand: "It will be your great return." And again: "Your great return."

Repeated, the words took on such power that, deep inside her, Irena saw them written out with capital initials: Great Return. She dropped her resistance: she was captivated by images suddenly welling up from books read long ago, from films, from her own memory, and maybe from her ancestral memory: the lost son home again with his aged mother; the man returning to his beloved from whom cruel destiny had torn him away; the family homestead we all carry about within us;

the rediscovered trail still marked by the forgotten footprints of childhood; Odysseus sighting his island after years of wandering; the return, the return, the great magic of the return.

2

The Greek word for "return" is *nostos*. *Algos* means "suffering." So nostalgia is the suffering caused by an unappeased yearning to return. To express that fundamental notion most Europeans can utilize a word derived from the Greek (*nostalgia*, *nostalgie*) as well as other words with roots in their national languages: *añoranza*, say the Spaniards; *saudade*, say the Portuguese. In each language these words have a different semantic nuance. Often they mean only the sadness caused by the impossibility of returning to one's country: a longing for country, for home. What in English is called "homesickness." Or in German: *Heimweh*. In Dutch: *heimwee*. But this reduces that great notion to just its spatial element. One of the oldest European languages, Icelandic (like English)

makes a distinction between two terms: *söknuður*: nostalgia in its general sense; and *heimþrá*: longing for the homeland. Czechs have the Greek-derived *nostalgie* as well as their own noun, *stesk*, and their own verb; the most moving Czech expression of love: *styska se mi po tobe* ("I yearn for you," "I'm nostalgic for you"; "I cannot bear the pain of your absence"). In Spanish *añoranza* comes from the verb *añorar* (to feel nostalgia), which comes from the Catalan *enyorar*, itself derived from the Latin word *ignorare* (to be unaware of, not know, not experience; to lack or miss). In that etymological light nostalgia seems something like the pain of ignorance, of not knowing. You are far away, and I don't know what has become of you. My country is far away, and I don't know what is happening there. Certain languages have problems with nostalgia: the French can only express it by the noun from the Greek root, and have no verb for it; they can say *Je m'ennuie de toi* (I miss you), but the word *s'ennuyer* is weak, cold—anyhow too light for so grave a feeling. The Germans rarely use the Greek-derived term *Nostalgie*, and tend to say *Sehnsucht* in speaking of the desire for an absent thing. But

Sehnsucht can refer both to something that has existed and to something that has never existed (a new adventure), and therefore it does not necessarily imply the *nostos* idea; to include in *Sehnsucht* the obsession with returning would require adding a complementary phrase: *Sehnsucht nach der Vergangenheit, nach der verlorenen Kindheit, nach der ersten Liebe* (longing for the past, for lost childhood, for a first love).

The dawn of ancient Greek culture brought the birth of the *Odyssey*, the founding epic of nostalgia. Let us emphasize: Odysseus, the greatest adventurer of all time, is also the greatest nostalgic. He went off (not very happily) to the Trojan War and stayed for ten years. Then he tried to return to his native Ithaca, but the gods' intrigues prolonged his journey, first by three years jammed with the most uncanny happenings, then by seven more years that he spent as hostage and lover with Calypso, who in her passion for him would not let him leave her island.

In Book Five of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus tells Calypso: "As wise as she is, I know that Penelope cannot compare to you in stature or in beauty. . . . And yet the only wish I wish each day is to be

back there, to see in my own house the day of my return!" And Homer goes on: "As Odysseus spoke, the sun sank; the dusk came: and beneath the vault deep within the cavern, they withdrew to lie and love in each other's arms."

A far cry from the life of the poor émigré that Irena had been for a long while now. Odysseus lived a real *dolce vita* there in Calypso's land, a life of ease, a life of delights. And yet, between the *dolce vita* in a foreign place and the risky return to his home, he chose the return. Rather than ardent exploration of the unknown (adventure), he chose the apotheosis of the known (return). Rather than the infinite (for adventure never intends to finish), he chose the finite (for the return is a reconciliation with the finitude of life).

Without waking him, the Phaeacian seamen laid Odysseus, still wrapped in his bedding, near an olive tree on Ithaca's shore, and then departed. Such was his journey's end. He slept on, exhausted. When he awoke, he could not tell where he was. Then Athena wiped the mist from his eyes and it was rapture; the rapture of the Great Return; the ecstasy of the known; the music that sets the air vibrating between earth and

heaven: he saw the harbor he had known since childhood, the mountain overlooking it, and he fondled the old olive tree to confirm that it was still the same as it had been twenty years earlier.

In 1950, when Arnold Schoenberg had been in the United States for seventeen years, a journalist asked him a few treacherously innocent questions: Is it true that emigration causes artists to lose their creativity? That their inspiration withers when it no longer has the roots of their native land to nourish it?

Imagine! Five years after the Holocaust! And an American journalist won't forgive Schoenberg his lack of attachment to that chunk of earth where, before his very eyes, the horror of horrors started! But it's a lost cause. Homer glorified nostalgia with a laurel wreath and thereby laid out a moral hierarchy of emotions. Penelope stands at its summit, very high above Calypso.

Calypso, ah, Calypso! I often think about her. She loved Odysseus. They lived together for seven years. We do not know how long Odysseus shared Penelope's bed, but certainly not so long as that. And yet we extol Penelope's pain and sneer at Calypso's tears.

3

Like blows from an ax, important dates cut deep gashes into Europe's twentieth century. The First World War, in 1914; the second; then the third—the longest one, known as "the Cold"—ending in 1989 with the disappearance of Communism. Beyond these important dates that apply to Europe as a whole, dates of secondary importance define the fates of particular nations: the year 1936, with the civil war in Spain; 1956, with Russia's invasion of Hungary; 1948, when the Yugoslavs rose up against Stalin; and 1991, when they set about slaughtering one another. The Scandinavians, the Dutch, the English are privileged to have had no important dates since 1945, which has allowed them to live a delightfully null half century.

The history of the Czechs in the twentieth century is graced with a remarkable mathematical beauty owing to the triple repetition of the number twenty. In 1918, after several centuries, they achieved their independence, and in 1938 they lost it.

In 1948 the Communist revolution, imported from Moscow, inaugurated the country's second twenty-year span; that one ended in 1968 when, enraged by the country's insolent self-emancipation, the Russians invaded with half a million soldiers.

The occupier took over in full force in the autumn of 1969 and then, to everyone's surprise, took off in autumn 1989—quietly, politely, as did all the Communist regimes in Europe at that time: and that was the third twenty-year span.

Our century is the only one in which historic dates have taken such a voracious grip on every single person's life. Irena's existence in France cannot be understood without first analyzing the dates. In the fifties and sixties, émigrés from the Communist countries were not much liked there; the French considered the sole true evil to be fascism: Hitler, Mussolini, Franco, the dictators in Latin America. Only gradually, late in the sixties and into the seventies, did they come to see Communism, too, as an evil, although one of a lesser degree—say, evil number two. That was when, in 1969, Irena and her husband emigrated to France. They soon realized that com-

pared with the number one evil, the catastrophe that had befallen their country was not bloody enough to impress their new friends. To make their position clear, they took to saying something like this:

"Horrible as it is, a fascist dictatorship will disappear when its dictator does, and therefore people can keep up hope. But Communism, which is sustained by the enormous Russian civilization, is an endless tunnel for a Poland, a Hungary (not even to mention an Estonia!). Dictators are perishable, Russia is eternal. The misery of the countries we come from lies in the utter absence of hope."

This was the accurate expression of their thinking, and to illustrate it, Irena would quote a stanza from Jan Skacel, a Czech poet of the period: he describes the sadness surrounding him; he wants to take that sadness in his hands, carry it far off somewhere and build himself a house out of it, he wants to lock himself inside that house for three hundred years and for three hundred years not open the door, not open the door to anyone!

Three hundred years? Skacel wrote those lines in the 1970s and he died in 1989, in autumn, just

a few days before those three hundred years of sadness he saw stretching ahead crumbled in just a few days: people filled the Prague streets, and the key rings jangling in their lifted hands rang in the coming of a new age.

Did Skacel have it wrong when he spoke of three hundred years? Of course he did. All predictions are wrong, that's one of the few certainties granted to mankind. But though predictions may be wrong, they are right about the people who voice them, not about their future but about their experience of the present moment. During what I call their first twenty-year span (between 1918 and 1938), the Czechs believed that their republic had all infinity ahead of it. They had it wrong, but precisely because they were wrong, they lived those years in a state of joy that led their arts to flourish as never before.

After the Russian invasion, since they had no inkling of Communism's eventual end, they again believed they were inhabiting an infinity, and it was not the pain of their current life but the vacuity of the future that sucked dry their energies, stifled their courage, and made that third twenty-year span so craven, so wretched.

In 1921, convinced that with his twelve-tone system he had opened far-reaching prospects to musical history, Arnold Schoenberg declared that thanks to him, predominance (he didn't say "glory," he said *Vorherrschaft*, "predominance") was guaranteed to German music (he, a Viennese, didn't say "Austrian," he said "German") for the next hundred years (I quote him exactly, he spoke of "a hundred years"). A dozen years after that prophecy, in 1933, he was forced, as a Jew, to leave Germany (the very Germany for which he sought to guarantee *Vorherrschaft*), as was all music based on his twelve-tone system (which was condemned as incomprehensible, elitist, cosmopolitan, and hostile to the German spirit).

Schoenberg's prognosis, however mistaken, is nonetheless indispensable for anyone seeking to understand the meaning of his work, which he considered not destructive, hermetic, cosmopolitan, individualistic, difficult, or abstract but, rather, deeply rooted in "German soil" (yes, he spoke of "German soil"); Schoenberg believed he was writing not a fascinating epilogue to the history of Europe's great music (which is how I tend to see his work) but the prologue to a glorious future stretching farther than the eye could see.

4

From the very first weeks after emigrating, Irena began to have strange dreams: she is in an airplane that switches direction and lands at an unknown airport; uniformed men with guns are waiting for her at the foot of the gangway; in a cold sweat, she recognizes the Czech police. Another time she is strolling in a small French city when she sees an odd group of women, each holding a beer mug, run toward her, call to her in Czech, laugh with fake cordiality, and in terror Irena realizes that she is in Prague. She cries out, she wakes up.

Martin, her husband, was having the same dreams. Every morning they would talk about the horror of that return to their native land. Then, in the course of a conversation with a Polish friend, an émigré herself, Irena realized that all émigrés had those dreams, every one, without exception; at first she was moved by that nighttime fraternity of people unknown to one another, then somewhat irritated: how could the very private experience of a dream be a collective event? what was unique about her soul, then? But that's

enough of questions that have no answers! One thing was certain: on any given night, thousands of émigrés were all dreaming the same dream in numberless variants. The emigration-dream: one of the strangest phenomena of the second half of the twentieth century.

These dream-nightmares seemed to her all the more mysterious in that she was afflicted simultaneously with an uncontrollable nostalgia and another, completely opposite, experience: landscapes from her country kept appearing to her by day. No, this was not daydreaming, lengthy and conscious, willed; it was something else entirely: visions of landscapes would blink on in her head unexpectedly, abruptly, swiftly, and go out instantly. She would be talking to her boss and all at once, like a flash of lightning, she'd see a path through a field. She would be jostled on the Métro and suddenly, a narrow lane in some leafy Prague neighborhood would rise up before her for a split second. All day long these fleeting images would visit her to assuage the longing for her lost Bohemia.

The same moviemaker of the subconscious who, by day, was sending her bits of the home

landscape as images of happiness, by night would set up terrifying returns to that same land. The day was lit with the beauty of the land forsaken, the night by the horror of returning to it. The day would show her the paradise she had lost; the night, the hell she had fled.

5

Loyal to the tradition of the French Revolution, the Communist countries hurled anathema at emigration, deemed to be the most odious treason. Everyone who stayed abroad was convicted in absentia in their home country, and their compatriots did not dare have any contact with them. Still, as time passed, the severity of the anathema weakened, and a few years before 1989, Irena's mother, an inoffensive pensioner recently widowed, was granted an exit visa for a weeklong trip to Italy through the government travel agency; the following year she decided to spend five days in Paris and secretly see her daughter. Touched, and full of pity for a mother she imagined had

grown elderly, Irena booked her a hotel room and sacrificed some vacation time so she could be with her the whole while.

"You don't look too bad," the mother said when they first met. Then, laughing, she added: "Neither do I, actually. When the border policeman looked at my passport, he said: 'This is a false passport, Madame! This is not your date of birth!'" Instantly Irena recognized her mother as the person she had always known, and she had the sense that nothing had changed in those nearly twenty years. The pity she'd felt for an elderly mother evaporated. Daughter and mother faced off like two beings outside time, like two timeless essences.

But wasn't it awful of the daughter not to be delighted at the presence of her mother who, after seventeen years, had come to see her? Irena mustered all her rationality, all her moral discipline, to behave like a devoted daughter. She took her mother to dinner at the restaurant up in the Eiffel Tower; she took her on a tour boat to show her Paris from the Seine; and because the mother wanted to see art, she took her to the Musée Picasso. In the second gallery the mother stopped

short: "I've got a friend who's a painter. She gave me two pictures as a gift. You can't imagine how beautiful they are!" In the third gallery she declared she wanted to see the Impressionists: "There's a permanent exhibition at the Jeu de Paume." "That's gone now," Irena said. "The Impressionists aren't at the Jeu de Paume anymore." "No, no," said the mother. "They are, they're at the Jeu de Paume. I know they are, and I'm not leaving Paris without seeing van Gogh!" Irena took her instead to the Musée Rodin. Standing in front of one of his statues, the mother sighed dreamily: "In Florence I saw Michelangelo's *David*! I was just speechless!" "Listen," Irena exploded. "You're here in Paris with me, and I'm showing you Rodin. Rodin! You hear? Rodin! You've never seen him, so why are you thinking about Michelangelo when you're right in front of Rodin?"

The question was fair: why, when she is reunited with her daughter after years, does the mother take no interest in what the younger woman is showing her and telling her? Why does Michelangelo, whom she saw with a group of Czech tourists, captivate her more than Rodin?

And why, through all these five days, does she not ask her daughter a single question? Not one question about her life, and none about France either—about its cuisine, its literature, its cheeses, its wines, its politics, its theaters, its films, its cars, its pianists, its cellists, its athletes?

Instead she talks constantly about goings-on in Prague, about Irena's half-brother (by her second husband, the one who just died), about other people, some Irena remembers and some she's never heard of. A couple of times she's tried to inject a remark about her life in France, but her words never penetrate the chinkless barrier of the mother's discourse.

That's how it had been ever since she was a child: the mother fussed over her son as if he were a little girl, but was manfully Spartan toward her daughter. Do I mean that she did not love her daughter? Perhaps because of Irena's father, her first husband, whom she had despised? We won't indulge in that sort of cheap psychologizing. Her behavior was very well intentioned: overflowing with energy and health herself, she worried over her daughter's low vitality; her rough style was meant to rid the daughter of her hypersensitivity, rather like an athletic father who throws his fear-

ful child into the swimming pool in the belief that this is the best way to teach him to swim.

And yet she was fully aware that her mere presence flattened her daughter, and I won't deny that she took a secret pleasure in her own physical superiority. So? What was she supposed to do? Vanish into thin air in the name of maternal love? She was growing inexorably older, and the sense of her strength as reflected in Irena's reaction had a rejuvenating effect on her. When she saw her daughter cowed and diminished at her side, she would prolong the occasions of her demolishing supremacy as long as possible. With sadistic zest, she would pretend to take Irena's fragility for indifference, laziness, indolence, and scolded her for it.

Irena had always felt less pretty and less intelligent in her mother's presence. How often had she run to the mirror for reassurance that she wasn't ugly, didn't look like an idiot . . . ? Oh, all that was so far away, almost forgotten. But during her mother's five-day stay in Paris, that feeling of inferiority, of weakness, of dependency came over her again.

6

The night before her mother left, Irena introduced her to her companion, Gustaf, a Swede. The three of them had dinner in a restaurant, and the mother, who spoke not a word of French, managed valiantly with English. Gustaf was delighted: with his mistress, Irena, he spoke only French, and he was tired of that language, which he considered pretentious and not very practical. That evening Irena did not talk much: she looked on in surprise as her mother displayed an unexpected capacity for interest in another person; with just her thirty badly pronounced English words she overwhelmed Gustaf with questions about his life, his business, his views, and she impressed him.

The next day her mother left. Back from the airport, and back to peace in her top-floor apartment, Irena went to the window to savor the freedom of solitude. She gazed for a long while out at the rooftops, the array of chimneys with all their different fantastical shapes—the Parisian flora that had long ago supplanted the green of Czech gardens—and she realized how happy she was in

this city. She had always taken it as a given that emigrating was a misfortune. But, now she wonders, wasn't it instead an illusion of misfortune, an illusion suggested by the way people perceive an émigré? Wasn't she interpreting her own life according to the operating instructions other people had handed her? And she thought that even though it had been imposed from the outside and against her will, her emigration was perhaps, without her knowing it, the best outcome for her life. The implacable forces of history that had attacked her freedom had set her free.

So she was a little disconcerted a few weeks later when Gustaf proudly announced some good news: he had proposed that his firm open a Prague office. Since the Communist country had limited commercial appeal, the office would be a modest one; still, he would have occasion to spend time there now and then.

"I'm thrilled to have a connection with your city," he said.

Rather than delight, she felt some sort of vague threat.

"My city? Prague isn't my city anymore," she answered.

"What?" He bristled.

She had never disguised her views from him, so it was certainly possible for him to know her well, and yet he was seeing her exactly the way everyone else saw her: *a young woman in pain, banished from her country.* He himself comes from a Swedish town he wholeheartedly detests, and in which he refuses to set foot. But in his case it's taken for granted. Because everyone applauds him as *a nice, very cosmopolitan Scandinavian who's already forgotten all about the place he comes from.* Both of them are pigeonholed, labeled, and they will be judged by how true they are to their labels (of course, that and that alone is what's emphatically called "being true to oneself").

"What are you saying!" he protested. "Then what is your city?"

"Paris! This is where I met you, where I live with you."

As if he hadn't heard her, he stroked her hand: "Accept this as my gift to you. You can't go there. So I'll be your link to your lost country. I'm happy to do it!"

She did not doubt his goodness; she thanked

him; nonetheless she added, her tone even: "But please do understand that I don't need you to be my link with anything at all. I'm happy with you, cut off from everything and everyone."

He responded just as soberly: "I understand what you're saying. And don't worry that I expect to involve myself in your old life there. The only one I'll see of the people you used to know will be your mother."

What could she say? That her mother is exactly the person she doesn't want him spending time with? How could she tell him that—this man who remembers his own dead mother with such love?

"I admire your mother. What vitality!"

Irena has no doubt of that. Everyone admires her mother for her vitality. How can she explain to Gustaf that within the magic circle of maternal energy, Irena has never managed to rule over her own life? How can she explain that the constant proximity of the mother would throw her back, into her weaknesses, her immaturity? Oh, this insane idea of Gustaf's, wanting to connect with Prague!

Only when she was alone, back in the house, did she calm down, telling herself: "The police

barrier between the Communist countries and the West is pretty solid, thank God. I don't have to worry that Gustaf's contacts with Prague could be any threat to me."

What? What was that she just said to herself? "The police barrier is pretty solid, thank God?" Did she really say, "Thank God?" Did she—an émigré everyone pities for losing her homeland—did she actually say, "Thank God?"

7

Gustaf had come to know Martin by chance, over a business negotiation. He met Irena much later, when she was already widowed. They liked each other, but they were shy. Whereupon the husband hurried in from the beyond to help them along by being a ready subject for conversation. When Gustaf learned from Irena that Martin had been born the same year he was, he heard the collapse of the wall that separated him from this much-younger woman, and he felt a grateful affection for the dead man whose age encouraged him to court the man's beautiful wife.

Gustaf worshipped his deceased mother; he tolerated (without pleasure) two grown daughters; he was fleeing his wife. He would very much have liked to divorce if it could be done amicably. Since that was impossible, he did his best to stay away from Sweden. Like him, Irena had two daughters, who were also on the brink of living on their own. For the elder one Gustaf bought a studio apartment, and he arranged to send the younger one to a boarding school in England, so that Irena, living alone, could take him in.

She was dazzled by his goodness, which everyone saw as the main trait, the most striking, almost unbelievable trait of his character. He charmed women by it; they understood only too late that the goodness was less a weapon of seduction than a weapon of defense. His mother's darling boy, he was incapable of living on his own without women's caretaking. But he tolerated all the less well their demands, their arguments, their tears, and even their too-present, too-expansive bodies. To keep them around and at the same time avoid them, he would lob great artillery shells of goodness at them. Under cover of the smoke he would beat his retreat.

In the face of his goodness, Irena was at first

[illegible] why was he so kind, so gen-[illegible]? How could she repay [illegible] compense she could figure out [illegible] her desire. She would set her wide-[illegible] on him, a gaze that demanded some [illegible] immense, intoxicating, nameless thing.

Her desire; the sad story of her desire. She had never known sexual pleasure before she met Martin. Then she bore a child, moved from Prague to France with a second daughter in her belly, and soon after that Martin was dead. She went through some long, hard years then, forced to take on any sort of work—cleaning houses, caring for a rich paraplegic—and it was a big triumph just to get the chance to do translations from Russian to French (she was glad to have studied languages seriously in Prague). The years rolled by, and on posters, on billboards, on the covers of magazines displayed on the newsstands, women stripped and couples kissed and men strutted in underpants, while amid the universal orgy her own body roamed the streets neglected and invisible.

So meeting Gustaf had been a festival. After such a long time, her body, her face were finally being seen and appreciated, and because they

were pleasing, a man had invited her to share life with him. It was in the midst of that enchantment that her mother turned up in Paris. But at perhaps that same time, or very slightly later, she began to harbor a vague suspicion that her body had not entirely escaped the fate it was apparently destined for all along. That Gustaf, who was fleeing his wife, his women, was looking to her not for an adventure, a new youth, a freedom of the senses, but for a rest. Let's not exaggerate; her body did not go untouched; but her suspicion grew that it was being touched less than it deserved.

8

Europe's Communism burned out exactly two hundred years after the French Revolution took fire. For Irena's Parisian friend Sylvie, that was a coincidence loaded with meaning. But with what meaning? What name could be given to the triumphal arch spanning those two majestic dates? *The Arch of the Two Greatest European Revolu-*

[illegible] Or *The Arch Connecting the Greatest Revolution with the Final Restoration?* For the sake of avoiding ideological argument, I propose that we adopt a more modest interpretation: the first date gave birth to a great European character, the Émigré (either the Great Traitor or the Great Victim, according to one's outlook); the second date took the Émigré off the set of The History of the Europeans; with that, the great moviemaker of the collective unconscious finished off one of his most original productions, the emigration-dream show. And it was at this moment that Irena first returned to Prague for a few days.

When she set out it was very cold, and then after she had been there three days, summer arrived suddenly, unexpectedly, unseasonably. Her thick suit became unwearable. Having packed nothing for warmer weather, she went to a shop to buy a summer dress. The country was not yet overflowing with merchandise from the West, and all she found was the same fabrics, the same colors, the same styles she had known during the Communist period. She tried on two or three dresses and was uncomfortable. Hard to say why: they weren't ugly, their cut wasn't bad, but

they reminded her of her distant past, the sartorial austerity of her youth; they looked naive, provincial, inelegant, fit for a country schoolteacher. But she was in a hurry. Why, after all, shouldn't she look like a country schoolteacher for a few days? She bought the dress for a ridiculous price, kept it on, and with her winter suit in the bag stepped out into the hot street.

Then, walking by a big department store, she unexpectedly passed a wall covered with an enormous mirror and she was stunned: the person she saw was not she, it was somebody else or, when she looked longer at herself in her new dress, it was she but she living a different life, the life she would have lived if she had stayed in Prague. This woman was not dislikable, she was even touching, but a little too touching, touching to the point of tears, pitiable, poor, weak, downtrodden.

She was gripped by the same panic she used to feel in her emigration-dreams: through the magical power of a dress she could see herself imprisoned in a life she did not want and would never again be able to leave. As if long ago, at the start of her adult life, she had had a choice among several possible lives and had ended up choosing the

one that took her to France. And as if those other lives, rejected and abandoned, were still lying in wait for her and were jealously watching for her from their lairs. One of them had now snatched Irena and bound her into her new dress as if into a straitjacket.

Frightened, she hurried home to Gustaf's apartment (his company had bought a house in central Prague and he kept a pied-à-terre up under the eaves) and changed her clothes. Back in her winter suit now, she looked out the window. The sky was cloudy, and the trees bent under the wind. It had been hot for only a few hours. A few hours of heat to play a nightmare trick on her, to call up the horror of the return.

(Was it a dream? Her final emigration-dream? No, no, the whole thing today had been real. Still, she had the sense that the snares she knew from those early dreams were not done with—that they were still present, still at the ready, on the lookout for her.)

9

During the twenty years of Odysseus' absence, the people of Ithaca retained many recollections of him but never felt nostalgia for him. Whereas Odysseus did suffer nostalgia, and remembered almost nothing.

We can comprehend this curious contradiction if we realize that for memory to function well, it needs constant practice: if recollections are not evoked again and again, in conversations with friends, they go. Émigrés gathered together in compatriot colonies keep retelling to the point of nausea the same stories, which thereby become unforgettable. But people who do not spend time with their compatriots, like Irena or Odysseus, are inevitably stricken with amnesia. The stronger their nostalgia, the emptier of recollections it becomes. The more Odysseus languished, the more he forgot. For nostalgia does not heighten memory's activity, it does not awaken recollections; it suffices unto itself, unto its own feelings, so fully absorbed is it by its suffering and nothing else.

After killing off the brazen fellows who hoped to marry Penelope and rule Ithaca, Odysseus was obliged to live with people he knew nothing about. To flatter him they would go over and over everything they could recall about him before he left for the war. And because they believed that all he was interested in was his Ithaca (how could they think otherwise, since he had journeyed over the immensity of the seas to get back to the place?), they nattered on about things that had happened during his absence, eager to answer any question he might have. Nothing bored him more. He was waiting for just one thing: for them finally to say "Tell us!" And that is the one thing they never said.

For twenty years he had thought about nothing but his return. But once he was back, he was amazed to realize that his life, the very essence of his life, its center, its treasure, lay outside Ithaca, in the twenty years of his wanderings. And this treasure he had lost, and could retrieve only by telling about it.

After leaving Calypso, during his return journey, he was shipwrecked in Phaeacia, whose king welcomed him to his court. There he was a for-

eigner, a mysterious stranger. A stranger gets asked "Who are you? Where do you come from? Tell us!" and he had told. For four long books of the *Odyssey* he had retraced in detail his adventures before the dazzled Phaeacians. But in Ithaca he was not a stranger, he was one of their own, so it never occurred to anyone to say, "Tell us!"

10

She leafed through her old address books, lingering over half-forgotten names; then she reserved a room at a restaurant. On a long table against the wall, alongside platters of petits fours, twelve bottles stood in neat rows. In Bohemia people don't drink good wine, and there is no custom of laying down vintage bottlings. She bought this old Bordeaux with all the greater pleasure: to surprise her guests, to make a party for them, to regain their friendship.

She came close to ruining it all. Awkwardly her friends eye the bottles until one of them, full of confidence and proud of her plain-and-simple

style, declares her preference for beer. Emboldened anew by this outspokenness, the others go along and the beer lover calls the waiter.

Irena blames herself for having committed an act of poor taste with her case of Bordeaux, for thoughtlessly underscoring everything that stands between them: her long absence from the country, her foreigner's ways, her wealth. She blames herself the more because the gathering is so important for her: she hopes finally to figure out whether she can live here, feel at home, have friends. So she determines not to let that bit of boorishness bother her, she is even willing to see it as a pleasing directness; after all, this beer her guests are so loyal to, isn't beer the holy libation of sincerity? the potion that dispels all hypocrisy, any charade of fine manners? the drink that does nothing worse than incite its fans to urinate in all innocence, to gain weight in all frankness? And in fact the women in the room are fullheartedly fat, they talk incessantly, overflow with good advice, and sing the praises of Gustaf, whose existence they all know about.

Meanwhile, the waiter appears in the doorway with ten half-liter mugs of beer, five in each hand,

a great athletic feat that provokes applause and laughter. They all lift their mugs and toast: "Health to Irena! Health to the daughter who's returned!"

Irena takes a small sip of beer, thinking: And suppose it were Gustaf offering them the wine? Would they have turned it down? Certainly not. Rejecting the wine was rejecting her. Her as the person she is now, coming back after so many years.

And that was exactly her gamble: that they'd accept her as the person she is now, coming back. She left here as a naive young woman, and she has come back mature, with a life behind her, a difficult life that she's proud of. She means to do all she can to get them to accept her with her experiences of the past twenty years, with her convictions, her ideas; it'll be double or nothing: either she succeeds in being among them as the person she has become, or else she won't stay. She arranged this gathering as the starting point in her campaign. They can drink beer if they insist, that doesn't faze her; what matters to her is choosing the topic of conversation herself and being heard.

But time is passing, the women are all talking at once, and it is nearly impossible to have a conversation, much less to impose its subject. She tries delicately to take up topics they raise and lead them toward what she wants to tell them, but she fails: as soon as her remarks move away from their own concerns, no one listens.

The waiter has already brought the second round of beer; her first mug is still standing on the table with its foam collapsed as if disgraced alongside the exuberant foam of the fresh mug. Irena faults herself for having lost her taste for beer; in France she learned to savor a drink by small mouthfuls, and is no longer used to bolting great quantities of liquid as beer-loving requires. She raises the mug to her lips and forces herself to take two, three swigs in a row. Just then one woman—the oldest of them all, about sixty—gently puts her hand to Irena's lips and wipes away the flecks of foam left there.

"Don't force yourself," she tells her. "Suppose we have a little wine ourselves? It would be idiotic to pass up such a good wine," and she asks the waiter to open one of the bottles still standing untouched on the long table.

11

Milada had been a colleague of Martin's, working at the same institute. Irena had recognized her when she first appeared at the door of the room, but only now, each of them with a wine glass in hand, is she able to talk to her. She looks at her: Milada still has the same shape face (round), the same dark hair, the same hairstyle (also round, covering the ears and falling to below the chin). She appears not to have changed; however, when she begins to speak, her face is abruptly transformed: her skin creases and creases again, her upper lip shows fine vertical lines, while wrinkles on her cheeks and chin shift rapidly with every expression. Irena thinks Milada certainly must not realize this: people don't talk to themselves in front of a mirror; she would see her own face only when it is at rest, with the skin nearly smooth; every mirror in the world would have her believe that she is still beautiful.

As she savors the wine, Milada says (and instantly, on her lovely face, the wrinkles spring forth and start to dance): "It's not easy, returning, is it?"

"They can't understand that we left without the slightest hope of coming back. We did our best to drop anchor where we were. Do you know Skacel?"

"The poet?"

"There's a stanza where he talks about his sadness; he says he wants to build a house out of it and lock himself inside for three hundred years. Three hundred years. We all saw a three-hundred-year-long tunnel stretching ahead of us."

"Sure, we did too, here."

"So then why isn't anyone willing to acknowledge that?"

"Because people revise their feelings if the feelings were wrong. If history has disproved them."

"And then, too: everybody thinks we left to get ourselves an easy life. They don't know how hard it is to carve out a little place for yourself in a foreign world. Can you imagine—leaving your country with a baby and with another one in your belly. Losing your husband. Raising your two daughters with no money . . ."

She falls silent, and Milada says: "It makes no sense to tell them all that. Even until just lately, everybody was arguing about who had the hard-

est time under the old regime. Everybody wanted to be acknowledged as a victim. But those suffering-contests are over now. These days people brag about success, not about suffering. So if they're prepared to respect you now, it's not for the hard life you've had, it's because they see you've got yourself a rich man!"

They've been talking for a long time in a corner when the other women approach and collect around them. As if to make up for not paying enough attention to their hostess, they are garrulous (a beer high makes people more noisy and good-humored than a wine high) and affectionate. The woman who earlier had demanded beer cries: "I've really got to taste your wine!" and she calls the waiter, who opens more bottles and fills glasses.

Irena is gripped by a sudden vision: beer mugs in hand and laughing noisily, a bunch of women rush up to her, she makes out Czech words, and understands, horrified, that she is not in France, that she is in Prague and she is doomed. Oh, yes—it's one of her old emigration-dreams, and she quickly banishes the memory of it: in fact the women around her aren't drinking beer now,

they're raising wineglasses, and again they're toasting the daughter's return; then one of them, beaming, says to her: "You remember? I wrote you that it was high time, high time you came back!"

Who is that woman? The whole evening she's been talking about her husband's sickness, lingering excitedly over all the morbid details. Finally Irena recognizes her: the high-school classmate who wrote her the very week Communism fell: "Oh, my dear, we're old already! It's high time you came back!" Again, now, she repeats that line, and in her thickened face a broad grin reveals dentures.

The other women assail her with questions: "Irena, remember when . . . ?" And "You know what happened back then with . . . ?" "Oh, no, really, you must remember him!" "That guy with the big ears, you always made fun of him!" "No, you can't possibly have forgotten him! You're all he talks about!"

Until that moment they have shown no interest in what she was trying to tell them. What is the meaning of this sudden onslaught? What is it they want to find out, these women who wouldn't lis-

ten to anything before? She soon sees that their questions are of a particular kind: questions to check whether she knows what they know, whether she remembers what they remember. This has a strange effect on her, one that will stay with her:

Earlier, by their total uninterest in her experience abroad, they amputated twenty years from her life. Now, with this interrogation, they are trying to stitch her old past onto her present life. As if they were amputating her forearm and attaching the hand directly to the elbow; as if they were amputating her calves and joining her feet to her knees.

Transfixed by that image, she can give no answer to their questions; anyhow, the women are not expecting one, and, drunker and drunker, they fall back into their chatter, which leaves Irena out. She watches their mouths opening all at the same time, mouths moving and emitting words and constantly bursting into laughter (a mystery: how is it that women not listening to one another can laugh at what the others are saying?). None of them is talking to Irena anymore, but they're all beaming with good humor, the woman

who started off by ordering beer begins singing, the others do the same, and even when the party's over, they go on singing out in the street.

In bed Irena thinks back over her party; once again her old emigration-dream comes back and she sees herself surrounded by women, noisy and hearty, raising their beer mugs. In the dream they were working for the secret police with orders to entrap her. But for whom were tonight's women working? "It's high time you came back," said her old classmate with the macabre dentures. As an emissary from the graveyards (the graveyards of the homeland), her job was to call Irena back into line: to warn her that time is short and that life is supposed to finish up where it started.

Then her thoughts turn to Milada, who was so maternally friendly; she made it clear that nobody is interested anymore in Irena's odyssey, and Irena realizes that, actually, neither is Milada. But how can she blame her? Why should Milada be interested in something that has no connection at all with her own life? It would be just a polite charade, and Irena is glad that Milada was so kindly, with no charade.

Her last thought before sleeping is about Sylvie. It's already so long since she's seen her! She

misses her! Irena would love to take her out to their Paris bistro and tell her all about her recent trip to Bohemia. Get her to understand how hard it is to return home. Actually you were the first, she imagines telling her, the first person who used those words: the Great Return. And you know something, Sylvie—now I understand: I could go back and live with them, but there'd be a condition: I'd have to lay my whole life with you, with all of you, with the French, solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it. Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. And the women would sing and dance with me around the fire, with beer mugs raised high in their hands. That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again.

12

One day at the Paris airport, she moved through the police checkpoint and sat down to wait for the Prague flight. On the facing bench she saw a man and, after a few moments of uncertainty and sur-

prise, she recognized him. In excitement she waited till their glances met, and then she smiled. He smiled back and nodded slightly. She rose and crossed to him as he rose in turn.

"Didn't we know each other in Prague?" she said in Czech. "Do you still remember me?"

"Of course."

"I recognized you right away. You haven't changed."

"Oh, that's an exaggeration."

"No, no. You look just the same. Good Lord, it's all so long ago." Then, laughing: "I'm grateful to you for recognizing me!" And then: "You've stayed there all that time?"

"No."

"You emigrated?"

"Yes."

"And where've you been living? In France?"

"No."

She sighed: "Ah, if you'd been living in France and we're only running into each other now . . ."

"It's pure chance that I'm going through Paris. I live in Denmark. What about you?"

"Here. In Paris. Good Lord. I can hardly believe my eyes. What have you been doing all

this time? Have you been able to carry on with your work?"

"Yes. What about you?"

"I must have done about seven different things."

"I won't ask you how many men you've been with."

"No, don't. And I promise not to ask you that kind of question either."

"And now? You've gone back?"

"Not completely. I still have my apartment in Paris. What about you?"

"Neither have I."

"But you do return often."

"No. This is the first time," he said.

"Oh, so late! You were in no big rush!"

"No."

"You have no obligations in Bohemia?"

"I'm a completely free man."

His tone was even, and she noted some melancholy as well.

Aboard the airplane her seat was forward on the aisle, and several times she turned to look back at him. She had never forgotten their long-ago encounter. It was in Prague, she was with a

bunch of friends in a bar, and he, a friend of one of them, never took his eyes off her. Their love story stopped before it could start. She still felt regret over it, a wound that never healed.

Twice she went to lean against his seat and continue their conversation. She learned that he would be in Bohemia for only three or four days, and at that in a provincial city to see his family. She was sad to hear it. Wouldn't he be in Prague for even a day? Well, yes, actually, on his way back to Denmark, maybe a day or two. Could she see him? It would be such a pleasure to get together again! He gave her the name of his hotel in the provinces.

13

He enjoyed the encounter, too; she was friendly, charming, and agreeable; forty-something and pretty; and he hadn't the faintest idea who she was. It's awkward to tell someone you don't remember her, but doubly awkward in this case because maybe it wasn't that he'd forgotten her

but just that she didn't look the same. And to tell a woman that is too boorish for him. Besides, he saw right away that this unknown woman was not going to make an issue of whether or not he remembered her, and that it was the easiest thing in the world to chat with her. But when they agreed to meet again and she offered to give him her telephone number, he was flustered: how could he phone a person whose name he didn't know? Without explaining, he said he would rather she call him, and asked her to take down the number at his provincial hotel.

At the Prague airport they separated. He rented a car, took the expressway and then a local highway. When he reached the city, he looked for the cemetery. But in vain. He found himself in a new neighborhood of tall identical buildings that threw him off. He spotted a boy of about ten, stopped the car, asked the way to the cemetery. The boy stared at him without answering. Thinking he had not understood, Josef articulated his question more slowly, louder, like a foreigner trying to enunciate clearly. The boy finally answered that he didn't know. But how in hell can a person not know where the cemetery is, the only ceme-

tery in town? Josef shifted gears, set off again, asked some other people, but their directions seemed barely intelligible. Eventually he found it: cramped behind a newly built viaduct, it seemed unimposing, and much smaller than it used to be.

He parked the car and walked down a lane of linden trees to the grave. Here, some thirty years earlier, he had watched the lowering of the coffin that held his mother. He had often come here afterward, on every visit to his hometown before his departure abroad. When, a month ago, he was planning this trip back to Bohemia, he already knew he would begin it here. He looked at the tombstone; the marble was covered with many names: apparently the grave had meanwhile become a large dormitory. Between the lane and the tombstone there was only lawn, neatly kept, with a flowerbed; he tried to imagine the coffins underneath: they must lie jammed one against the next, in rows of three, piled several layers deep. Mama was way down at the bottom. Where was the father? He had died fifteen years later; he would be separated from her by at least one layer of coffins.

He envisioned Mama's burial again. At the

time there were only two bodies in the grave: his father's parents. He'd found it perfectly natural back then that his mother should be with her husband's family; he'd never even wondered if she might not have preferred to join her own parents. Only later did he understand: regroupings in family vaults are determined well in advance by power relationships; his father's family was more influential than his mother's.

The number of new names on the stone troubled him. A few years after he left the country, he got word of his uncle's death, then of his aunt's, then eventually of his father's. Now he began reading the names closely; some were of people he had thought still living; he was stunned. It was not their deaths that unsettled him (anyone who decides to leave his country forever has to resign himself never to see his family again), but the fact that he had not been sent any announcement. The Communist police kept watch on letters addressed to émigrés; had people been afraid to write him? He examined the dates: the two most recent were after 1989. So it was not out of caution that they didn't write. The truth was worse: he no longer existed for them.

14

The hotel dated from the last years of Communism: a sleek modern building of the sort built all over the world, on the main square, very tall, towering by many stories over the city's rooftops. He settled into his seventh-floor room and then went to the window. It was seven in the evening, dusk was falling, the streetlights went on, and the square was amazingly quiet.

Before leaving Denmark he had considered the coming encounter with places he had known, with his past life, and had wondered: would he be moved? cold? delighted? depressed? Nothing of the sort. During his absence, an invisible broom had swept across the landscape of his childhood, wiping away everything familiar; the encounter he had expected never took place.

A long time ago Irena had visited a town in the French provinces, seeking out a little respite for her husband, who was already very ill. It was a Sunday; the town was quiet; they stopped on a bridge and stared at the water flowing peacefully between the greenish banks. At the point where

the river formed an elbow, an old villa surrounded by a garden looked to them like the image of a comforting home, the dream of an idyll long past. Caught up by the beauty, they took a stairway down onto the embankment, hoping for a stroll. After a few steps they saw that they'd been fooled by the Sunday peacefulness; the way was barricaded; they came up against an abandoned construction site: machines, tractors, mounds of earth and sand; on the far side of the river, trees lay felled; and the villa whose beauty had drawn them when they saw it from above now revealed broken windowpanes and a huge hole in place of a front door; behind the house jutted a building project ten stories high; yet the cityscape's beauty that had struck them with wonder was not an optical illusion; trampled, humiliated, mocked, it still showed through its own ruin. Irena looked again at the far bank and she saw that the great felled trees were in flower! Felled and laid out flat, they were alive! Just then music suddenly exploded from a loudspeaker, fortissimo. At that bludgeoning Irena clapped her hands over her ears and burst into sobs. Sobs for the world that was vanishing before her eyes. Her husband, who

was to die in a few months, took her by the hand and led her away.

The gigantic invisible broom that transforms, disfigures, erases landscapes has been at the job for millennia now, but its movements, which used to be slow, just barely perceptible, have sped up so much that I wonder: Would an *Odyssey* even be conceivable today? Is the epic of the return still pertinent to our time? When Odysseus woke on Ithaca's shore that morning, could he have listened in ecstasy to the music of the Great Return if the old olive tree had been felled and he recognized nothing around him?

Near the hotel a tall building exposed its bare side, a blind wall decorated with a gigantic picture. In the twilight the caption was unreadable, and all Josef could make out was two hands clasping, enormous hands, between sky and earth. Had they always been there? He couldn't recall.

He was dining alone at the hotel restaurant and all around him he heard the sound of conversations. It was the music of some unknown language. What had happened to Czech during those two sorry decades? Was it the stresses that had

changed? Apparently. Hitherto set firmly on the first syllable, they had grown weaker; the intonation seemed boneless. The melody sounded more monotone than before—drawling. And the timbre! It had turned nasal, which gave the speech an unpleasantly blasé quality. Over the centuries the music of any language probably does change imperceptibly, but to a person returning after an absence it can be disconcerting: bent over his plate, Josef was listening to an unknown language whose every word he understood.

Then, in his room, he picked up the telephone and dialed his brother's number. He heard a joyful voice inviting him to come over right away.

"I just wanted to tell you I'm here," said Josef. "Do excuse me for today, though. I don't want you to see me like this after all these years. I'm knocked out. Are you free tomorrow?"

He wasn't even sure his brother still worked at the hospital.

"I'll get free," was the answer.

15

He rings, and his brother, five years older than he, opens the door. They grip hands and gaze at each other. These are gazes of enormous intensity, and both men know very well what is going on: they are registering—swiftly, discreetly, brother about brother—the hair, the wrinkles, the teeth; each knows what he is looking for in the face before him, and each knows that the other is looking for the same thing in his. They are ashamed of doing so, because what they're looking for is the probable distance between the other man and death or, to say it more bluntly, each is looking in the other man's face for death beginning to show through. To put a quick end to that morbid scrutiny, they cast about for some phrase to make them forget those few grievous seconds, some exclamation or question, or if possible (it would be a gift from heaven) a joke (but nothing comes to their rescue).

"Come," the brother finally says and, taking Josef by the shoulders, leads him into the living room.

16

"We've been expecting you ever since the thing collapsed," the brother said when they sat down. "All the émigrés have already come home, or at least put in an appearance. No, no, that's not a reproach. You know best what's right for you."

"There you're wrong," said Josef with a laugh. "I don't know that."

"Did you come alone?" the brother asked.

"Yes."

"Are you thinking of moving back for good?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you'd have to take your wife's feelings into consideration. You got married over there, I believe."

"Yes."

"To a Danish woman," said his brother, hesitantly.

"Yes," Josef said, and did not go on.

The silence made the brother uncomfortable, and just to say something, Josef asked, "The house belongs to you now?"

In the old days the apartment had been part of

a three-story income property belonging to their father; the family (father, mother, two sons) lived on the top floor and the other two were rented out. After the Communist revolution of 1948 the house was expropriated, and the family stayed on as tenant.

"Yes," answered the brother, visibly embarrassed. "We tried to get in touch with you, but we couldn't."

"Why was that? You do know my address!"

After 1989 all properties nationalized by the revolution (factories, hotels, rental apartments, land, forests) were returned to their former owners (or more precisely, to their children or grandchildren); the procedure was called "restitution": it required only that a person declare himself owner to the legal authorities, and after a year during which his claim might be contested, the restitution became irrevocable. That judicial simplification allowed for a good deal of fraud, but it did avoid inheritance disputes, lawsuits, appeals, and thus brought about, in an astonishingly short time, the rebirth of a class society with a bourgeoisie that was rich, entrepreneurial, and positioned to set the national economy going.

"There was a lawyer handling it," answered the brother, still embarrassed. "Now it's already too late. The proceedings are closed now. But don't worry, we'll work things out between us and with no lawyers involved."

Just then the sister-in-law came in. This time that collision of gazes never even occurred: she had aged so much that the whole story was clear from the moment she appeared in the doorway. Josef wanted to drop his eyes and only look at her later, secretly, so as not to upset her. Stricken with pity, he stood up, went to her, and embraced her.

They sat down again. Unable to shake free of his emotion, Josef looked at her; if he had met her in the street, he would not have recognized her. These are the people who are closest to me in the world, he told himself, my family, all the family I have, my brother, my only brother. He repeated these words to himself as if to make the most of his emotion before it should dissipate.

That wave of tenderness caused him to say: "Forget the house business completely. Listen, really, let's be pragmatic—owning something here is not my problem. My problems aren't here."

Relieved, the brother repeated: "No, no. I like equity in everything. Besides, your wife should have her say on the subject."

"Let's talk about something else," Josef said as he laid his hand on his brother's and squeezed it.

17

They took him through the apartment to show him the changes since he had left. In one room he saw a painting that had belonged to him. When he'd decided to leave the country, he had to act quickly. He was living in another town at the time, and since he needed to keep secret his intention to emigrate, he could not give himself away by doling out his possessions to friends. The night before he left, he had put his keys in an envelope and mailed them to his brother. Then he'd phoned him from abroad and asked him to take anything he liked from the apartment before the state confiscated it. Later on, living in Denmark and happy to be starting a new life, he hadn't the slightest desire to find out

what his brother had managed to salvage and what he had done with it.

He gazed for a long while at the picture: a working-class suburb, poor, rendered in that bold welter of colors that recalled the Fauve artists from the turn of the century, Derain for example. And yet the painting was no pastiche; if it had been shown in 1905 at the Salon d'Automne together with works by the Fauves, viewers would have been struck by its strangeness, intrigued by the enigmatic perfume of an alluring visitor come from some faraway place. In fact the picture was painted in 1955, a period when doctrine on socialist art was strict in its demand for realism: this artist, who was a passionate modernist, would have preferred to paint the way people were painting all over the world at the time, which is to say in the abstract manner, but he also wanted his work to be exhibited; therefore he had to locate the magic point where the ideologues' imperatives intersected with his own desires as an artist; the shacks evoking workers' lives were a bow to the ideologues, and the violently unrealistic colors were his gift to himself.

Josef had visited the man's studio in the 1960s,

when the official doctrine was losing some of its force and the painter was already free to do pretty much whatever he wanted. In his naive sincerity Josef had liked this early picture better than the recent ones, and the painter, who looked on his own proletarian Fauvism with a slightly condescending affection, had cheerfully made him a gift of it; he'd even picked up his brush and, alongside his signature, written a dedication with Josef's name.

"You knew this painter well," remarked the brother.

"Yes. I saved his poodle's life for him."

"Are you planning to go see him?"

"No."

Shortly after 1989 a package had arrived at Josef's house in Denmark: photographs of the painter's latest canvases, created now in complete freedom. They were indistinguishable from the millions of other pictures being painted around the planet at the time; the painter could boast of a double victory: he was utterly free and utterly like everybody else.

"You still like this picture?" asked the brother.

"Yes, it's still very fine."

The brother tilted his head toward his wife: "Katy loves it. She stops to look at it every day." Then he added: "After you left, you told me to give it to Papa. He hung it over the table in his office at the hospital. He knew how much Katy loved it, and before he died he bequeathed it to her." After a little pause: "You can't imagine. We lived through some dreadful years."

Looking at the sister-in-law, Josef remembered that he had never liked her. His old antipathy (she'd returned it in spades) now seemed to him stupid and regrettable. She stood there staring at the picture with an expression of sad impotence on her face, and in pity Josef said to his brother: "I know."

The brother began an account of the family's story: the father's lingering death, Katy's illness, their daughter's failed marriage, then on to the cabals against him at the hospital, where his position had been gravely compromised by the fact of Josef's emigrating.

There was no tone of reproach to that last remark, but Josef had no doubt of the animosity with which the brother and sister-in-law must have discussed him at the time, indignant at the

paltry reasons Josef might have alleged to justify his emigration, which they certainly considered irresponsible: the regime did not make life easy for the relatives of émigrés.

18

In the dining room the table was set for lunch. The conversation turned lively, with the brother and sister-in-law eager to inform him of everything that had happened during his absence. The decades hovered above the dishes, and his sister-in-law suddenly attacked him: "You had some fanatical years yourself. The way you used to talk about the Church! We were all scared of you."

The remark startled him. "Scared of me?" His sister-in-law held her ground. He looked at her: on her face, which only minutes earlier had seemed unrecognizable, her old features were coming out.

To say that they'd been scared of him was nonsense, actually, since the sister-in-law's recollection could only concern his high-school years,

when he was between sixteen and nineteen years old. It is entirely possible that he used to make fun of believers back then, but his taunts couldn't have been anything like the government's militant atheism and were meant only for his family, who never missed Sunday Mass and thereby incited Josef to be provocative. He had graduated in 1951, three years after the revolution, and when he decided to study veterinary medicine it was that same taste for provocation that inspired him: healing sick people, serving humanity, was his family's great pride (already two generations back, his grandfather had been a doctor), and he enjoyed telling them all that he liked cows better than humans. But nobody had either praised or deplored his rebellion; because veterinary medicine carried less social prestige, his choice was interpreted simply as a lack of ambition, an acceptance of second rank within the family, below his brother.

Now at the table he made a garbled effort to explain (to them and to himself both) his psychology as an adolescent, but the words had trouble getting out of his mouth because the sister-in-law's set smile, fastened on him,

expressed an immutable disagreement with everything he was saying. He understood that there was nothing he could do about it; it was practically a law: People who see their lives as a shipwreck set out to hunt down the guilty parties. And Josef was doubly guilty: both as an adolescent who had spoken ill of God and as an adult who had emigrated. He lost the desire to explain anything at all, and his brother, subtle diplomat that he was, changed the subject.

His brother: as a second-year medical student, he had been barred from the university in 1948 because of his bourgeois background; so as not to lose hope of resuming his studies later on and becoming a surgeon like his father, he had done all he could to demonstrate his support for Communism, to the point where one day, sore at heart, he wound up joining the Party, in which he stayed until 1989. The paths of the two brothers diverged: first ejected from school and then forced to deny his convictions, the elder felt himself a victim (he would feel that way forever); at the veterinary school, which was less coveted and less tightly monitored, the younger brother had no need to display any particular loyalty to the

regime: to his brother he seemed (and forever would seem) a lucky little bastard who knew how to get away with things; a deserter.

In August 1968 the Russian army had invaded the country; for a week the streets in all the cities howled with rage. The country had never been so thoroughly a homeland, or the Czechs so Czech. Drunk with hatred, Josef was ready to hurl himself against the tanks. Then the country's statesmen were arrested, shipped under guard to Moscow, and forced to conclude a slapdash compromise, and the Czechs, still enraged, went back indoors. Some fourteen months later, on the fifty-second anniversary of Russia's October Revolution, imposed on the country as a national holiday, Josef had climbed into his car in the town where he had his animal clinic and set off to see his family at the other end of the country. Arriving in their city, he slowed down; he was curious to see how many windows would be draped with red flags which, in that year of defeat, were nothing else but signals of submission. There were more of them than he expected: perhaps the people displaying them were doing so against their actual convictions, out of prudence, with some

vague fear; still, they were acting voluntarily, no one was forcing them, no one was threatening them. He had pulled up in front of his family home. On the top floor, where his brother lived, there blazed a large flag, hideously red. For a very long moment Josef contemplated it from inside his car; then he turned on the ignition. On the trip home he decided to leave the country. Not that he couldn't have lived here. He could have gone on peacefully treating cows here. But he was alone, divorced, childless, free. He reflected that he had only one life and that he wanted to live it somewhere else.

19

At the end of lunch, sitting over his coffee, Josef thought about his painting. He considered how to take it away with him, and whether it would be too unwieldy in the airplane. Wouldn't it be easier to take the canvas out of the frame and roll it up?

He was about to discuss it when the sister-in-law said: "You must be going to see N."

"I don't know yet."

"He was an awfully good friend of yours."

"He still is my friend."

"In 'forty-eight everyone was terrified of him. The Red Commissar! But he did a lot for you, didn't he? You owe him!"

The brother hastily interrupted his wife, and he handed Josef a small bundle: "This is what Papa kept as a souvenir of you. We found it after he died."

The brother apparently had to leave soon for the hospital; their meeting was drawing to a close, and Josef noted that his painting had vanished from the conversation. What? His sister-in-law remembers his friend N., but she forgets his painting? Still, although he was prepared to give up his whole inheritance, and his share of the house, the picture was his, his alone, with his name inscribed alongside the painter's! How could they, she and his brother, act as if it didn't belong to him?

The atmosphere suddenly grew heavy, and the brother started to tell a funny story. Josef was not listening. He was determined to reclaim his picture, and, intent on what he wanted to say, his

distracted glance fell on the brother's wrist and the watch on it. He recognized it: big and black, a little out of style; he had left it behind in his apartment and the brother had appropriated it for himself. No, Josef had no reason to be incensed at that. It had all been done according to his own instructions; still, seeing his watch on someone else's wrist threw him into a strange unease. He had the sense he was coming back into the world as might a dead man emerging from his tomb after twenty years: touching the ground with a timid foot that's lost the habit of walking; barely recognizing the world he had lived in but continually stumbling over the leavings from his life; seeing his trousers, his tie on the bodies of the survivors, who had quite naturally divided them up among themselves; seeing everything and laying claim to nothing: the dead are timid. Overcome by that timidity of the dead, Josef could not summon the strength to say a single word about his painting. He stood up.

"Come back tonight. We'll have dinner together," said the brother.

Josef suddenly saw his own wife's face; he felt a sharp need to address her, talk with her. But he

could not do that: his brother was looking at him, waiting for his answer.

"Please excuse me, I have so little time. Next visit," and he gave them each a warm handshake.

On the way back to the hotel, his wife's face appeared to him again and he blew up: "It's your fault. You're the one who told me I had to go. I didn't want to. I had no desire for this return. But you disagreed. You said that not going was unnatural, unjustifiable, it was even foul. Do you still think you were right?"

20

Back in his hotel room, he opens the bundle his brother gave him: an album of photographs from his childhood, of his mother, his father, his brother, and, many times over, little Josef; he sets it aside to keep. A couple of children's picture books; he tosses them into the wastebasket. A child's drawing in colored pencil, with the inscription "For Mama on her birthday" and his clumsy signature; he tosses that away. Then a notebook.

He opens it: his high-school diary. How did he ever leave that at his parents' house?

The entries dated from the early years of Communism here, but, his curiosity somewhat foiled, he finds only accounts of his dates with girls from high school. A precocious libertine? No indeed: a virgin boy. He leafs through the pages absently, then stops at these rebukes addressed to one girl: "You told me love was only about bodies. Dear girl, you would run off in a minute if a man told you he was only interested in your body. And you would come to understand the dreadful sensation of loneliness."

"Loneliness." The word keeps turning up in these pages. He would try to scare them by describing the fearsome prospect of loneliness. To make them love him, he would preach at them like a parson that unless there's emotion, sex stretches away like a desert where a person can die of sadness.

He goes on reading, and remembers nothing. So what has this stranger come to tell him? To remind him that he used to live here under Josef's name? Josef gets up and goes to the window. The square is lit by the late-afternoon sun, and the

image of the two hands on the big wall is sharply visible now: one is white, the other black. Above them a three-letter acronym promises "security" and "solidarity." No doubt about it, the mural was painted after 1989, when the country took up the slogans of the new age: brotherhood of all races; mingling of all cultures; unity of everything, of everybody.

Hands clasping on billboards, Josef's seen that before! The Czech worker clasping the hand of the Russian soldier! It may have been detested, but that propaganda image was indisputably part of the history of the Czechs, who had a thousand reasons to clasp or to refuse the hands of Russians or Germans! But a black hand? In this country, people hardly knew that blacks even existed. In her whole life his mother had never run into a single one.

He considers those hands suspended there between heaven and earth, enormous, taller than the church belfry, hands that shifted the place into a harshly different setting. He scrutinizes the square below him as if he were searching for traces he left on the pavement as a young man when he used to stroll it with his schoolmates.

"Schoolmates"; he articulates the word slowly, in an undertone, so as to breathe in the aroma (faint! barely perceptible!) of his early youth, that bygone, remote period, a period forsaken and mournful as an orphanage; but unlike Irena in the French country town, he feels no affection for that dimly visible, feeble past; no desire to return; nothing but a slight reserve; detachment.

If I were a doctor, I would diagnose his condition thus: "The patient is suffering from nostalgic insufficiency."

21

But Josef does not feel sick. He feels clearheaded. To his mind the nostalgic insufficiency proves the paltry value of his former life. So I revise my diagnosis: "The patient is suffering from masochistic distortion of memory." Indeed, all he remembers are situations that make him displeased with himself. He is not fond of his childhood. But as a child, didn't he have everything he wanted? Wasn't his father worshipped by all his

patients? Why was that a source of pride for his brother and not for him? He often fought with his little pals, and he fought bravely. Now he's forgotten all his victories, but he will always remember the time a fellow he considered weaker than himself knocked him down and pinned him to the ground for a loud count of ten. Even now he can feel on his skin that humiliating pressure of the turf. When he was still living in Bohemia and would run into people who had known him earlier, he was always surprised to find that they considered him a fairly courageous person (he thought himself cowardly), with a caustic wit (he considered himself a bore) and a kind heart (he remembered only his stinginess).

He knew very well that his memory detested him, that it did nothing but slander him; therefore he tried not to believe it and to be more lenient toward his own life. But that didn't help: he took no pleasure in looking back, and he did it as seldom as possible.

What he would have other people, and himself, believe is that he left his country because he could not bear to see it enslaved and humiliated. That's true; still, most Czechs felt the same way, enslaved

and humiliated, and yet they did not run off abroad. They stayed in their country because they liked themselves and because they liked themselves together with their lives, which were inseparable from the place where the lives had been lived. Because Josef's memory was malevolent and provided him nothing to make him cherish his life in his country, he crossed the border with a brisk step and with no regrets.

And once he was abroad, did his memory lose its noxious influence? Yes; because there Josef had neither reason nor occasion to concern himself with recollections bound to the country he no longer lived in; such is the law of masochistic memory: as segments of their lives melt into oblivion, men slough off whatever they dislike, and feel lighter, freer.

And above all, abroad Josef fell in love, and love is the glorification of the present. His attachment to the present drove off his recollections, shielded him against their intrusion; his memory did not become less malevolent but, disregarded and kept at a distance, it lost its power over him.

22

The more vast the amount of time we've left behind us, the more irresistible is the voice calling us to return to it. This pronouncement seems to state the obvious, and yet it is false. Men grow old, the end draws near, each moment becomes more and more valuable, and there is no time to waste over recollections. It is important to understand the mathematical paradox in nostalgia: that it is most powerful in early youth, when the volume of the life gone by is quite small.

Out of the mists of the time when Josef was in high school, I see a young girl emerge; she is long-limbed, beautiful; she is a virgin; and she is melancholy because she has just broken off with a boy. It is her first romantic separation and it hurts her, but her pain is less strong than her amazement at discovering time; she sees it as she never saw it before:

Until then her view of time was the present moving forward and devouring the future; she either feared its swiftness (when she was awaiting something difficult) or rebelled at its slowness

(when she was awaiting something fine). Now time has a very different look; it is no longer the conquering present capturing the future; it is the present conquered and captured and carried off by the past. She sees a young man disconnecting himself from her life and going away, forevermore out of her reach. Mesmerized, all she can do is watch this piece of her life move off; all she can do is watch it and suffer. She is experiencing a brand-new feeling called nostalgia.

That feeling, that irrepressible yearning to return, suddenly reveals to her the existence of the past, the power of the past, of her past; in the house of her life there are windows now, windows opening to the rear, onto what she has experienced; from now on her existence will be inconceivable without these windows.

One day, with her new boyfriend (platonic, of course), she turns down a path in the forest near the town; it is the same path she had walked a few months earlier with her previous boyfriend (the one who, after their break, caused her to feel nostalgia for the first time), and she is moved by the coincidence. Deliberately she heads for a dilapidated little chapel at a crossing of the forest paths,

because that was where her first boyfriend tried to kiss her. Irresistible temptation draws her to relive the bygone love. She wants the two love stories to come together, to join, to mingle, to mimic each other so that both will grow greater through their fusion.

When the earlier boyfriend had tried to stop at that spot and clasp her to him, happy and abashed she quickened her pace and prevented it. This time, what will happen? Her current boyfriend slows down too, he too prepares to take her in his arms! Dazzled by this repetition (by the miracle of this repetition), she obeys the imperative of the parallel and hurries ahead, pulling him along by the hand.

From then on she succumbs to the charm of these affinities, these furtive contacts between present and past; she seeks out these echoes, these co-respondences, these co-resonances that make her feel the distance between what was and what is, the temporal dimension (so new, so astonishing) of her life; she has the sense of emerging from adolescence because of it, of becoming mature, adult, which for her means becoming a person who is acquainted with time, who has left a frag-

ment of life behind her and can turn to look back at it.

One day she sees her new boyfriend hurrying toward her in a blue jacket, and she remembers that her first boyfriend also looked good in a blue jacket. Another day, gazing into her eyes, he praises their beauty by way of a highly unusual metaphor; she was fascinated by that because her first boyfriend, commenting on her eyes, had used word for word the same unusual phrase. These coincidences amaze her. Never does she feel so thoroughly suffused with beauty as when the nostalgia for her past love blends with the surprises of her new love. The intrusion of the previous boyfriend into the story she is currently living is to her mind not some secret infidelity; it adds further to her fondness for the man walking beside her now.

When she is older she will see in these resemblances a regrettable uniformity among individuals (they all stop at the same spots to kiss, have the same tastes in clothing, flatter a woman with the same metaphor) and a tedious monotony among events (they are all just an endless repetition of the same one); but in her adoles-

cence she welcomes these coincidences as miraculous and she is avid to decipher their meanings. The fact that today's boyfriend bears a strange resemblance to yesterday's makes him even more exceptional, even more original, and she believes that he is mysteriously predestined for her.

23

No, there is no allusion to politics in the diary. Not a trace of the period, except perhaps the puritanism of those early years of Communism, with the ideal of romantic love as backdrop. Josef is struck by a confession from the virgin boy: that he easily mustered the boldness to stroke a girl's breasts but he had to battle his own modesty to touch her rump. He had a good sense for exactness: "When we were together yesterday, I only dared to touch D.'s rump twice."

Intimidated by the rump, he was all the more avid for emotions: "She swears she loves me, her promise of intercourse is a victory for me . . ."

(apparently, intercourse as proof of love counted more for him than the physical act itself) ". . . but I feel let down: there is no ecstasy in our encounters. It terrifies me to imagine our life together." And farther along: "It's so tiring, faithfulness that does not spring from true passion."

"Ecstasy"; "life together"; "faithfulness"; "true passion." Josef lingers over these words. What could they have meant to an immature person? They were at the same time enormous and vague, and their power lay precisely in their nebulous nature. He was on a quest for sensations he had never experienced, did not understand; he was looking for them in his partner (on the watch for each little emotion her face might reflect), he looked for them in himself (for interminable hours of introspection), but he was always frustrated. At that point he wrote (and Josef has to acknowledge the startling perspicacity of this remark): "The desire to feel compassion for her and the desire to make her suffer are one and the same desire." And indeed he behaved as if he were guided by those words: in order to feel compassion (in order to reach the ecstasy of compassion), he did everything possible to see his

girlfriend suffer; he tortured her: "I provoked her to doubts about my love. She fell into my arms, I consoled her, I wallowed in her sadness and, for a moment, I could feel a tiny flame of arousal flare up in me."

Josef tries to understand the virgin boy, to put himself in his skin, but he is not capable of it. That sentimentality mixed with sadism, that whole business is completely contrary to his tastes and to his nature. He tears a blank page out of the diary, picks up a pencil, and copies out the sentence "I wallowed in her sadness." He contemplates the two handwritings for a long time: the one from long ago is a little clumsy, but the letters are the same shape as today's. The resemblance is upsetting, it irritates him, it shocks him. How can two such alien, such opposite beings have the same handwriting? What common essence is it that makes a single person of him and this little snot?

24

Neither the virgin boy nor the high-school girl had access to an apartment to be alone in; the intercourse she promised him had to be postponed till the summer vacation, which was a long way off. In the meantime they spent their time hand in hand on the sidewalks or the forest paths (young lovers in those days were tireless walkers), sentenced to repetitive conversations and fondlings that led nowhere. There in that desert without ecstasy, he informed her that an unavoidable separation loomed, as he would soon be moving to Prague.

Josef is surprised to read this; moving to Prague? Such a plan was quite simply impossible, for his family had never had any intention of leaving their city. And suddenly the memory rises up out of oblivion, disagreeably present and vivid: he is standing on a forest path, in front of that girl, and he's talking to her about Prague! He is talking about moving away, and he's lying! He recalls perfectly his awareness of lying, he sees himself talking and lying, lying in order to see the high-school girl cry!

He reads: "Sobbing, she clasped me to her. I was extremely alert to every sign of her pain, and I regret that I no longer remember the exact number of her sobs."

Is this possible? "Extremely alert to every sign of her pain," he counted the sobs! That torturer-accountant! That was his way of feeling, of living, of savoring, of enacting love! He held her in his arms, she sobbed, and he counted!

He goes on reading: "Then she calmed down and told me: 'Now I understand those poets who stayed faithful unto death.' She looked up at me, and her lips *twitched*." The word "twitched" is underlined in the diary.

Josef recalls neither her words nor her twitching lips. The only vivid recollection is the moment when he was spouting those lies about moving to Prague. Nothing else remains in his memory. He strains to call up the features of that exotic girl who compared herself not to pop singers or tennis players but to poets, poets "who stayed faithful unto death"! He savors the anachronism of the carefully recorded expression, and feels more and more fondness for that girl, so sweetly old-fashioned. The one thing he holds against her is

her having been in love with a detestable snot whose only desire was to torture her.

Oh, that snot! Josef can see him staring at the girl's lips, those twitching lips—uncontrolled, uncontrollable despite herself! He must have been aroused by the sight, as if he were watching an orgasm (a female orgasm, a thing he would have no idea of!) Maybe he got an erection! He must have!

Enough! Josef turns the pages and learns that the high-school girl was preparing to go off to the mountains for a week of skiing with her class; the little snot protested, threatened to break up with her; she told him the trip was a school requirement; he refused to listen and flew into a rage (another ecstasy! an ecstasy of rage!) "If you go, it's the end between us. I swear—the end!"

What did she answer? Did her lips twitch when she heard his hysterical outburst? Not likely, because that uncontrolled movement of the lips, that virginal orgasm, always aroused him so much that he would certainly have mentioned it. Apparently this time he overestimated his power. For there are no further references to his schoolgirl. There follow a few accounts of vapid dates with another girl (Josef skips over some lines),

and the diary finishes with the closing days of the school year (he has one more to go) just when an older woman (this one he remembers very well) introduced him to physical love and moved his life onto other tracks; he had stopped writing all that down by now; the diary did not outlive its author's virginity; a very brief chapter of his life came to an end, and, having neither sequel nor consequence, was relegated to the dim cupboard of cast-off items.

Josef sets about ripping the diary pages into tiny scraps. The gesture is probably excessive and useless; but he feels the need to give free rein to his aversion; the need to annihilate the little snot so that never (even if only in a bad dream) would he be mistaken for him, be vilified in his stead, be held responsible for his words and his acts!

25

At that moment the telephone rang. He remembered the woman from the Paris airport, and picked up the phone.

"You won't recognize me," said a voice.

"I do, sure I do!"

"But you can't know who you're talking to."

No, he was mistaken; it wasn't the woman from the airport. It was one of those blasé drawls, those unpleasantly nasal voices. He was disconcerted. She introduced herself: it was the daughter from her previous marriage of the woman he'd divorced after a few months of life together, thirty years back.

"No, you're right, I couldn't know who I was talking to," he said with a forced laugh.

Since the divorce he had never seen them, neither his ex-wife nor his stepdaughter, who in his memory was still a little girl.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

He regretted having begun the conversation so enthusiastically; he was unhappy with her tone of familiarity, but he couldn't do anything about that now: "How did you find out I was here? Nobody knows."

"Well, really."

"What do you mean?"

"Your sister-in-law."

"I didn't know you knew her."

"Mama does."

Immediately he pictured the alliance that had sprung up spontaneously between those two women.

"So then, you're calling on your mother's behalf?"

The blasé voice turned insistent. "I need to talk to you. It's absolutely necessary."

"You, or your mother?"

"Me."

"Tell me first what this is about."

"Do you want to see me or not?"

"I'm asking you to tell me what it's about."

The blasé voice turned aggressive: "If you don't want to see me, just say so right out."

He detested her insistence but did not dare put her off. Keeping secret her reason for the meeting was a very effective gambit on his stepdaughter's part: he grew uneasy.

"I'm only here for a couple of days; I'm very busy. I might be able to squeeze in a half hour at most . . . ," and he named a café in Prague for the day he was leaving.

"You won't be there."

"I'll be there."

When he hung up he felt a kind of nausea. What could those women want from him? Some advice? People who need advice don't act aggressive. They wanted to make trouble for him. Prove they existed. Take up his time. But then why had he agreed to meet her? Out of curiosity? Oh, come on—it was out of fear! He had given in to an old reflex: to protect himself he always tried to be fully informed in advance. But protect himself? These days? Against what? There was certainly no danger. Quite simply, his stepdaughter's voice enveloped him in a fog of old recollections: intrigues; interfering relatives; abortion; tears; slander; blackmail; emotional bullying; angry scenes; anonymous letters: the whole concierge conspiracy.

The life we've left behind us has a bad habit of stepping out of the shadows, of bringing complaints against us, of taking us to court. Living far from Bohemia, Josef had lost the habit of keeping his past in mind. But the past was there, waiting for him, watching him. Uneasy, Josef tried to think about other things. But when a man has come to look at the land of his past, what can he think about if not his past? In the two days left to him, what should he do? Pay a visit to the town

where he'd had his veterinary practice? Go and stand, moist-eyed, before the house he used to live in? He hadn't the slightest desire to do that. Was there anyone at all among the people he used to know whom he would—sincerely—like to see? N.'s face emerged. Way back, when the rabble-rousers of the revolution accused the very young Josef of God knows what (in those years everyone, at some time or another, stood accused of God knows what), N., who was an influential Communist at the university, had stood up for him without worrying about Josef's opinions and family background. That was how they'd become friends, and if Josef could reproach himself for anything, it would be for having largely forgotten about the man during the twenty years since his emigration.

"The Red Commissar! Everyone was terrified of him!" his sister-in-law had said, implying that, out of self-interest, Josef had attached himself to a stalwart of the regime. Oh, those poor countries shaken by great historical dates! When the battle is over, everybody stampedes off on punitive expeditions into the past to hunt down the guilty parties. But who were the guilty parties? The

Communists who won in 1948? Or their ineffective adversaries who lost? Everybody was hunting down the guilty and everybody was being hunted down. When Josef's brother joined the Party so as to go on with his studies, his friends condemned him as an opportunist. That had made him detest Communism all the more, blaming it for his craven behavior, and his wife had focused her own hatred on people like N., who, as a convinced Marxist before the revolution, had of his own free will (and thus unpardonably) helped to bring about a system she held to be the greatest of all evils.

The telephone rang again. He picked it up, and this time he was sure he recognized her: "Finally!"

"Oh, I'm so glad to hear your 'finally!' Were you waiting for my call?"

"Impatiently."

"Really?"

"I was in a hideous mood! Hearing your voice changes everything!"

"Oh, you're making me very happy! How I wish you were with me—right here, where I am."

"How sorry I am that I can't be."

"You're sorry? Really?"

"Really."

"Will I see you before you leave?"

"Yes, you'll see me."

"For sure?"

"For sure! We'll have lunch together the day after tomorrow!"

"I'll be delighted."

He gave her the address of his hotel in Prague.

As he hung up, his glance fell on the shredded diary, now only a small pile of paper strips on the table. He picked up the whole bundle and merrily tossed it into the wastebasket.

26

Three years before 1989, Gustaf had opened an office in Prague for his company, but he only went there for a few visits each year. That was enough for him to love the city and to see it as an ideal place to live; not only out of love for Irena but also (maybe even especially) because there he felt, even more than in Paris, cut off from Sweden,

from his family, from his past life. When Communism unexpectedly vanished from Europe, he was quick to tout Prague to his company as a strategic location for conquering new markets. He saw to the purchase of a handsome baroque house for office space, and set aside two rooms for himself up under the eaves. Meanwhile Irena's mother, who lived alone in a villa on the city's outskirts, put her whole second floor at Gustaf's disposal; he could thus switch living quarters as the mood struck him.

Sleepy and unkempt during the Communist period, Prague came awake before his eyes: it filled up with tourists, lit up with new shops and restaurants, dressed up with restored and repainted baroque houses. "Prague is my town!" he would exclaim in English. He was in love with the city: not like a patriot searching every corner of the land for his roots, his memories, the traces of his dead, but like a traveler responding with surprise and amazement, like a child wandering dazzled through an amusement park and reluctant ever to leave it. Having learned Prague's history, he would declaim at length to anyone who'd listen about its streets, its palaces, its churches,

and hold forth endlessly on its stars: on Emperor Rudolf (protector of painters and alchemists), on Mozart (who, says the gossip, had a mistress there), on Franz Kafka (who though miserable throughout his lifetime in this city had, thanks to the travel agencies, turned into its patron saint).

At an unhoped-for speed Prague forgot the Russian language that for forty years all its inhabitants had been made to learn from grade school onward, and now, eager for applause on the world's proscenium, displayed to the visitors its new attire of English-language signs and labels. In Gustaf's company offices the staff, the trading associates, the rich customers all addressed him in English, so Czech was no more than an impersonal murmur, a background of sound against which only Anglo-American phonemes stood forth as human words. And one day when Irena landed in Prague, he greeted her at the airport not with their usual French "*Salut!*" but with a "Hello!"

Suddenly everything was different. For let's look at Irena's life after Martin died: she had nobody left to speak Czech with, her daughters refused to waste their time with such an obviously