

unsettled, confused: why was he so kind, so generous, so undemanding? How could she repay him? The only recompense she could figure out was to display her desire. She would set her wide-eyed gaze on him, a gaze that demanded some 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.

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-*

*tions? 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