

ABSTRACT

ILANA MCQUINN

Replika

(Under the Direction of KATARZYNA JERZAK)

In the summer of 2009, in the process of researching the history of the development of national identity in Czechoslovakia, I discovered a collection of photographs by the Czech photographer Josef Koudelka in a book called *Invasion 68: Prague*. The book featured images from the August 1968 armed invasion of Czechoslovakia by five Warsaw Pact powers (Soviet Union, Bulgaria, East Germany, Romania, and Poland), precipitated by reforms that included the allowance of personal freedoms by the newly instated Alexander Dubček. Dubček's movement was known as the Prague Spring, and the invasion silenced this movement and returned Prague to Soviet control. In examining these photographs, I discovered a large photograph of a crowd, in which one of the central figures is a woman who is an exact double of myself. Despite this photograph being taken almost twenty years before I was even born, this woman could be my twin. The following work is an exploration into my personal experience of the encounter of a physical replica of myself, and the story she may have had.

INDEX WORDS: Identity, Double, *Invasion 68: Prague*, Prague, Replica, Josef Koudelka, Creative Writing, Soviet Bloc

REPLIKA

by

ILANA MCQUINN

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Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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in COMPARATIVE LITERATURE
with High Honors

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REPLIKA
by
ILANA MCQUINN

Approved:

Dr. Katarzyna Jerzak
Dr. Katarzyna Jerzak
Faculty Research Mentor

4/29/10

Approved:

Dr. Thomas Cerbu
Dr. Thomas Cerbu
Reader

4/29/10

Approved:

Dr. David S. Williams
Dr. David S. Williams
Director, Honors Program, Foundation Fellows and
Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities

5/7/10

Approved:

Dr. Pamela B. Kleiber
Dr. Pamela B. Kleiber
Associate Director, Honors Program and
Center for Undergraduate Research Opportunities

5/7/10

DEDICATION

“Isn't it the moment of most profound doubt that gives birth to new certainties? Perhaps hopelessness is the very soil that nourishes human hope; perhaps one could never find sense in life without first experiencing its absurdity.”

- Václav Havel

Although this story is fictional, it is inspired by real events. It is dedicated to the other girl, and the woman that she became or is now, and her story.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Katarzyna Jerzak for always being supportive of and continually encouraging my writing. Her advice and comments on my work has been invaluable. Secondly, I would like to thank Dr. John Morrow, Jr., who, by mentoring my historical research into the 20th Century history of Czechoslovakia, provided me with historical background to write my story. Not only that, but if I had not conducted that research I never would have found the photograph that is the centerpiece of my work. I have to acknowledge the photographic work of Josef Koudelka, *Aperture* magazine and Magnum photos for producing the book *Invasion 68: Prague*, without which I never would have known that my bygone twin even existed. I would also like to thank my reader Dr. Cerbu, for guiding me through many of my literary interests and goals. Lastly, I would like to thank my family for their constant support.

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BOOK ONE

I.

It was my twenty-second birthday.

I am almost ashamed to admit that I was mindlessly flipping through the pages, giving the images in front of me only superficial glances. It was someone else who saw her. I wonder if it had to happen that way. Someone else had to see her first, anyone but me. Maybe I would have never noticed, maybe because I didn't want to. Once I saw her, it was so obvious. This is how it happened.

I was sitting on one side of the island, passing through pages like a child with a limited attention span, when suddenly from the other side of the marble slab she cocked her head. From her angle the book was upside down. She said simply "What are you doing in this book?"

It was a simple sentence. There were no large words, no searing accusations, and no hypothetical meaning-of-life-type implications, at least not in the purely semantic sense. Seven words. What-are-you-doing-in-this-book.

I had no answer. At first, simply because I had no idea what she was talking about. The photo we were now both examining was a double page spread, spanning the entire 12.6 by 9.5 inches of the book. It was in the middle of the table, so from where I was sitting I had to raise myself slightly from my chair and lean forward for a better view, as if I was a child peering over

the railings of a platform above an animal enclosure in a zoo. The photo was as large as an endless open sea. I hovered above it, looking into faces in a large crowd. I saw myself. I was staring into the deepest depths of my own eyes. I stayed perfectly still. If I made the slightest movement, I felt sure I might fall headfirst into the abyss. A prickling sensation, as if ants with ice cold feet were performing military drills, began in my lower back. The ants crawled, marching steadily up my spine and diverged at my shoulders, finally fading away only by seeping out from the tips of my fingers. She was right. I was there, inserted amid a crowd of protesters in Prague in 1968.



1. "Detaining a Russian Suspect Woman" by Josef Koudelka

Let me explain.

I found the book in the library. In the summer of 2009, I was a rising senior at the University of Georgia, preparing to tackle my Honors History thesis on the development of the Czech national identity. My advisor had given me a list of books. I was spending the summer

studying at Indiana University in Bloomington, which has an excellent Slavic studies department, so when I arrived at the 5th floor I found an overwhelmingly expansive collection of books in Czech. I wandered through the aisles and found thousands of books in a language that I could not understand, and despite the fact that library records indicated that the books were located in the library according to the call numbers that I had so neatly organized in a list, I could find none of the books I was looking for. I gave up and began scanning all titles for any English at all.

In the process, I came upon a large gray book, the front cover labeled plainly in large black letters that read “Invasion” in bolded letters above a large block-lettered “68” that covered almost the whole span of the top of the book. Within the “8,” in white letters, it read: “Prague” and underneath “Josef Koudelka.” *Invasion 68: Prague* by Josef Koudelka.



2. *Invasion 68: Prague*

In small letters on the left side “aperture” stood inauspiciously, but piqued my interest immediately. *Aperture* is a magazine dedicated to photography. I have always had a weakness for photography books, due to being a photographer myself. I mean that I’m sort of a photography jack-of-all-trades. I’ve been shooting manual since I was in the ninth grade, and have since composed photo essays, worked for newspapers, shot sports, travels, weddings, and

everything in between. I flipped briefly through the pages, I was in a rush. Stark black and white photos displayed the largest amassed force since World War II, the culmination of the tank power of five of the Warsaw Pact signers rolling through the streets of Prague in the summer of 1968. The photos were interspersed with the transcripts of eyewitnesses, radio broadcasts, and public service announcements. My eyes widened hungrily, this was amazing. It was perfect, and I anticipated it being incredibly useful for my section on Soviet Communist Czechoslovakia. I tucked the book under my arm.

I did not have the chance to look at it right away. I hate to admit that I failed to read the introduction on the back cover for quite some time, even after seeing her face. There is something implausible about how these photographs came to this collection. In 1968, Josef Koudelka was thirty years old and although he had spent six years photographing gypsies and theatre, he had never covered a news event. Warsaw Pact tanks invaded the city of Prague on August 21 of 1968. With uncanny timing, Koudelka had returned only one day before from following gypsies, just in time to witness the invasion through his lens. He managed to smuggle a few photos out of the country. One of the photos that made it out of the country and to New York (where they were then distributed by Magnum photos) showed the photographer looking at his watch from a balcony down onto the street, where the first tanks came through the city. This image became iconic of the event. The photographer's watch shows the exact time in which the tanks invaded.



3. “Czechoslovakia 1968” by Josef Koudelka

The images were credited as unknown to protect the photographer, who was receiving threats to his family. He even received the Robert Capa Award anonymously. He finally acknowledged authorship 16 years later and it was not until 2008, forty years later, that most of the 250 photos were published in the book I am now holding in my hands. 2008. It was published only a year before the stark block lettering caught my eye in the Bloomington library.

He had been in Romania until only the day before the first news event he ever shot, the photos miraculously survived the day and, even more impressively the next forty years, and I happened to be studying Czech history at just the right time that this book had just been published, and found its way to the bookshelves at Indiana University, where I was accepted off the waiting list into a Russian language immersion program. As if dictated by fate, somehow this book and I were meant to meet. The ants with their ice cold feet are doing drills again, as I speak with you now. The coincidences make me wonder about divine intervention, fate, purposeful direction of intertwining life paths, and serendipity.

At times I think there are too many serendipitous coincidences combined in the publication and my subsequent discovery of this book, and that the existence of this book that holds my forty-year antecedent cannot be, and the next time I pick up the heavy book it might dissolve, disappear, and she would be lost forever, as if the whole thing were some kind of

dream. I would go back to being me, although now I am not really sure what that even means, and if I can ever be “me” as I had once thought I was, without her. We are one and the same.

I had barely had a chance to look at the book when I left for my boyfriend’s family’s house the next day. The Millers were the only people I knew within hundreds of miles of Bloomington. The upcoming Sunday would be my 22nd birthday. Twenty-two years ago I was born on Father’s day, and every eleven years I have to share my birthday with all the Dads of the world. I had shared my birthday with my own Dad before, but never anyone else’s. I anticipated a strange and lonely birthday. I never could have predicted what happened.

User ID: 20582796355942
Title: Invasion 68, Prague
Author: Koudelka, Josef, 1938-
Call number: DB2629 .K66 2008b
Item ID: 30000124812789
Date charged: 6/18/2009, 13:22
Date due: 8/2/2009, 23:59

4. Library receipt

It was on my birthday morning, June 21st, 2009, before breakfast, that Mrs. Miller found her. Found me, found my mirror image, my face in a crowd in 1968, almost 20 years before I was born. The photograph shows a crowd of people. The assumption is that these are a crowd of Czech protesters, filling the streets to confront the tanks that threaten to and will succeed in returning their country to a puppet-land of the USSR, where individuality and expression are enemies, and personal freedoms are eradicated.

Most of the people in the photo are men, although the central focus seems to be a short fat woman with curly hair. The caption reads, "Detaining a suspect Russian woman." My face is positioned immediately next to the middle-aged Russian woman. Occasionally I am gripped by a sudden sense of fear: what if she is, I am, the Russian? Then I immediately reason that it couldn't be, it would be impossible. I don't look as though I'm being detained.

No one is moving, or rather, everyone is moving everywhere, but by the circumstance of being compressed into a 35 mm lens, motion is stopped abruptly mid-way through its trajectory. Each line hangs in suspense threatening to spill over and break the edges of the film in an eruption of life. The only small bubble of space seems to be in front of the small middle-aged woman. Stacks of young and middle aged Czech men are crowding into the small space behind her, pushing her someplace I can't see. The action is frozen, a film on pause. If I could find a way to press the play button, and set the prisoners of the film free, and they would all topple over onto one another in a small pile right in front of my feet. As a bystander, I have to step back to avoid becoming a part of the photo's activity.

They are all moving, despite the inevitable pause of memory, except for one figure. The only young woman in the crowd of Czech protesters, the girl with the dark eyes and the straight lips, staring unabashedly into the camera, has no movement at all. She stands, with a thin-wristed hand close to her chest. My impression is that although the rest of the crowd is only frozen by the lens, she is frozen in real time, and when the scene resumes, and all of the rest of the crowd topples over to the floor, she will remain standing, staring, in the same position, looking into my eyes. As the rest of the crowd falls away, only she and I will remain standing, staring, locked in an endless unbreakable connection, two deer caught in headlights, each waiting for the other to flinch and respond to the world around them.

To understand, you have to abandon your normal conception of your photograph as an immobile and two-dimensional object. The photograph is alive, a living and breathing moment. For me, this photo has a soul. The philosopher Martin Buber once described any living presence as “You.” A living presence can be found in anything. A book or a piece of jewelry that belonged to your great-grandmother can be a “You,” while the neighbor you have lived by for the last five years can be completely lacking in that quality. It is the connection, the sinews of the soul of the “I,” the individual in question, that reaches out into the most substantially meaningful depths of the object or person, and changes the thing from an “it” to a “You.”

When my eyes lay upon hers, our souls locked through the passage of time, place, and experience. Her eyes have always made me uncomfortable. It is as if from her deep, dark, passionately dulled eyes she is silently judging me, asking me some kind of question that I haven’t understood, or accusing me of some failure to act or be. Her piercing, inquiring gaze has



5. The charge

put the action in my hands. She is waiting for me to respond, and I have failed. She is challenging me, disappointed and almost disgusted that I am the one who is truly inactive, comfortably sitting at a marble island in a suburban kitchen in Indiana. I am the mirror image,

and she is living. The photograph forces her, like the return of the Russian tanks, into an immobile life of silence, and yet I am the one who knows not what to do or say.

What does one do, after a moment that lasts forever that leaves one bewildered and lost? Confused as to what the appearance of a double, ages older nonetheless, means in the schema of the world? I can tell you what I did. I wish, for the sake of excitement, that one glimpse would have set a fast rolling chain reaction, like dominos, in which the world shook and boulders tumbled and from the rubble, I emerged, as a new person. Instead, I sat shocked, and said stupidly, “Wow, she really does look like me.”

I showed my boyfriend Ryley, and then the rest of his family. I did what any normal mature twenty-two year old would do on her birthday, and attempted to be ten years below my age. I ate ice cream for lunch, shared a Father’s Day barbeque with the Millers, and constructed a huge “slip n’ slide” from plastic painting tarps, tent pegs, dishwashing soap, and a hose.



6. A middle America homemade slip n’ slide

Three twenty-pluses forgot their age with a middle-schooler, sliding down a plastic tarp into the grass, covered in sudsy dish soap. It was not only the first day in my twenty-second year of life, but the birth of myself in duplicate.

II.

The summer months passed. Although I had to return the book to the Bloomington library, I knew that I would buy Koudelka's book. With my weakness for photography, it would have been likely I would have wanted the book even if I had never seen the face of my doppelganger on page sixty-one. When I returned to school in Athens, Georgia, in August, I showed the photo to everyone I knew. At first, I only told people about it, but because all people are afflicted by harmless curiosity, everyone I told usually asked to see it. Over and over again, I found the page, opened it, and held it under my chest, and watched their eyes grow wide in disbelief. The best response came from my Dad. I was forced by the distance between us to send him the image through a photo message on my cell phone. Reply: "That is really creepy."

For months she would fade in and out of my foremost thoughts. I wondered who she was, and how old she was. I wondered what she was doing there. I wondered if she was a student, or what kind of job she had. I wondered if she knew the photographer. I wondered what she was thinking, when she made eye contact with the photographer's lens. I wondered what Koudelka thought when she stared straight into his lens. I wondered if she looked just as much like me from other angles. I wondered if we were the same height. She seems tall. She is certainly taller than the Russian woman.

Was she still alive? Was she alive and in Prague? If she lived in Prague, was it possible that she had seen me when I was in Prague with my parents? It was less than three years ago. What is it like, to perceive another as yourself, not in your own age and face but in the face that you once had? Is it less disturbing? Is it just nostalgic? What if she had seen me? I thought about Prague, how subdued and frail I was after months of depression. I had gone to Prague only one

month after I had dropped out of an Ivy League school. I had spent a year and a half there, wandering aimlessly, growing progressively more miserable and lost.

What would I have looked like to someone else? Has my face been haunting her mind for the three years since my visit to Prague, like her eyes haunt mine? Her eyes. They still bothered me. I wondered if there had ever been any photos where that burning challenge and question lingered from behind my own eyes.

One day while I was working in my room, a snapshot appeared, a memory of my face exactly like her face in my mind's memory, and my insides froze. I compulsively searched through my package of photographs from Prague. Quickly, feverishly, obsessively, I flipped through detailed photo after detailed photo of door hinges, metal cherubs of St. Vitus' Cathedral, street signs, and stained-glass windows. I found two photographs that I supposed were the images I had in my mind. The sun is going down in Prague and I am walking through the streets in one, and in a park near the home of a former colleague of my father's on the outskirts of the city in the second. But the look in my eyes is not like hers. In both, I am separated from anyone



7. and 8.

Prague photos March 2007

by at least a few steps. I am not surrounded by a mass of protesting and angry citizens. I am alone. There is no challenge in my eyes. My eyes are away from the camera from the first, and so distant that they shyly and quietly evade the glare of camera for the comfort of the non-prying

grassy ground in the latter. My eyes are dulled, detached, and lost. Mine are sad, where hers are defiant. She seems to know that normalization lies ahead, and where she has already determined that she will persevere, my eyes seem to indicate that I have already given up.



9. Eyes

I actually avoid looking at her face. The indeterminable look in her eye makes me horribly uncomfortable and almost ashamed. Yet, the double page spread on pages sixty and sixty-one seems impossibly to have been bound so that whenever I randomly open the book, the page naturally falls open at her face. Each time an unexplainable discomfort inside me compels me to turn away with a shudder, almost like it were a graphic photograph of starving children, or some kind of wartime atrocity. I cannot save her. I don't know how.

III.

Nothing changed. She still stayed frozen in her 35mm moment, and I was immobilized by my helplessness. We were in a stalemate, until the day that my wallet disappeared in transit from winter holidays in Seattle, WA back to Athens, GA. To this day I still half expect to find my wallet, equipped with identification cards, insurance, at least five different coffee shop frequent buyer cards, debit card, and thirty dollars in cash lodged in some shoe, or underneath my bathroom sink, or in the refrigerator. Although it seems impossible that I could have even lost it at all, after a few days I told myself to accept the reality that it was likely wedged under some seat in American Airlines flight 1802, or in a trash can in the Chicago O'Hare airport, and to

replace my most important items: my debit card, my driver's license, student ID. I am still confused as to where it could be, because it seems that it was never found by a Good Samaritan, and never found by a petty thief, because the debit card was never used. Either way, I became identity-less in the most basic way, in limbo waiting for the certification that I was in fact who I claimed to be.

It was then that I began to see her again. Everything is black and white, and as if in a fever, I slip in and out of consciousness. I was locked in a small, dark alleyway, surrounded by people. The body heat of men and women shoving and pushing in every direction left me flustered, confused, and anxious. I felt myself pushing back in all directions, because I was afraid if I didn't I would be pushed under and trampled. The undulation of the crowd was like a sticky pendulous wave of heavy flesh, and I was caught in the middle, forced into the sway of bodies to-and-fro, back-and-forth. Then I looked up. From across the crowd I saw a mirror image of myself, a girl, locked just as I was in a tightly woven web of arms, legs, and bodies. But on her side of the crowd, everything was moving as if in slow motion, and the people swayed with a controlled breeze. Our eyes met, and time slowed and all noise of shouting and yelling and shoving fell away. I could hear only the sound of the wind. I felt sticky sweat and the fear of claustrophobia drenching my hair, but saw cool, calm, and collected resignation in the mirror image of myself in the other side of the crowd. I could see in her eyes that she knew what to do to survive. She knew not to fight back, and not to resist. We both just stared, but with a jolt the world began again. My side of the crowd turned to color, while she and the people around her remained in black and white. I heard sounds, yelling, and the rumble of tanks. Confused, I broke eye contact. We, each of our crowds (now split by chromatic division), turned into a long two-dimensional sheet of paper. I looked up just in time to catch her eye. She was judging me,

pitying my fear. And then a tank ripped right into the middle of the page, separating the two halves, and she is gone.

And then I woke up. I wake up and I am sleeping on a futon six inches from the floor, where I wake up every day, but drenched in sweat and overcome by a feeling of loss. When I was a child I went to the dermatologist to have a mole removed. I remember her telling me that they could remove it completely, by using some kind of device that punched a little hole about a centimeter deep, or they could just use a scalpel and shave it off. I opted for the latter. I have always imagined the first device as some kind of metal hollow cylinder attached to a long handle, like a garden aerator. After this dream, I am left with the feeling that an enormous one of those has somehow been used in my sleep to excise the entirety of my chest. Just like after a real operation, I am left not with the sharp pain of removal but with the dull ache that signifies that the rest of your system is attempting to cope with the absence of something that was once integral. It is the kind of loss that exists in your body, in the core of your soul, as if a gaping hole lives where something that once defined you had been.

I went back to the book. First, I scoured the double page spread that crossed pages sixty-one and sixty-two for any telling detail I could find. I counted 12 people, including the barely visible tops of late 60's coiffed heads, squeezed into the frame. Only two are female: myself and the short Russian woman. There are only two people whose faces are fully in vision, the Russian woman and a younger man (who stands in between her and me). A few people are holding what appears to be a newspaper or a flyer of some sort. From looking at later pictures, I imagine that it is probably the *Rudé Pravo*, or it could be the *Svobodne Slovo*, although I'm pretty sure it is the *Svobodne Slovo*. I try over and over to see what she's wearing, to see any indication of an identity other than my own, but all I can make out is a thin light colored sleeve belonging to

some kind of sweater. I imagine that it's a cardigan. There is nothing more that I can deduce from this picture. I am also tempted to believe that perhaps she is with the attractive, tall, dark man next to her, holding the Russian woman and a copy of *Rudé Pravo*, but I cannot be sure.

Armed with only the shape of my own face, the lines that collect from wear and worry under my eyes, the accusatory look that they hold, and four inches of sleeve, I am prepared to pour over each and every photograph that fills Koudelka's collection in the chance that she might appear again.

My eyes catalogued face after face in the crowds, and I began to see repetitions. Often familiar faces reappear from page to page, likely from photos taken in succession. Not hers. At first I was terrified that I might flip to a page of the injured or dying victims of the invasion and be confronted by her lifeless eyes. Then, I felt like I might be able to reach into it,



10.



11.



12.

Photos from Josef Koudelka's *Invasion 68: Prague*

tap one of the protestors on the shoulder, and ask, holding her picture, "Excuse me, have you seen this girl?" It doesn't occur to me until now, how strange that request might seem, standing holding a picture of someone who is by all appearances myself.

I progress further and further through the photos and begin to realize by intuition that she will not be there, and that none of the characters that reappear throughout the streets of Prague will know who she is. I know by the way that she holds her hand close to her chest, I know by the look of cold questioning in her eyes, I know because I know myself, that she knows no one,

and no one knows her, with perhaps the solitary exception of the young man to her right. I can see by the look in her eyes that she knows that to survive is to be invisible, unheard of, and that she is an expert. She was caught only once.

Finally I look into her face, without turning the page. I let myself be absorbed by the silent noise that surrounds her, that fills her life. I know this is only one moment, but I imagine the qualities of this photograph to permeate throughout her entire life: her tight-lipped stare, the hand tucked into her chest, perpetual caution in a world where the air is heavy with every whispered thought and hope that cannot be heard. A country that is as trapped and surrounded as she is in the crowd. I have to do what I can, I have to reach into the crowd, I have to answer her stare and find some way to scream her whispers to a world that has long forgotten and never known the silence of survival. I don't know how to do it, but I will.

BOOK TWO

I.

I was born under the sign of the Swastika. I grew up in a time of unfreedom, from a dictatorship of the right to a dictatorship of the left. In my late teens, I tried to free my life by freeing my soul. I freed my thoughts inside by setting the words that I was too afraid to say to sail on waves of black ink, on seas of black pages. When I was young it was the height of the silent times. The climate was the most charged and the least active, and my scribbling was the most prolific. But I grew up, and realized that time is finite, and began to abandon my notes for things that I considered less trivial. In truth, it was anything but trivial, but I began to see the time I spent expressing my minute frustrations as wasted energy. It was when I was young, and spent my time with Jiří, even before the samizdat houses, that my notes were the most profound. I had always called it that, taking notes.

Jiří would ask me, “What are you doing?”

I would respond, “Taking notes.”

“Yes,” he would say, “but *why* are you always ‘taking notes’?”

I would answer hotly, “Because, in this place, if I am not allowed to speak, at least I will be able to preserve my thoughts in the silence of the written word.”

“And permanence of the written word,” he would remind me in an advisory tone. And of course he was right. It was risky, dangerous, and even foolish. By keeping endless volumes of

notes on my thoughts, I inevitably put myself and everyone I worked with at risk. Written records could be found, and would have been used for some kind of obscene joke of a criminal trial. I never wanted to put anyone in danger. It was just my method of defiant survival. My silent outcry.

After I had Leóna, I had less time for note-taking. When I worked for the samizdat, I took fewer notes. After Jiří was gone, I had less energy for notes. Finally, it became apparent that the reverse domino effect would bring the collapse of the symbols and structures of Soviet influence and power all over Eastern Europe. I could act, and there were younger and better generations to take up the reigns of active defiance. Silence was no longer a necessity of survival. When I began teaching at the Charles University, I had long since stopped taking the notes of defiant youth. I had a new, intellectual, impersonal kind of note taking to attend to. Lecturing, mothering, and pain were all things that either dwindled my urge or eliminated my time to take notes. I neither had the mental space nor the determination of internal survival that characterized my teens, my twenties, my thirties.

But one day, in early March of 2007, I felt the necessity to take notes again. On this day it was two months to my 67th birthday, and despite the fact that life had been too busy for nearly twenty years for me to take note of anything, I was confronted with an encounter that reminded me of the importance of written word. This is what happened.

I was on my way to meet a former colleague, who had recently left the post of professor of Medieval Bohemian history for a position in developing tour programs for local school groups at Pražský Hrad. I have always liked to walk, so I chose to walk over the Karlův Most into Malá Strana, rather than take the metro to Malostranské náměstí. If I had been tired that day and decided to take the metro, I might have never seen her. I walked purposefully through throngs of

idling tourists over the bridge, continued onto Mostecká and then Malostraske namestí. Then I stopped. I stood motionless in the shock of an unbelievable and incomprehensible vision. As the afternoon sun set over the streets, I gazed into the eyes of a girl who was none other than myself, only perhaps forty years younger. Her face had no wrinkles, there were no lines of collected experiences. Her eyes scanned over the street, and our eyes locked for a moment that seemed to span my entire lifetime. It was as if the moment encapsulated the past fifty years. All of the experiences from when I looked as she does until now, all of the years of my life that have accumulated in my skin, joints and bones, compressed in the solitary overwhelming sensation of looking into the eyes of a stranger who was the reflection of my former self. Yet at the same time, there was something different in her eyes. I saw sorrow and futility.

The films of her eyes were multi-layered. There was a shade of dullness that upon a cursory glance could have easily curtailed the expression beneath. Behind that stood a layer of bewilderment, loss, and I even caught a glimpse of something like imprisonment and the frantic hope of escape. It made my heart ache, as if it had become a stretchable putty, to see this girl, the image of the girl that I once was, with so much confusion in her eyes.

Then, a little boy a few steps behind her called out a name. I think I heard him call her “Ilona!” but I can’t be sure. He grabbed her hand. She looked down and her eyes changed, the dull curtain showed a soft and friendly resignation and nothing more. She took his hand in hers and smiled down at him. She tickled the boy a bit about the ribcage with her free hand, and it finally dawned on me that she was not alone. Two men and two women, perhaps family or family and friends, followed behind her and chatted. They were walking toward me down Zámecká, and then they all turned the corner out of sight. One of the men had a large

professional looking camera. I wondered if they were tourists. Just like that, she was already gone.

At first I had the sudden urge to follow her, as if somehow it would prove the moment was real. Maybe I could catch her and explain that she and I were the same person, or that I had once been her. If she could see my eyes, I thought, she could have seen that our eyes were the same. Yet, even as I thought that, I knew that it did not make sense. Even if I had wanted to follow her, I couldn't. I was frozen to the spot. I looked into the window of the shop at my reflection, and saw my face. I saw my skin, creased and textured with age, but her eyes. They were both my own and a stranger's, filled with confusion, doubt, and uncertainty. I felt the life in my legs again after a little time had passed, and I hurried to the street corner where she had disappeared, but they were gone. Bewildered I kept walking onto Nerudova, and then to Úvoz, and was fifteen minutes late to meet Hana at U zavěšeného kafe for an early dinner.

II.

It had been so long since I had been in the practice of taking notes, that I had to stop to buy a notebook before I returned to my flat. As I browsed through aisles in the stationery store I was struck with the thought that note-taking would be and had been the most important activity of my life. It had some significance that I had yet to uncover. My first notes described in detail the girl who was the replica of my youth. I thought of Jiří, both because I was writing (I heard him ask me "Are you still writing?") and because the apparition had reminded me of my youth. Jiří and the years of silence. There is no Jiří anymore, there are only my notes.

I wanted to remember that moment, place it exactly in time and space, because I knew there would come a time when I would doubt its validity. I closed the pages and pulled the heavy, rectangular wooden trunk from under my bed. The trunk is simple wood craftsmanship, lacking even the most basic decorative designs, but to me it has always seemed to hold some kind of enchantment. I am afraid to open it sometimes, although everything inside there is something that I have already seen, something I have already written. I opened the heavy lid and relished the sound of the familiar hinges, and stared down into a mass of volumes of simple bound notebooks. They were all identical, made of the same washed pulpy grayish material that is somewhere in between cardboard and paper, unique from each other only in the location of tatters and tears and the variation in the words inside. I picked one out from the middle and felt the soft binding, content to sit quietly just fingering the worn cover, leafing the tips of the pages with my thumb. Merely holding the book filled my mind with memories of secret meetings in dirty basements, the houses, tanks, Jiří, whispers of hope, crushing despair, and silence. Jiří never understood that survival meant invisibility. He was too tall, he was too handsome, and too charismatic to pass unnoticed. I somehow inherently understood that rebellion could only be achieved underground, in hiding. You had to be unnoticed, unheard of, unseen. I was an expert, which I suppose was why I always knew that for me taking notes was safe. No one would ever look twice at me or suspect me. I had years of experience of avoiding watchful eyes.

I did not dare open them. I simply sat on the edge of the bed holding one in my hands, carrying its weight and picturing her face. I was teetering on a window ledge, the present on the inside and past on the other. I held the words in my hands and the memories in my mind, and yet I could not bring myself to open the pages and plunge headfirst through time. I was not ready to relive the past. Not yet.

I lay in bed that night, her face in silvery shadows shining through the dark. I was lost in time and space. Unbelievably I was young again. I tried unsuccessfully to guess what her age might be. She could have been anywhere from seventeen to twenty-five. I thought about the man with the camera and wondered about the way she was dressed, in a red knit hat, a bright blue jacket, and black pants tucked in to her dark green boots. There once was a time when I would have been able to resolutely determine a foreigner from a local, but today I can never tell. I do not understand the way the younger generations dress. It all seems foreign to me. I lay there, her face faintly illuminated in the darkness, and I wondered what life is like to be young, to be twenty something today, and not almost sixty-seven. My students can choose their clothing or take a train past the Berlin Wall, both things that I could never do.

The young experience today is so different from my own, and the Spring, and images of hope and freedom, and Jiří. I fell asleep to the passage of time and years. Silence and fear '63, '64, '65, taking notes, '66, '67, the Spring, '68, hope, tanks, bombs, fighting, screaming, crowded streets, tanks, '69, silence, Jiří. My dreams that night were confused and scattered clips of a spliced and reordered film of my life. I hurried down the street with my hands in my pockets, collar up and head down, not too fast but not too slow, always in search of the perfect balance that attracted no attention, my father's silence after his return from Terezín, sitting in the same chair every day not speaking, a man with a camera, looking out of the balcony window to see tanks invading our city streets, the rumble the tanks made on the Prague streets, crowds, Jiří pushing the woman through the alley, the funerals for the students' self-immolation, carrying samizdat beneath the pregnant belly in my sweater, a man with a camera in the hot crowded alley, giving birth to my daughter, Jiří, the man with the camera in the hot crowded alley, a

camera, a camera, proof, the sound of silence, resignation, and the look in her eyes. Her face, my face.

I dreamed in these fitful memories until the morning. I awoke thinking of my past. I was almost sixty-seven. Had I given up the fight for survival and perseverance, or was it no longer really necessary? Did I need to persevere? Was there anything worth persevering for? I had thought so then. Am I too comfortable now? I thought of the sorrow in her eyes, and suddenly I knew that I might never know if the vision from the previous afternoon had been real, or had merely been a figment of my memory.

III.

My doubt grew every day over whether or not the vision of the girl had been real, and yet I still walked the streets for weeks, months even, expecting to turn every corner and open every door to see those eyes, her eyes, my eyes, that haunted me. If I saw her again, maybe closer, perhaps she would see in my eyes that we were one and the same, even if my skin hid our identical facial features in multiple decades of age and wear.

I expected to see her everywhere. In restaurants, in coffee shops and bookstores, and especially on the Charles University campus, where I spent every day, with the throngs of young students filing in and out of buildings and classroom doors. Call it a little crazy, but I even sat in the library, under the guise of grading papers or reading, just so that I could watch each and every face of a tall, brown-haired girl walk through the doors. These were unsuccessful lost moments in which I never saw her, nor completed any of the work I had sat down with. I walked

completely indirect routes home, just to walk by the street where I had seen her before, but never to any avail.

I scrutinized the students in my classroom, half expecting maybe she had been sitting in front of me all along, and I had never noticed. I teach national literature, the literature of our people. I especially love teaching the literature of the 20th Century, and sometimes I give special courses just on samizdat. My students in that course usually ask me eventually, because I seem to know so much, if I ever worked with a samizdat. Usually, I lie and smile and tell them no, that I was no more affiliated than anyone else. Occasionally a student is not satisfied with that response. One such student pressed me, “I heard that Václav Havel got you this job.”

I was facing the board, my back to the class, so he did not see me smile. I could not help but play along. “Is that what they say?” I said.

“Well did you?” he asked. “Were you friends with Václav Havel?”

“I will not confirm or deny that I ever carried samizdat for Václav Havel,” and before he had a chance to tell me that he had not asked if I carried samizdat, I returned to the course material. He looked clearly confused, and I could see every day for the rest of the term that in his mind he was concocting all of the possible ways that I was involved in the underground writers’ network.

Although most of my students have family members or parents who lived through Stalinism and normalization, my students still sometimes ask me what it was like to live then. Usually I tell them, “That question is precisely why we are reading the novels of Hrabal, Škvorecký, and Kundera,” and if they do their readings they will understand exactly what their country was like.

Sometimes I tell them about my parents, and my childhood. Some students know of similar stories among their neighbors or in their own families. My father was a famous linguist who spoke Czech, German (in those days, survival required German knowledge), Russian, French, Italian, English, but also Romanian, Ukrainian, Polish and Hungarian. My mother worked in a florist's shop. I know from photos of her, books that were hers, and Teta Jelínková's stories that she had loved flowers.

My father was intelligent and educated, making him a threat to the Nazi occupation leadership when they took over in 1939. His reputation as a linguist, however, made him useful and highly esteemed in the eyes of the Germans, so while his existence was tolerated, he was prevented from working in any way other than the occasional beck and call of the Nazi leadership. I heard that once he was called upon and forced to translate a memorandum for Konstantin von Neurath, the first Reichsprotektor of Czechoslovakia. My father had no choice but to accommodate the Nazi party, although fortunately I think that they usually preferred to call upon their own "superior" Aryan-German linguists. I have also heard rumors that he was responsible for the "Věřit ve vítězství velkého udce je velká volovina" (To believe in the victory of the great Fuhrer is absolute rubbish!) play on words that mocked Goebbels' attempt to prevent Winston Churchill's "V for Victory" symbol (Goebbels claimed it symbolized the German goddess Viktoria) from being used subversively by placing it intentionally in public spaces all over the city. I am not entirely convinced of the validity of this rumor, but I would very much like to think that it is true. Any kind of academic linguistic activity was brought to a complete halt when the Nazis shut down Charles University in November 1939 after the massive funeral procession for the student Jan Opletal, who was shot and killed in a protest rally.

The real threat to my family came from my mother's ethnic and religious status as a Jew. I was born in the winter of 1941, in the midst of World War II and Nazi occupation. My brother Marek was two and a half, and I was only a few months old, when my mother was called to pack her bags for the train, which everyone knew was headed for the concentration camp at Terezín. My father, like the famous Polish physician and writer Janusz Korczak who marched to the concentration camps with the residents of his Jewish orphanage despite being granted clemency on the basis of his incredible reputation as a physician, refused to allow my mother to go alone to Terezín. Despite his being of non-Jewish descent, and being considered valuable to the Nazi regime, he chose to accompany her to the camp. Before he left he used his connections to leave my brother and me with forged identification papers that would hide our half-Jewish background. Our last name did not have to be changed, because my father was not Jewish. This proved to be very helpful when my father returned, because it meant that my brother and me did not have to undertake the confusing task of learning our original names, because they had never changed.

My brother was old enough to have vague memories of our parents, although I had none. My father left us with Dorota Jelínekova, a woman he had known since his own childhood, a neighbor and friend of his parents. We grew up calling her Tetka Jelínekova, and our papers certified that my brother Marek and myself were the children of her much younger deceased brother Petr. My father had considered leaving us, Teta told me later, with Bohumila Nováková of the 4th floor of our own building, a woman who was a close friend of my mother's, but he did not trust the neighbors not to sell our short lives for security and a few extra koruna. So my father and mother took us one day to Dorota Jelínekova's apartment, and we never saw my mother again.

My brother cried incessantly for a week and then sporadically for months, because he was old enough to understand that something was missing. Teta said that he walked around the apartment and in the streets calling, “Tatá? Matka?” with red blotchy eyes. This often got her strange looks from strangers and the Gestapo often stopped her, but she calmly explained that these were her brother Petr’s children. It was the perfect cover, because his death appropriately explained the tear-stained and distraught Marek. Teta told me, however, that from the very beginning, I never cried, understanding even then that there were times for expression, and times for silence. 1942 was a time of silence.

Father came home in May of 1945, when I was not quite four, and my brother had recently turned six. As a child I had asked, “Tetka, where is my father?” I had never concerned myself with my mother, because I had always assumed that she was my mother. She explained to me one day that she was not my mother, that both my father and mother had been sent away unjustly to some place very bad, but it was a very big secret that these far away people were my parents. I had to pretend that she had never told me. It made me feel very important to be in on some kind of big secret, a master plan.

I had always imagined them as secret agents, and that with their sly and cunning genius they would one day break out of wherever it was that they were being kept and come home victorious heroes and we would be reunited. Whenever I would tell Marek of how exciting it would all be, Marek would quickly respond that I was stupid and didn’t understand anything. He was six then, I was not quite four. I did not understand much, besides that the men in black with the lightning bolt insignias on their collars were bad, and that I was never to speak in their presence or look at them. I was always very good at that, while Marek would become moody and agitated in their presence.

Marek seemed to know who father was as soon as he came through the door, despite not having seen him since age two. They looked at each other, both completely still. I was confused at who this stranger was who was in Tetka's house. I had been conditioned to be afraid and suspicious of strangers, but when I looked at Tetka, she had a frozen stare of joyous disbelief painted on her face. Her eyes were bright, glistening with tears, but the crow's feet wrinkles that framed the corners of her eyelids smiled, and when combined with the gaping droop of her shocked jaw and the curve of the corner of her mouth, formed a paradoxical impression of happy trauma.

Father staggered in and collapsed to his knees at Marek's feet. He wrapped his arms around Marek, nearly collapsing onto him. My brother had been transformed before my eyes into a rigid pole. For just a moment, Marek's body softened and it seemed as though he was going to fall in relief into Father's arms in kind, but instead, he tensed again and spoke. Quietly, coldly, and unshakingly three words drifted from his lips. "Where is Matka?"

His words drifted into the air and hung there, as if suspended in a verbal gelatinous bubble, the words seeping into every molecule that drenched the thick atmosphere. This man, my father, looked up into Marek's eyes as though he had suddenly been slapped, and burst into tears, his shoulders heaving as he held loosely onto Marek's body. In that moment, I realized that this was my secret agent father, and that this was not the exciting and glamorous escape from the enemy that I had imagined. There was something wrong. There was no mother, and a father who seemed to be missing something, I didn't know what. Tetka ran over and cried, "Oh Tomáš!" and grabbed both my father and Marek into her arms, and she cried. Marek finally bent and hugged my father back, but turned his head and looked at me. Two tears sat, one falling quietly down his cheek, and the other one poised like a glistening crystal at the corner of his eye. I

watched them from a distance, alone, as if in a different world, until Tetka grabbed me with one hand and pulled me over. There we stayed in a huddle in the middle of the floor for what seemed to my young heart like days.

It is shocking how strongly certain memories resonate from childhood. I was not even four years old, but I remember this scene as if it were yesterday. We never moved out of Tetka's house, even after Father came home. Tetka's husband had died years ago, and she had wanted to keep taking care of us, especially after it became apparent that my father had been broken. The Germans had allowed my father to voluntarily choose to stay in Terezín with my mother "for marrying a dirty Jewess." He had worked and wasted away, living in a three by three meter box with ten other men while she had been interned there. In 1944, my mother was sent to Auschwitz. Although my father begged to go with her, the guards knew he was not Jewish and forbade him, reassuring him that he would die eventually in Terezín anyway. Eventually they beat him with the butts of their rifles to stop his protests, and left him locked in a prison chamber for a week. In that week my mother went to Auschwitz, where her fate was sealed. My father never told me any of this, in fact, I am not even sure how I know these facts, but I know that they are true.

Father rarely spoke after his return home. He would sometimes play quietly with me, stacking the blocks, or looking on as I drew, sometimes suggesting subjects by pointing and smiling sadly. He would stroke my hair and my face and look at me, but I did not like that, because although he tried to smile, his lips always shook and his eyes betrayed the despair of a loss that I had never understood. Most of the time my father sat in his chair and looked out of the wide, three paned window, with its foggy glass, over into the street. Sometimes I liked to climb into his lap and just look out the window with him. It was quiet and calm. He would whisper in

my ear “Můj malý ptáček,” my little birdie, in every language he knew (mon petit oiseau, moja mala ptaszyna, môj malý vtáčik, maya malenkaya ptichka, mein vöglein). I think that he spoke to Tetka the most, and a little bit to Marek, but my father the linguist became a man of few words. Once when I was eight he sat me down with him and told me that language and words were the most powerful forces in the world, and apologizing for his silence, explained that he had lost the strength to wield them and carry their heavy weight. I imagined words as enormous heavy boulders, and only the strongest could lift them, project them, and utilize their power. Thus, my childhood taught me the importance of words, but also that there was a time, place, and purpose for them, that all had to be weighed evenly in the scale. By age nine, when my father passed on and was finally reunited with my mother again, I was an expert in silence.

IV.

Thinking back on the crystal clear memory of my father’s return in 1945, I can only imagine that the confusion, sadness, and mistrust in my almost four year old eyes must have been something like the expression in the eyes that haunted my mind, the vision of my younger self in Malá Strana. When I said that if I could only get close enough for her to see my eyes, it was because the eyes never change. Her eyes were my eyes, and I know that although the texture, firmness, and even the way the skin hangs on the brow may have changed from age four to twenty-five to sixty-seven, I know that the eyes themselves never change. The feeling behind the eyes may be hardened from pain or soft with laughter or even deep with thought, but the eyes themselves, they never change. I imagined her face, laid in a layer on top of my own. We were stacked, myself on the day my father came home, her and me today at age sixty-six, and our eyes

were uniform, a piercing beam of proof. She drifted in and out of my memory, as the days and weeks went on, and I found myself increasingly thinking about my life at her age. I found myself, the more I thought of her, whether or not I would ever see her again and whether she had ever really been, returning to the trunk.

One or two nights a week, and then soon several nights in a row, I picked up one of the leather-bound books, and without the courage to open them and remember the past, put them back. Finally, one day, about a month after the vision of my antecedent had appeared to me. I saw a girl in the street, just the side of her face and her thin, tightly-kept stature, but something in her appearance brought me back to March in Malá Strana. I hurried to catch her, I was not entirely sure I would be able to. She was not rushing, but I am almost sixty-seven. I could not outrun the police these days as I did once. Somehow I reached her and caught her attention by barely grabbing her right shoulder with my hand. Her back had been to me. I had no idea what I would have said to her, but I never had to face this possibility. She turned and the view of her full face made it obvious that this girl was not the girl I had seen before. I stammered that I was sorry and that I thought she had been someone else, to which she responded confusedly that it was not a problem, and walked away, leaving me standing there bewildered. She looked back at me once, no doubt wondering if I was senile. To be quite honest, I wondered the same thing. Had I ever seen her, the apparition of my youth?

When I finally turned to move, I suddenly felt compelled, drawn as if by some unseen path, to march purposefully through campus and back to my apartment, up the stairs, and immediately to the trunk. It was not in its usual place under the bed, because I had pulled it out so many nights lately that I had eventually just left it askew of the bed. Without hesitating I opened the trunk, pulling out a notebook at random. I never dated individual entries, only

marking the date on the first and last pages of the book. This book began in October of 1963. I was twenty-two.

I turned to a page a near the front.

They say we're in an economic recession. Of course, it is not the "They" in power who says we are in an economic recession, They who are the KSČ, the Komunistická strana Československa. They the communists would never admit a flaw in their system. It is they who whisper on the streets and in neighbors' cellars who talk of recession. What I want to know is, what does an economic recession mean to us anyway? Recession implies a high point from which we've fallen. What have we possibly lost? Are they saying that things are worse from 1960, or 1961 or 1962? I suppose at least Stalin is dead. Or so they say. Sometimes I feel as if he is still here, walking the streets. I see him in the fear in the eyes of the women and men I pass in the street. The elderly possess different eyes, eyes which both understand the world that we live in now and the freedom that we've lost. Those who knew our country the way Masaryk had seen it. If it were not for them, living proof that once our University had open doors and open thought, I would think the time of the First Republic was a fairy tale. I have a hard time believing that the First Republic ever was, having grown up in the silence of an absent home, of an imaginary heritage. The only way to protect yourself is to hide yourself, as Marek and I were forced to do. I have never known what most think of as "freedom." I have never known an open education. That boy that I met last week in the café, he told me about the history of our University, that it had been a bastion of intelligence and culture for our people since Medieval times, that it now lay bent and broken to the lines of the party ideology. After we spoke I thought about University, some idealized utopia where my mind was free for the rest of the day. Maybe, one day, the ideal for which Masaryk strove will be realized for the Czech people. Maybe.

It was all I had written in that section. I called him “the boy who was the expert on the University.” I remembered that day. I had been sitting in a café, reading Karel Čapek, toward the rear of the café, with my back facing the door. I was reading Čapek’s play, *Bílá Nemoc*. I was intensely afraid for the brave Dr. Galen, who had just refused to cure the armaments producer Krüg of the White Plague for the second time unless the dictator, “The Marshal,” agreed to stop the war. I tensed as I continued to read, preparing myself for a tragic ending. I suddenly felt uncomfortable, like I was being watched. Čapek’s work was not exactly “approved,” so I put the book in my bag, taking out my notebook. A deep voice interrupted my thoughts behind me, and so surprised me that I flinched.

He asked what I was reading. I turned and watched him circle around to the other side of the table, taking a seat across from me. I told him that I wasn’t reading, I was writing. He looked confused, and said that he could have sworn he saw me reading a book, and then turned red, embarrassed that he had just admitted he had been watching me. I told him no, I was just writing. Trying to cover his tracks, he asked what I was writing about. Now he had caught me in a lie, and awkwardly, I did not know what to say. I was- I stammered- taking notes. This was the first time I had ever had to qualify my notebook scribbles. Nobody had ever asked me that before.

At that his eyes brightened, widened, and he sat down at my table. “Do you study at the University?” he asked me, his voice full of excitement.

“No, no,” I told him, and I laughed. “I am not a University student.”

“Oh,” he told me, “Me neither. But it is a wonderful place.”

The introduction was sudden, unnatural, and awkward, but something about him, as he happily chattered about the history of Charles University and the national youth sporting

association, the Sokol, as if we had known each other all our lives, made me comfortable and relaxed. I suppose that was what Jiří was like, sudden and sometimes awkward, but comfortable.

I put down the book I had been holding, and searched for the volume that preceded this one. I found it and flipped to the back, searching for what I had written about my encounter with the University expert in the café. Only two pages from the very end, I found:

Did you know that the first graduate of the Charles University was in 1359? Of course you wouldn't know that. If I don't know it, you don't know, because you, as this notebook, are merely an extension of myself. We had a University, the Bohemians, the Czechs, almost three-hundred years before being completely submissive to the Habsburg reign, when the landowners were expelled at the beginning of the Thirty-Year's War. The infamous Battle of White Mountain that Jiří said put our people under the German yoke. Oh, right. I met a boy named Jiří today at the café. I suppose he's not really a boy, a young man. He is likely older than me. Quite attractive in fact. Expert on the Charles University, I guess. I know many people believe that the Battle of White Mountain was the moment that was indicative of a change in Bohemian history, which began our subversion as subjects of a foreign empire in our own lands. The national hero, Jan Hus himself, was once the rector of the University when it was Czech dominated, in the early 1400's. In the late 1800's it was split into two, a Czech and a German University, right when the Czechs were beginning to have the slightest inclination toward the hope of an existence free of outside influence. I can't write to you about all of the history. There is too much. And I know all too well what happened when the Germans returned and the students stood up for our independence and freedom. Jan Opletal was shot and the University was shut down. My life, Jiří's life, and anyone our age who was a child born of the War, would never be allowed the

freedom of thought that is supposed to be a key component of higher education. Of course the University reopened, but nothing is the same. Nothing will ever be the same as it once was.

Here I skipped a few lines. Just blank. Then I wrote:

I could not understand how he knew so much about the University without being a student there. He called himself “a fan of the University ideal.” He seemed almost ashamed when he told me that he was a tram operator. The way that he looked down when he spoke, I felt like I should have shared with him the disappointment in the way I lived, that I had not attended university, and that there was no shame, and that we would be able to persevere, and that perhaps even having an unassuming job was in fact the best way to live without being seen, and education was not necessarily always taught in school, as marvelous as the idea of the Charles University of old seemed. But I didn’t. Somehow I couldn’t. I wonder if I will ever see him again, I had written.

It was late. I closed the notebook. I had kept the memory of my youth at bay for so long, it had been at least twenty years since those moments had drifted into my daily memories, longer since I had expected to see Jiří’s face everywhere I went, in the streets, in my dreams, in the mirror even. It was like this, a few pages every night, I began to revisit my youth.

V.

The next day, I went back and started from the beginning. The inside of the first page read August, 1958.

~~Hi. We’ve never met, but you’ve been in my possession for the past seven years.~~ I must have thought this a bad way to start. *Before Father died, on his deathbed, one might say, he gave*

me this notebook. Well, deathbed isn't right either, because Father was essentially on his deathbed from the day that I met him.

Three lines blank, as if I were thinking on how to restart this one-way conversation with the paper, to salvage my introduction with the page. I continued.

In the last weeks of Father's life, he left me with this notebook. He told me that education was not dead, that language and understanding were not dead, that it had just lost its way in our country, and that if I wanted to preserve my voice when I was not at liberty to be heard, he wanted me to be able to. "And that is precisely what this notebook is for," he had said. And then, I officially became an orphan. I suppose I have always been an orphan of sorts. My parents were absent for the first 4 years. One never returned and the other only half-functioned as a parent afterwards. Tetka was the closest thing that I ever had to a sense of real security, and now she is also gone. Father gave me this book for my thoughts after his death, but it is not until now, seven years later, after Tetka's death, that a pen has touched its pages.

Tetka has left us well cared for. Marek and I were left her apartment in the will. We will continue to live here, and I suppose I will continue to go to school. Father had been afraid in this environment to send us to school, but anything out of the ordinary was noticed, so we went like all other small children to the first level of school, but he made sure Tetka checked everything we learned in school. Poor Marek. When Father died, Marek was already old enough that it had come time for him to either go on to gymnasium, which would prepare him for education, professional school or apprentice school. And while Father still had control, with his mistrust of everything, Marek transferred from one level of education to the next, and was essentially doomed to apprenticeship, minor training jobs, and no hope of further acceleration. I, on the other hand, escaped that fate, because Tetka still had hope that maybe one day They might fall

and an education in a gymnasium might be useful. So now Marek and I are here together. I have two more years at gymnasium, and I do not know what I will do. But Marek has a job as an electrician. He is trained for that. Not that he ever does anything at work. The lights of the entire city would be out and I think that They would not be able to call the electricians to fix it. And so Marek and his companions sit there, and they are paid, while they never know what kinds of electrical problems there are in the city. It's kind of funny, in the way that you would imagine something would be funny if it were not your life. I suppose that's how we make it through the days, to see the humor in things.

On the following page, I had listed things that I had heard in school that I did not believe.

Russian products are superior.

Tomorrow in the stores there will be sugar.

Jaroslava is very wealthy and has an uncle who works in London, and he sent her American blue jeans for her birthday. Učitelka Macovicka told her it was disgraceful to flaunt her money like that, and looked at her as if she were dirty, as if she had prostituted herself to the West.

Anyone with a wartime connection with the West, veterans of the Spanish Civil War, and Jews are "bourgeois nationalists." A threat to the Communist state.

We have to learn Russian because it will be the dominant world language soon.

To be a Pioneer is the greatest honor that could be bestowed on a Communist youth. I am not a Communist youth and I have been hearing that for years. No Czech wants to be a Pioneer.

They know when you are reading banned books, looking at a banned book, or even thinking about a banned book. Basically, They know when you are not thinking party thoughts. I think this one may be true.

On the next page: Historical lies.

Claim: *Stalin saved us from the Nazis in 1945. Fact: The Nazi regime was already collapsing, and the Soviets were INVADING us. They also ignore the Prague Uprising, when we retook our own city by force, setting barricades, driving the remaining weak Nazis from OUR home. Not the Soviet home.*

I remember, I was only four, but I remember the explosions in the street. Marek and I kept hoping to see what was happening through the window, but our street was far from anything important, at most we saw excited people running to the action, and yet Tetka was still afraid. Pulling us back from the window with one strong pull, a hand on each of our collars.

Claim: *They try to tell us that our national hero Jan Hus, the religious martyr, was a Communist leader ahead of his time. FACT: True, Hus may have fought for the religious rights of the everyday Czech, but that hardly made him a Communist. Also fact, doesn't his status as a religious figure in some way negate his validity as a Communist? We are supposed to ignore religious obedience, because it distracts from the true cause (I could hear the mocking in my voice as I wrote), THE GREAT REVOLUTION.*

Claim: *The Czechs had dutifully asserted their true desires to be united in the Communist collective international as early as the Battle of Zborov, 1917. Fact: True, the Czech soldiers at Zborov joined their "Slavic brothers" in battle rather than fight for the Austrians and Germans, but it hardly signified that we wanted to be domineered by another power, just because their language is closer to ours. Besides, the Communist revolution was not until the following year.*

THE BIG LIE: *There were Czechs sent to live in the town of Terezín, the home of the "Small Fortress" of the Hapsburg Dynasty, by the Nazis during the war. No mention of the Jews, no mention of those sent on to Auschwitz and Dachau. There is no explanation, no discussion.*

Need I really say how I know that this is a LIE? There was an empty space there, where I had written nothing. I could almost feel its emptiness, as if it were an awkward pause in conversation or some kind of hole in my chest. I had not wanted to write her name, I did not want to write his name, I did not want to remember my parents, their absence, their loss, my loss, their pain, my pain. And then I had written in the corner, LIES LIES LIES THE REWRITTEN PARTY APPROVED LESSONS OF CZECH HISTORY.

*I flipped a few pages, beginning to be uncomfortable with the anger that seemed to be seeping through time and space. Frustration oozed through the pages as if it had been trapped almost fifty years in this book, finally freeing itself into the atmosphere. *Marek is sending me to the store tomorrow while he is at work with what little earnings he has. I know if I do not go first thing in the morning, I will miss the milk, or the bread, or the flour they might have in the morning. The long line made of old ladies, grandmothers, and mothers with small children will form, and they will wait and wait, and one by one all of the identical packages of bread or flour will disappear off the shelves, devoured by hungry hands, and all that will be left will be vinegar. I went last week after school, and there was nothing but rows and rows of vinegar. I used to go with Tetka sometimes, when I was not in school, and we would make jokes about the vinegar. Oh how much we loved vinegar, how wonderful vinegar was. We would drink it, we would use it to wash our clothing and rinse our hair. Vinegar, we would laugh, was the most wonderful Soviet product there was! All-purpose! I cannot stand to see the vinegar bottles anymore. Not without Tetka. It makes me so angry. We joked about it, to make it through the days, but Tetka died and all life had to give her in her last years was stupid vinegar. I know I will be late to school if I go and wait in line in the morning, but I do not want to see more shelves of vinegar bottles.**

I put the book down on the small table next to the bed, I could not read any more. I was filled with indignant despair then. I had not remembered so much anger in my notes, but I understood that the only comfort I had known had just lost. I was finally expressing my frustration, in a fiery flood of black-inked words. I chose to forgive my young self, judging my undirected frustration understandable.

I stopped reading then, and lay in bed, waiting for another day, another day where I would return to the 21st Century Czech Republic, to teaching my classes with lessons I had written and by speaking truths I believed. A time where I could read whatever I pleased. And yet, as I reassured myself over and over that I would wake up in a world of options and choice, I went to sleep unconvinced that I would not wake up as an angry 17-year-old girl staring at rows upon rows of vinegar, bewildered and frustrated after having run from gymnasium to the store as quickly as possible, only to find nothing left but vinegar. Tart, sticky, pungent, yellowing vinegar.

VI.

Day after day, I lived life outside in the present, and life at home in the past, scanning through the pages, with no sense of time other than what was inscribed in the beginning of the book.

One double page spread:

Agáta complained to me today that her family had been out of electricity for the entire week, that they had filed a report for the electricity to be repaired but no electrician had come, and her father had said the Party must have made a mistake and hired some false comrades in

the electric division. She was sure to add, “Isn’t your brother working in electricity?” and to look at me with disdain, as if I, by familial relation, could not even accomplish the simplest tasks and undoubtedly was purposefully undermining the national system. I went home and asked Marek about Agáta’s power, and he became very annoyed. He screamed that he was tired of hearing people complain about their problems as if it was his fault! As if they ever told him on time where and when to go fix anything! As if his measly pay was even worth the trip and the time it took to fix the power of the good comrades (as he said this last part his nostrils flared and I almost thought he was going to growl). Then he plopped down into one of the old wooden chairs of Tetka’s that we have been sitting in all our lives and it broke into a million pieces. Splinters and shards of wood scattered in rays, making him look like the center orb of a sun made of fragmented chair legs. Neither of us could help but laugh, and we rolled around laughing on the floor. I tried to sit on him to keep him from getting up from his splintery mess and he laughed and yelled “Ow, ow I’m going to have splinters in my behind! Then how will I be able to fix the good comrades’ lights?” and just laughed more. I told him that I would make him dumplings, because we had flour, but he went to the pub instead. He called it his liquid bread again. I am getting bored here alone in the house. I may go join him. After all, sometimes you hear rumors of the world, the elusive outside. It is the world that you believe exists in your heart, even though you have no hope of seeing it, those places and people you must believe in with faith. Rumors in the pub help keep that faith alive. Plus, if I go with him he will likely leave earlier, which means he won’t drink all his wages, and may mean we will be able to afford more flour next week.

Clearly I was adjusting to a life without Tetka, as if I were suddenly realizing that I had always in some sense been alone, my parents ripped away, one because of her heritage and the

other because he loved her. *I am tired of this empty, quiet life*, I wrote later. *Marek is gone to work all the time, even though he always says there is never anything to do at work, and he will get paid poorly whether or not he works. I think he hates being here in this empty, quiet apartment with all of Tetka's furniture as much as I do. I like nights like tonight, where he brings friends here to listen to the BBC. On clear nights like tonight the BBC comes through. I love to be the one to twist the dial, while everyone sits around perfectly silent and still as I tune the radio box, straining to hear through the static and buzz of the signal blocker for the faintest hint of British voices. It is the most exacting skill, twisting the knob perfectly to the exact frequency. I feel like a bank robber, a criminal of the state, cracking a safe. The safe to free speech. Marek would laugh at me if I said that aloud. Anyway, and then everyone stops and yells- "There! There! That's it!" and usually I've just passed it, and I have to hush everyone to be quiet, and tune back and forth with the minutest, most precise movements until I find it again.*

On warm nights you can hear the whispers of foreign broadcasts float out the cracked window panes into the streets of Prague. Sometimes I wonder how many people actually understand English. Marek's friend from grade school is at the University and understands English. He tells us what the radio announcer is saying.

These are my favorite nights.

We sit and we laugh and I don't have to be alone to do my schoolwork. And sometimes Marek's friends will talk to me about what I am reading in school, or tell me real news they've heard at work, or on the streets. And then I forget that Tetka's gone, and I don't see the reflection of Father's sad grey eyes, staring out of the window, and I don't look at myself and wonder if I look like her....

I am very proud to have our own radio broadcasting with a strong history in the Radio Prague, but it was nationalized in 1948, which really means is that its output is dictated by the party lines. And now it is even under direct party control. I wonder why They don't trust us?

Minor acts of subversive deception and general disdain for the KSČ appeared again and again in the writings of my young mind. I wrote about my first experience with samizdat.

Today Jarmila brought a pamphlet to gymnasium. It was very dangerous for her to bring it there. We should have met after school, or before, somewhere else, in her building, my house, anywhere but here. When she pulled it out from under her arm, between her side and the inside of her coat, my skin tingled all over my shoulders. It was not white, but whitish, dirty, as if it had been dropped in the street. Almost the color of snow as it begins to turn into graying mush. It was just paper, dingy and unimportant looking, but when she put it in my hands I felt as if I had suddenly received something of otherworldly significance, it had a power greater than I could ever understand. You could have easily convinced me that it had some magical quality, and if I turned the page the right way or pressed in the right way or blew on it, it might reveal some secret. It felt almost weightless in my hands, as if the laws of gravity could not pass through the ethereal bubble of mystery that shrouded the small stack. It said nothing on the front page, a blank guise. Just like Švejk! A certifiable idiot, empty by all appearances from the outside, but secretly the wisest of all. You have to appear unassuming. I opened the page and found hand-typed copies of poetry of the members of Group 42- Ivan Blatný and Jiřína Hauková.

We both knew that poetry of members of Group 42 had been banned since 1948, but we did not want to put the pamphlet away, so we huddled in the corner, trying to look like we were telling girls' secrets instead of reading illegal literature. Trying to seem empty, so no one could suspect what we were hiding. We were both afraid that if we put the pages down, they would

disappear, snatched away by invisible authorities, or imploded in a burst of flames. I wanted to ask her if I could take them home with me, I wanted to read each poem over and over again, but I was afraid. When I touched it she eyed me jealously. It was hers, after all. She said that a boy who lived in her building, his mother typed it. He is younger and he wanted to impress her, so he gave one to her. I scribbled parts down on a strip of paper.

This was one part of Hauková's "Ode to the Sun":

Oh sun, you'll kiss my ankles,

You'll kiss my knees,

You'll kiss the valleys of my body,

You'll kiss the hills of my body,

You'll kiss my eyes to see with greater love,

And that was all that I had written from that one, because Jarmila was getting very nervous. So I took a few lines from Blatný:

How can anyone say that this is freedom

Everything is fate

Complete and inexorable fate

I skipped quite a few lines but I liked these so I wrote these too: "The pen writes beautifully but the ink's contents are diminishing," and "To do something, what an effort. To do nothing, how boring."

I wish that I had the whole pamphlet. I wish I felt the kiss of the sun. I wish I had the whole poems. "How can anyone say that this is freedom?" Today I teach these poems. It must have been some sort of trickle down of my father's love of language that I received, which morphed itself into the love of the written word. It was not that I disliked the readings that we

read in school, in fact, I enjoyed them a great deal. They were classic or Marxist. Stalin Prize winners. They were safe. There was something different about the unstoppable speech in these mysterious pamphlets. Their words lived in my heart, as if they were something I might have said myself, if only I had been able to find the right diction. I want to tell the presence of myself that lived in these pages to have hope, that this will not be the last time unsolicited pages of poetry and prose will play a part in my life. But I have to be patient, and let her take time to discover it on her own. I have to let her follow her path, my path.

In between entries I wrote about mundane things. I often wrote about the way people on the street looked as I sat on a bench on Wenceslas Square. It was one of my favorite weekend activities. I would catalogue them, taking a few notes on what they were wearing (Woman, medium height in grey coat and no hat, blond hair) and then next to their brief description I wrote whether I thought they were KSČ, or party members, or dissenters, and why. Reasons like “he didn’t look afraid” or “she smiled at a policeman” arbitrarily labeled someone as the KSČ. I thought of everything as so black and white then. You were one of them or you weren’t. That’s the way it was in school. You were “good” (a comrade) or not (a dissenter). And being a dissenter did not necessarily mean that you fought with the cops or became a spy, but rather that you at least thought, and thought on your own lines, and not on any party dictated platforms.

VII.

Today, historians say that the experience in Czechoslovakia was less severe than in the other Soviet Bloc countries. I have to say that I do not really understand what that means. I have never lived anywhere else. Foreign controlled Czechoslovakia was the only thing I had ever

known until I was almost fifty years old, and the Velvet Revolution came. I have met people from Poland, Hungary, and other Eastern European countries, and when we meet we share our experience. Sometimes I will meet them and they will immediately say “Oh, it was not as bad in (insert country in which they lived), but I heard that in Hungary...” or Romania, or wherever it may be. It was always the same story. It was bad where they were, but terrible someplace else. Intellectuals (I use this term loosely, in those times this meant anyone who had an inquisitive mind) were the enemy everywhere, and that was something that I found that we all across borders had in common.

I never enrolled in University, so I was never considered a part of the dreaded intelligentsia to the regime, but today, as a University professor, I would be. I still grew up linked to scholarly heritage, so to speak, thanks to my highly educated father. I spent most of my young adult years trying to hide this background, so as to be the least conspicuous and least noticed. I was afraid.

Often as I teach, I wonder how my life may have been different if I had chosen to go to the University in my last year of gymnasium and enrolled in 1960. I know, as I stood in front of the board with Jiřína Hauková’s “Ode to the Sun” (a favorite since I first read it), I would never have learned the poetry of Group 42 in 1960. But somehow, despite all odds, University still managed to foster some kind of uncontrollable forum for dissent. Any outburst of public defiance came in some way from the University. Why had I not wanted to go there, to be a part of that?

In my last year of school, I remembered that father had lost hope that education could ever be free of government control after 1939. I grew up thinking of the University as some kind of prison. I remembered Karel, the boy that lived downstairs who read to Marek and me when

we were children. When we were only five and seven, Karel was fifteen. When Karel was twenty, the police beat him at a demonstration at the University. He broke an arm, but survived. I was ten. I was scared that if I went to University, I would be beaten too. I also remember Marek was furious when I decided not to attend. He screamed about Tetka's hope for me, about how I was wasting the opportunities that I had been given. I can see his face, contorted, trying to keep his frustration inside, that I had been given a chance that he never had, and I was choosing not to take that chance. Tetka was a topic that Marek could rarely face, and as he tried to explain to me the mistake I was making, his voice quaked. He eventually threw up his hands and stomped out of the apartment, slamming the door behind him.

By then it was already too late. My mind had already been made. I had decided to take a job in a bookstore. It was a safe bookstore. It only sold classics and translations of foreign classics, as far as literature goes. Plenty of Stalin prize winners. The bookstore was named simply Kniha. In those days, all the stores were named simply for the items they sold. Everything was communal, general, and vague.

I remember the first day I had walked into the bookstore. The manager, who would one day become my employer, was a small round-faced Russian by heritage named Filip Andreyovich Sharapov. I walked home from work that day thinking of him. He was Russian, but his family had moved to Prague before he was born, in the height of purges and guerilla fighting after the October Revolution. His friendly, smiling face in my mind, I mounted the stairs to my apartment and went straight to the trunk.

It was 1959, the last year of gymnasium. I was counting KSČ on Wenceslas Square again. Well, it's silly of me to tell you, of course you know already. (There was an arrow drawn there, pointing to where I had made my list on the previous page:

Woman, mid-thirties, brown hair, looked hurried, agitated, holding the hand of her young son, he wore a red scarf. KSČ.

Man, fifties, balding, thin and bony, as if he was made of geometric shapes, holding a copy of Lidovky. Dissenter.

Man, very serious looking, moustache like Stalin, late twenties. KSČ. And it continued).

For some reason, I decided to stop in the bookstore on the way home. I must have passed there hundreds of times before, feeling the impossible gravity of the perfectly arranged bindings visible from the window and the smell of printed paper that wafted through the door (on nice days the door is open), always tempting me to wander in. On every other day, I have had the will power and the strength to resist it. I have always been afraid of tempting myself, of feeling the realization of poverty. I generally avoid going into stores when I do not have the money to buy things. Besides, I usually assume that the books in the stores are not worth buying anyway, all party dictated propaganda of some sort. But today, I could not resist it. I felt as if I were approaching it in slow motion, and through the window I could see a small, round faced man slowly taking books one by one in his hand, caressing their spine, examining their titles, and then finally placing them on a shelf. He looked at each one as if it were a precious family heirloom, or a relic. For a few moments I stood mesmerized, watching him catalogue with meticulous detail. Then he looked up. His features were soft. He looked like a kindly grandfather (although I am positive he can be no older than his mid- forties) who had lived in a library his whole life. Other Czech men have skin that looks old, tough and leathery from years of labor and exposure to, I don't know, the elements. He smiled at me, only slightly, his lips barely turning into a smug and knowing grin. It was the kind of smile an adult gives a child when reassuring the child that they

have understood something correctly, like a nod of approval. With a wave of his hand he beckoned me inside.

I cautiously entered, looking around me undoubtedly acting the role of the bewildered small child and gazed up at the gigantic towering bookcases. He greeted me in Czech (“Dobry den,” he said), and when I failed to respond he then greeted me in Russian, which startled me.” No,” I told him, “No, Dobry den. Dobry den. I am Czech.” And then there was nothing more, because I began looking all around me again. On the shelves there were Marxist books, classic books, like the books we read in school. Alexie Tolstoy, the favorite, because he won the Stalinist prize. I asked what he was doing, if those were a new shipment of books. He was packing them in paper, and wrapping them carefully, placing them on the floor behind the counter. He beckoned me over, and as I got closer to him I could smell kasha and milk. A pleasant, comforting sort of smell. He walked me to the shelves, away from the books he was carefully wrapping, showing me the books on the shelves. Then he stopped talking. I had not even noticed. I was still staring at so many books. I was so stupidly entranced that I was barely aware of anything. And then he asked me.

“Would you like to buy one?”

It is a legitimate question, I know. After all, it is a bookstore. And what did I do or say then? I blushed, and instead of telling him that I did not have the money, I just muttered an apology, backing out of the store and then turning and breaking into a full sprint as I crossed the threshold from the store to the street. I ran all the way home, careening through the apartment

door still panting. Marek was sitting at the table with a copy of the paper. He looked up at me and then looked back down at his paper, and said disinterestedly, "Escaping the Gestapo, huh?" I said nothing in response and went straight to my room, looking at the small shelf of books I had inherited from my father. I stared at them, taking each one off and putting each one back, until I chose Rossum's Universal Robots, which, like all of the books, I had read before. I sat there with my back to the door holding it in my arms close to my chest, as if someone on the other side of the room were trying to steal it from me. Some time passed like this, until Marek came knocking inquisitively at the door.

But I could not stay away from the bookstore for long. The next weekend I returned, resolved even if still humiliated by my own behavior from the week before that I would explain myself to the friendly-faced man and apologize for abusing his hospitality. Afterward, I had written him a kind of letter in my notebook.

Dear Filip Andreyovich Sharapov,
I was sorry to hear that you are Russian, although I never would have guessed, and I don't dislike you because of it. Thank you for being so understanding of my terror in our last meeting, and of the absurdity of my reaction to your very simple question. And thank you, thank you, thank you for letting me sit in the back on the floor of your shop, reading Fear and Misery of the Third Reich by Bertolt Brecht, while very few customers came in and out. Thank you, thank you, thank you.

He invited me to come back in to finish it next week, because I could not finish it in the few hours I was there, and I am incredibly grateful.

As the week went on, the entries still revolved around my experience in the bookstore.

I said something like, “if anyone read Brecht’s Fear and Misery of the Third Reich we would all stop being afraid of admitting what happened to the Jews in the war” today, when someone started asking questions in class about Terežín in class. Učitelka Ondraschekova shot me a sharp look and told me I had clearly misunderstood Brecht and interrogated me as to where I had been reading Brecht outside of school, ranting that confused young children like myself misinterpreted the message of “sensitive material” when not taught properly by state approved teachers (like herself of course). “The Marxist principles, the Marxist principles are what to take from Brecht,” she muttered and quickly moved on.

When I went back to Filip Andreyovich’s Kniha today I asked him about how he knows which kinds of books are “approved.” For some reason I trusted him more than I trust most people, even my own classmates, from the very beginning. There was something about the way he smelled of kasha and milk, and that fatherly look in his eyes (not like my father, but paternal) seemed comfortable and safe. He did not seem like a dissenter, but not like a comrade either. He was the least offensive person I had probably ever met, perfectly neither here nor there on the spectrum of things. He embraced everything and lived in the middle of it all. He looked at me with a question in his eyes, one eyebrow raised playfully, as if to ask, “What prompted such questions?” I was embarrassed, but told him about what I had said in class. “Ah, young one,” he said, as if he were ages older, “I can sell Brecht because he was an enemy of the Nazi state, and in being an enemy of the Nazi state he wrote as a Marxist. It is because of his promotion in his narratives of Marxist ideology that you and I can read Czech translations of Brecht.” And this was all he said, and I did not ask any more. I went back to reading Fear and Misery of the Third Reich on the floor.

It continued like this for quite some time. For the remainder of my last year in gymnasium I went into the Kniha on Saturdays. Eventually I even went straight to the Kniha, stopped counting KŠČ, and opted to spend my time on Filip Andreyovich's floor reading books. I even began helping Filip Andreyovich file books while he was busy with customers. Marek began to wonder what I was doing on the weekends, and I told him about Filip Andreyovich and the Kniha in Wenceslas Square. And then one day he asked me, "So does this mean when you go to University you will study books?"

I responded, "Why do you think I will go to the University?"

He became furious. I am fairly sure that because he had never had much choice in his own path, he begrudged me for choosing my own. *Who says University is the next step after gymnasium? Why should I want to go to that depressing daily reminder that we are only allowed to think and study as long as it is confined to the communist dictated portion of the political spectrum? No, Marek, I do NOT want to attend University. I will work at Filip Andreyovich's Kniha*, I had written. I had no idea whether I could get a job at the Kniha then, but it is exactly what happened. I had a terrible instinctual fear of the University, in my mind I could only imagine riots and police beatings.

Before I graduated I asked Filip Andreyovich if I could have a job, and even though he was not busy enough for me, and likely could not easily afford to pay me, I believe he saw the fear and hope in my eyes, and he agreed. This is when Marek became especially furious. *I have been so lonely*, I wrote, *Marek has not spoken to me in five days. He comes home every day and goes right to his room, slamming the door behind him, or else he goes straight out with his friends and will not come home until after I am asleep. I make him food, and most of the time he*

does not eat it, leaving it untouched on the counter for me to find, spoilt by the morning. Last night, he ate the dumplings I made. The plate was empty when I came out this morning.

It lasted for a week, despite repeated efforts to catch him, until I went sobbing into his room and told him I could not take it any longer. He hugged me as I curled up in a ball and rocked me back and forth. I told him through mouthfuls of tears that I was afraid, and we sat there together silently. Suddenly, he whispered into my ear, “Remember when you were three and I was five, and Tetka had somehow managed to buy a pound of sugar for making kolače cakes. It was a luxury! A rarity! It was to be such a prize, but while Tetka was cleaning in the other room you and I conspired to knock the bag off of the counter- I could barely reach it-“ he added, “and we ate handfuls of sugar from the bag until Tetka came in.” I nodded and my reddened, tear-glossed cheeks grimaced as I made an awkward half-smile. “I was old enough to know better,” he said, “but I knew that you weren’t, so we could get away with it. You were so funny.” He imitated my eyes, wide and excited from consuming pure sugar, and I started to laugh, choking a little on lingering tears. I knew that Marek had forgiven me.

I began working there in 1960. As the months passed, and the years, I noticed that slowly things were changing. Traffic into the bookstore increased and I became busy. From time to time, a party informer came in, attempting to trap us for selling banned books. They were usually very easy to spot, but it didn’t matter, because Filip Andreyovich was so meticulous and perfect about the acceptability of the books he kept in his store. I had not realized this then, but Filip Andreyovich, the first day I had been in the store, had been keeping all of the approved but frowned upon books wrapped in simple brown paper in a cabinet behind the desk. He never told me about that stash and always catalogued these himself, I suppose for my own safety. So I never knew that we had anything better, and any customers who did, came when Filip

Andreyovich was working, and often traded him goods for books. This explained the constant smell of kasha and milk. A University professor had a brother who was a milk seller, and always brought Filip Andreyovich milk for warm milk and kasha. Because I knew nothing, interchanges with suspicious persons were usually quite easy for me. I had very little to offer or tell them.

There was only once when I made a mistake, and failed to recognize an informer, and said some very imprudent things.

How could I have been so stupid! It should not matter how friendly he is or how nice he seems, why would I ever say something like that? I should know, of all people, the value of being careful. What would my father have said? I wish I were a child again and did not know that life should be different than this, and then I would never have said it.

He came in, dressed in a cap and a jacket. He did not look any different than anyone else. Like everybody else, clothing of Communist issue. Not to say that it means he should be trusted. He just looked unthreatening, unassuming, and to be honest, he was not bad looking. He told me he was a University student who was looking for a book for his courses. He was studying Literature, he needed Kruzhilikha. Simple enough. Written by party endorsed and Stalin Prize winner Vera Panova. He asked me if I had ever read the book. I told him no. His eyes wandered the shelf and he remarked on the volumes of Alexei Tolstoy, while there was almost no Lev Tolstoy. (I thought this was a stupid thing to say. Was he surprised there was no Lev? Alexei was a Stalin Prize winner, while Lev, was not). War and Peace, he said, that's something I would really like to get my hands on. Looking at me as I pulled Kruzhilikha off of the shelf, he asked if there were any by Lev Tolstoy next to the case that was practically a shrine to Alexei. Without looking, I told him that it did not appear that there were. He sighed and said that he would love to find Lev, but that he really wished he could study the Czech writers. Yes, he said forlornly,

what I would really like to read is Čapek, and Klíma. And then, barely taking a breath, he said, Are you sure you don't have any Lev, or Čapek or Klíma? I have a cousin, he said, In Yugoslavia, who works in a shoe store, he smiled at me. For a pair of pretty shoes for your pretty feet, you couldn't find Lev somewhere in this store?

And then I said it, I laughed, and I said, If I had Lev or Čapek here, I certainly would not trade him for a pair of shoes. Čapek is better than shoes.

As soon as it came out of my mouth I knew I had made a mistake. He looked at me, our transaction complete, my mouth ajar, as I passed the book across the counter. He said nothing more, only thanked me for the book and left. I stood at the desk. In shock and angry with myself. This is why I never speak. This is what father had meant about the betrayal of language. I was normally so disciplined.

Eventually I made it to the window of the shop. He was gone, but I saw a policeman there, across the street, staring at me through the window. And then I knew what I had already suspected, I had become someone worth watching.

The policeman followed me home, attempting to be discreet.

Months later, I was still writing about the lingering of my constant detail. Although it has been a month since I have actually seen the policeman, I still feel as though I am being followed. It is hard to shake the feeling, after six weeks of being followed by various plainclothesmen and policemen to and from work and when I went down to the bar with my brother (which did not happen often, and even less now because my brother's friends begrudged my constant companion- how could I blame them?), and watching policemen search through my trash from my window. I wonder what their file on me says. All of this was in the supposed lightening of repression in the days of Krushchev.

VIII.

They say that beginning in the early sixties, Prague began to experience a loosening of control over daily life thanks to the victory of Krushchev in the Soviet Union, who denounced Stalinist practices in his “Secret Speech.” I suppose the trickle down of this repressive release was felt in small measures, such as the increased traffic in the bookstore that I myself noticed. Radio Prague began broadcasting more hours each day, and in more languages. Yet for the most part, life went on in the early 60’s as usual. I learned about the books that Filip Andreyovich kept behind the counter for a few (he wrote them down for me specifically) clients, because Filip Andreyovich had to spend more and more time caring for his mother, and was hardly able to come into the store at all. I took over passing clandestinely wrapped books for milk, meat, or shampoo. I avoided confrontation of any sort in Tetka’s apartment with a restless Marek, who increasingly stamped the bare wooden floors proclaiming that now the time was ripe for change. Our table and three matching chairs shook as he stamped his feet, as if he were orating a profound speech to the empty air, which whispered lightly with approval in our apartment.

In the present year 2008, my life passed by much the same way. I had not forgotten the girl, rather, she had become a permanent fixture in the recesses of my mind, waiting for me to reach in and grab her from amid the clutter of class plans, daily activities, and students’ grades. And as I failed to find the time to explore her significance, my pace of plowing through the years of my notes slowed to a pause again.

Until one day, July of 2008, I was invited to a launch party, the premier of a book called *Invasion 68: Prague*, a collection of photographs by the famous photographer Josef Koudelka of

the Soviet ordered tank invasion of Prague. I owed the invitation to my position and connections in the University.

I was excited and honored to be invited. The event was to be held at the three-story homage to books, the Neo-Luxor, on Wenceslas Square on August 1st, the date of publication. I called my daughter Leóna, now living in Berlin, to ask her to accompany me as a guest. As the event was on a Tuesday, she knew that she would have to take work off for the trip, and came down for the weekend prior to the launch as well.

That Saturday night at dinner, she asked me about the trunk. Despite having not read from my notes in several weeks, I had left it sitting there, a constant reminder of a past that I had left in the purgatory of ink and paper pages. She asked me what it was doing there, and if I had needed help moving it, explaining its misplaced and off-kilter location in the middle of the floor.

“No,” I told her, explaining that the trunk held volumes of notebooks I had written, like diaries, when I was young. I had been revisiting them lately.

“Oh,” she said quietly. “I never knew that you did anything like that.” The sentence ended unfinished, as if there were other words that were hanging somewhere in the air. She pried flakes of white fish distractedly off the filet in front her, working up the nerve to ask, “Is my father in them?”

Her question was full of apprehension. I knew she was afraid my answer would crush all of her hopes. I had never shown my notes to anyone, having always considered them a kind of danger, meant to be locked away and mine only. I looked into her eyes. They were hopeful, but at the same time prepared for heartbreak. My poor, brave Leóna had never known her father. I thought of my own childhood, and knew there was no other option.

“Of course I wrote about your father.”

Her face glowed, thanking me a thousand times in silence. One elbow was on the table, leaning forward, just like the day I first met her father. We both rose from our meal without finishing, and approached the wooden trunk.

“I met him first in 1963,” I told her. “It was a random, chance meeting,” I started to say, and then corrected myself, “Or rather, it was chance to me,” I smiled, and opened to the page in which I had written about my catching his eye in the back of the coffee shop. I came to the end of the entry, and she asked the question I had been expecting.

“So when did you see him again?”

I flipped through the pages, and told her that, “You and I will meet him again together this time.” It was not until what must have been a few months later that there was any mention of him again. But once he reappeared in the pages of my life, he never left.

I was cataloging the books today in the shop. Filip Andreyovich's mother is still very ill, and worsening, so I have been doing much of the work in the shop alone. I was behind the desk, making notes in the ledger, when a young man walked by the shop. I looked up half-interestedly, and he just walked past, but as he was passing the door he looked into the shop. He glanced over exactly in the same half-interested manner that I had glanced up, and we both went about our business for about twenty seconds. It was just enough time for him to almost walk past the shop, and the edge of the window and be lost to the street forever, but instead he stopped and looked back, doing a double take. In my periphery I saw him stop, and I looked up too. He grinned at me playfully and waved awkwardly outside the window. It was the boy, or I suppose he might appreciate it if I called him a young man, Jiří from the coffee shop.

“Well hello,” he said, “I was wondering if I would ever see you again.” I didn’t want to tell him that I had wondered the same thing. “So this is where you get your books from, huh?”

he said. I must have frowned at him, or pursed my brow. I didn't like speaking candidly in the bookshop anymore, or really speaking candidly anywhere besides my own apartment, with my own brother. Not after the appearance of my policeman admirer. Anyway, I know I must have frowned or grimaced because he looked offended and said "Relax, I'm sorry, you didn't do anything wrong." I softened, realizing that I had not even said hello to him, and in an awkward attempt at an apology I told him that it was good to see him again. And then I asked what he was doing here.

He seemed offended again. It was his day off.

I knew that he wasn't planning on coming in this bookstore, because he had almost passed right by it before he saw me. I asked if he was here to buy a book.

He laughed and said he would love to buy a book, but "none of this party propaganda on the shelves on this side of the counter." For a moment I was afraid he knew about the behind the counter books, I said nothing and he said nothing more. To fill the silence, I asked where he had been going.

"Oh, just a friend's," he said offhandedly. He looked at me and asked, "Would you like to go with me?"

"The store doesn't close until 5," I said. It was 1:30. I was expecting this to be a deterrent, but he only said in response, "Ok, I can wait."

I watched him in shock as he walked over to the shelves and began wandering the book spines with his eyes. Was he expecting to spend the next four and a half hours looking at book titles? I stared at him for a few minutes, and he kept wandering. I looked down at my inventory list, and then looked back up. "The first time I came to this bookstore I ran away from the manager when he asked me if I wanted to buy a book," I said, "and then I came back one week

later and spent the entire Saturday afternoon, and every Saturday afternoon the rest of the 1959 reading books on this floor, in the back where customers wouldn't see me."

When he said nothing in response, I said "You can't really spend the next four hours standing around in here." I offered him The Two Captains by Veniamin Kaverin. Another Russian author who has won the Stalin Prize. I actually liked The Two Captains, so I did not feel bad for giving him a Stalin Prize book. Besides, I don't trust him enough to give him a book from behind the counter.

He has been sitting there on the floor for about two hours now, but I am not sure how much reading he has been doing, because even as I am writing these words, when I look up, he is looking at me.

Leóna looked at me and asked, "Is that it?"

"It's the end of the entry."

"What? Well did you go with him or not?" she demanded.

"I wrote more later," I assured her, and turned the page.

This unbelievable boy actually waited for me until 5:30, when I finished closing up the shop. He did not finish The Two Captains, and did not buy it, but I laughed and told him that if he was bent on finishing it he could always take up his spot on the floor again on his next day off. And we left and walked slowly through the streets, and I asked him what he thought of The Two Captains, and he told me he had already read it. I did not know what to say, so we walked the rest of the way in silence. We walked to Malá Strana, to an apartment building on an alley. I became defensive when we started descending to a boiler room. I could not understand what friend he had living in a boiler room. He responded as if I were a child. My friend lives in the building, he said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. We're having a boiler room

meeting. I just looked at him. We walked down the stairs to, well, a group meeting in a boiler room. Someone named Petr greeted Jiří with, “You were supposed to be here 4 hours ago! We have already drunk all of the beer from Jaroslav’s father’s bar, and have been planning proletarian revolts against the proletarian revolution for hours. What were you,” and then in mid-sentence he stopped and noticed me. “Oh, well hello,” he said, “and put out his hand, and then to Jiří, “So this is why you’re late.”

The whole experience made me slightly uncomfortable. All of these people, five boys and one other girl, were complete strangers. I sat with them as they talked about things that I’ve only said in these pages. Or maybe to Marek. All the things that I have thought about. They told rumors about the world on the other side, the girl said that she had a cousin who had a friend whose father worked in the embassy in London and that in London you can buy sugar and chocolate whenever you want. And bookstores have more than just a Marxist literature section. That the streets are clean, and people drive cars. That every radio has full broadcast. They discussed ideas, and books they had read, and how much they wanted access to the banned works list. I never said a word the whole time. They talked about jazz. They talked about their menial jobs. I was so uncomfortable with these strangers. I wanted to run home, run away to Marek, the only person I really felt comfortable with. Marek and Filip Andreyovich. I felt like a child who had just witnessed an adult do something you’d been told was wrong. Confused and scared.

Jiří must have noticed my discomfort, because every once in a while he would smile at me and sort of push me around, trying to make me relax I guess. I suppose it was not really any different than listening for the BBC with Marek’s friends, but I did not trust these people. I tried

to imagine if they had been people walking in the street, if they would have made the KSČ list or dissenter list. I know just as well as anyone that appearances and words can betray you.

Leóna looked at me. “What?” she said, “He took you to meet people to talk freely about the way things were, and you hated it?”

“I did not trust freedom. I just knew that I could ensure my survival if I did not attract attention. I did not trust anyone. I had been trained since childhood, with my fake papers, not to be noticeable, to play by the rules. Growing up meant to me that silent thoughts were safe thoughts.”

“You didn’t trust him?” She seemed hurt, indignant. She really was so much like him. “You didn’t gave them a chance?”

“Of course I went back,” I laughed, “even though I did not want to. Jiří came back to the bookstore, week after week, and although I protested, he brought me with him to every boiler meeting that I could come to. He claimed he would make me trust at least a few people. Finally he admitted that he truly did not care if I never trusted his friends from the boiler room, who eventually called themselves the Malá Strana Malingerers, and he really had selfish reasons for ‘bothering me’ about being afraid. He wanted “to see inside my head one day,” he said. One day he finally caught on about the notebooks. It was the first of many conversations that were all a variation on this same format:

He would ask, “What are you doing?”

And I’d say, “Taking notes.”

He’d say, “On what?”

I'd say, "On everything. These pages are where my thoughts live, where they're sent to stay after they come out of the grey matter."

"So you DO think!" he mocked.

"Of course I think." I would pretend to be annoyed.

"One of these days, maybe you will stop taking those notes? I'll be your notepad."

He would smile at me.

"No. They're safer here. Besides, all my old thoughts would be lonely without new ones to keep them company."

"And sometimes he would pester me more, and sometimes he would let it go. But eventually, I learned to trust the Malá Strana Malingerers at least a little bit, because Jiří won my trust. We saw each other more and more. He walked me home. Eventually I gave him behind the counter books for tram tickets. Even though I loved to walk, I found myself riding the tram, or really only his tram, just to say hello."

"So you," Leóna paused, "became a couple then?"

"No," I said, "We were only friends. Truly, he was my only friend then, besides Marek and Filip Andreyovich."

"So when was he yours? When did you begin to love him?"

I do not know when she had become a defiant teenager again, with so many persistent questions. I thought of our plates, still unfinished on the table in the empty kitchen. Two plates instead of one. I looked down, there were so many more boxes, and lifetimes of things to say, even though one of them was already over. I could not do it. I could not visit them all right now.

I felt my age, I felt all sixty-seven years weighing down my mind, my shoulders, and my eyes. I was so worn. I sighed.

“Maybe we can continue tomorrow. It is getting very late.” She looked disappointed, but then another look crossed her eyes as I slowly rose to clean the dishes in the kitchen. It was pity, pity for my recognizable exhaustion. I was not twenty-two anymore, taking notes and wandering Prague with Jiří.

She stopped me. “Stay here. I’ll see you in the morning.” I sat back down and she walked to the door. “Goodnight, I love you.”

I watched her leave. She was taller than me, like Jiří, more defiant than I ever was, like Jiří. Even in her late thirties now, she is beautiful and eye-catching. She is smart. She is so like him. I imagined what jail cell she may have ended up in, had she been a member of my generation. I had nightmares that night of a baby Leóna locked up in a prison cell, wailing to a deaf guard with a cap with a red star who fills her bottle with only vinegar. I beg her not to drink it from the other side, I scream and I wail and I beg the guard to let her out, but there is no sound, only inky written words that float and land on the walls in perfect lines, transforming Leóna’s prison cell into the pages of a journal.

IX.

At breakfast we were both silent. I had bought fresh yogurt and plums for her visit, and we each just prodded our soft white lumps, creating swirls of pinkish-purple in our bowls. I felt weak and tired, like my skin weighed heavily on my bones. I watched her take small spoonfuls

of yogurt, and finally I said, “There was one day...” and she looked up, expectantly, hopeful, and I knew I had broken the silence. I told her the story of the day things changed.

Jiří walked me home from work or the Malá Strana Malingerers meetings many times, but he never came inside. In fact, many times he walked me to my building, but he had been up to the apartment door only a few times. I had never told Marek that I had made a new friend. He was usually fairly disinterested in where I had been after work, or was gone himself when I arrived home. Marek had his own boiler room club, they just chose to reside in the pub instead. By this time, Marek had met a girl, your Teta Karolina in fact, and spent quite a lot of time with her.

One evening Jiří appeared at the apartment. I was in the kitchen making dinner for Marek and myself, and Marek was reading the newspaper at the table. I heard the knock at the door, but I hardly noticed. Marek got up from the table and went to the door. From the door, I heard Marek’s voice. ‘Jiří?’ and Jiří responded with ‘Marek!’ and I heard them embrace each other, although it was clear both were confused. Marek was wondering why Jiří was here, and Jiří no doubt was wondering if he had knocked on the door of the wrong apartment. I appeared from the kitchen, and they both looked at me.

Apparently, Jiří and my brother already knew each other. I never knew that Marek and Jiří knew each other, and Jiří did not know that Marek was my brother, and Marek did not know that I knew Jiří. We all laughed over our confusion as we attempted to piece together our connections. Jiří and Marek had met through Petr, who was in the Malá Strana Malingerers and a fellow employee of Marek’s. They had been loose friends ever since. Although I knew that Jiří had come to see me, Marek and Jiří sat down at the table and laughed and talked together the rest of the night. Marek seemed to have forgotten that he had not been expecting Jiří, and Jiří seemed

afraid to tell Marek that he had come to see his little sister. I made dinner in the kitchen, making our modest two portions into three miniscule portions, and we talked together long into the night. After that Jiří started to come over more often. Eventually he stayed over, and then suddenly we were essentially together.”

She smiled when she heard this story, although I could tell she was not satisfied. She wanted to know more. I’m sure you’re wondering how it could be that she had never known these stories? How could she have never asked before? It wasn’t that she hadn’t asked, I had always just told her that something terrible had happened to her father, but that he was a good man and I loved him and left it at that. She learned quickly that if she wanted real answers to go to Marek. After the one person I let in was ripped away, I shamefully guarded myself even from my own child. My own poor Leóna.

X.

I was part of a summer lecture series that Monday and Tuesday put on by the University, so while I was busy there, Leóna spent the day visiting with friends of hers from gymnasium and university. We met for lunch and we talked. I asked about how her husband and her son, my grandson David, were doing. I had wanted them all to come up, even though we could not all go to the book launch, but David was enrolled in a summer program (as I suppose busy embassy workers must do with their children in the summertime) and Leóna’s husband Karl stayed to be with him.

On Monday afternoon after my classes she made me buy a new blouse for the launch. She made me feel quite silly, in fact. I began telling her, the novelty of a new cover to an old

story hardly disguises the outdated syntax and colloquialisms, to which Leóna laughed and told me that she was going to give me a nice cover anyway, even if “my syntax was out of date.” She picked me out a silk lilac shirt, which I put on the next day at five, one hour before the launch start. I looked at myself feeling silly, but Leóna insisted I looked like a stunning expert on the national literature, “mysterious too” she added, raising her eyebrows to imply that the guests at the launch might whisper and wonder if it was true that I was a samizdat courier, and the circumstances of my job assignment at the University.

Leóna insisted that we take the metro, she said her feet would hate her at the end of the evening if we walked all the way to the Neoluxor from my neighborhood. She consented that I could wear comfortable and simple flats, while she chose classic black heels. I had satisfied her with the lilac shirt. As we rode the metro to the Muzeum stop, I could not help feeling agitated in some way, as if I were forgetting something, unprepared in some way for what was about to happen. I knew who Josef Koudelka was, I knew many of his works and the history of his experience as a photographer, and even read more into his experience after the invasion of Prague in 1968. I knew all about the Prague Spring, when Alexander Dubček became the head of the state and allowed personal freedoms again, and about when the Soviet Union took it all away. I knew, because I lived it.

We approached the Neoluxor, there were lots of people standing about, greeting us, as we crossed the threshold into the store. I smiled when Leóna took my arm, but I could not shake this feeling, that something overwhelmingly world-changing was about to happen. The air was abuzz with excitement and tension. The air was a saturated haze. My eyes blurred. Sounds melded into one cacophonous symphony of notes that floated on each droplet of the overloaded atmosphere. People walked among easels of enlarged photographs from the book and tables of neatly stacked

copies. Others milled about, picking up drinks and little hors d'oeuvres amidst a sea of stark black and white photos of defiant young Czechs screaming at Soviet soldiers in tanks, smoke, walls coated in graffiti, crowds of people in the treat. It was anachronistic, these people in nice clothes with glasses of wine and cocktails to the backdrop of confrontation with the stark uniformity of Communism.

Leóna saw someone she knew, and drifted away, and I kept walking, looking from photo to photo, lost in the emotion of each moment. There was a stage set up where the publisher planned to introduce the book or some such formality. People began to congregate in front of the stage as a woman dressed in a suit jacket and a skirt stood on the stage. I moved in that direction, but something caught my eye that stopped me. Through the conglomeration of people, I saw a large photograph that chilled my heart.

The large reproduction was arguably not as exciting as many of the other photographs. There was very little action, just a crowd of people in the street. But there was a set of eyes, piercing through the film on the other side of lens that held me rapt. It was me. Leóna came to my side and tapped my shoulder, but I did not notice.

“Mom,” she said. “Mom, come on. They’re starting the speech.” No answer. “Are you ok?”

It was me. I said it in my head ten times It’s me It’s me It’s me before I could open my mouth and actually say the words. “Leóna,” I whispered, and lifted my arm. I felt as if my arm did not exist. Even though I saw my finger pointing toward the photo visible in the space between a tall man’s back and a short older couple who looked expectantly at the stage, I could not feel it’s motion.

“Leóna, that’s me.”

XI.

I heard a woman's voice speaking about Koudelka's work, but as if it were the muffled sounds of someone speaking on the other side of a wall. Leóna became as entranced as myself, and together we approached the easel slowly, oblivious to event etiquette we were no doubt violating in extremity. The slow draw of our bodies halted a few inches from the image. This woman. That girl. It was undoubtedly me, but I felt not as if I was looking at myself. I looked mute but angry, as if to have been caught on film was a personal affront. My arm was close to my chest, my stance protective and mistrustful. The mistrust was there in my eyes too. I wanted to get down on both knees and beg this strange girl to forgive me, to apologize. I looked at her and felt as though I were looking at someone I had abandoned. In the back of my mind I was reminded of something, of some face, of a look in my eyes that I could not place. I felt as though I had experienced this all before, I had seen this look, I had seen this face before. I looked defiant in the photo in front of me, but for some reason my mind wanted to cover them in shades of sorrow and futility.

I was mesmerized by the face and the eyes in the photo. Leóna stood just as quietly as myself, but she had been looking at another figure in the crowd. She put her hand on my shoulder softly.

It was barely audible. "Dad," she said, choking on the word. Her hand went up and she reached forward as if to touch the photograph, and then she stopped, holding it there uncertainly, and then dropping it again.

Immediately to the left of myself was Jiří. My eyes surveyed the rest of the photo slowly. There was a short plump woman with curly hair, an alley full of men, and Jiří, standing there next to me, one hand on the woman's shoulder. The alley was crowded. I couldn't move. My muscles tensed all over my body as I tried to occupy as little space as possible. I just wanted people to stop touching me. I shrank more and more, but something always filled in the space that I shrank away from and there was no more open air than before. I felt Jiří's arm next to me. I looked at Jiří's face, his gaze directed downward. The entire memory flooded back all at once. People were shouting, something pushed me hard in the back and I looked up, and when I did, I saw a camera, a lens, a man with glasses and a beard. I had been documented. I was afraid, but the man turned and left before I could respond. The noises of the alley grew louder and louder, until suddenly I was snapped back to the book launch with the sounds of applause. Someone had finished speaking. It was humid, unbearable, suffocating. Noises crowded my head. Shots, screams, shouts, applause, I did not know what was real and what was a memory. I began to feel dizzy, and somewhere amidst the onslaught of sounds I heard Leóna's voice and felt her hand reach under my arm, and everything went black.

I came to outside in the street, sirens crooning faintly in the distance. At first I saw the alley, in black and white like the photo, but as if I were looking up at everyone from the ground. I saw Jiří's head above the woman with the curly hair, and I called to him, but all that came out were gasps. Then I heard faint noises, my friend Hana calling my name, Leóna telling me not to move. Suddenly the present flashed back into focus. I was in the dark in Wenceslas Square, being wheeled into an ambulance. My former colleague Hana, I remembered suddenly, had been invited to the book launch too, as an expert on the history of the Czech people. I felt sorry I had

not talked with her, tried to reach to her, but everyone kept telling me to relax and not to move. Leóna ushered me into a screaming ambulance. Young strangers in uniforms crowded around me and I drifted into darkness again.

XII.

In the morning I awoke in a white room with white wallpaper and teal curtains. Leóna was sitting next to me. A nurse was standing next to me taking notes with a pen and pad. The nurse, upon seeing I was awake, explained to me that I had a fainting spell, that I needed to be careful to watch the consistency of my blood glucose intake, and some other medical jargon that I heeded only marginally. I told them I felt fine, although in reality I really felt quite groggy, and asked when I could return home. They told me I would have to stay for the rest of the afternoon, and if I had no other problems then (including standing and walking around) I would be able to go home in the evening.

I apologized to Leóna for this inconvenience, for keeping her from going home to her family that morning. Leóna insisted that it was nothing, she had already talked to both Karl and her boss at the Embassy in Berlin to tell them she would be staying a few extra days. I felt as if they were all giving the “fainting spell” far too much importance. Leóna put her hand on my wrist as I stared blankly ahead. She asked me, “What were you doing in that photograph?”

I did not know where to begin, so I began with history. “When Krushchev came to power, he made a famous speech vilifying Stalinism. They say this was the beginning of the loosening of the chains from around our country. The chains loosened and we could breathe again. I remember several statues of Stalin being torn down. Jiří told me he and a friend cheered

watching a Stalin statue removed from the street. I remember him telling me that he was afraid the policeman guard was going to beat him or chase him, but instead the policeman just winked at him and shooed him away. He assumed the policeman to be a friend and heeded his advice, when the policeman shooed him away again more emphatically, and left. Perhaps one of the only cautious things Jiří has ever done in his life.”

She smiled at me, almost laughing imagining her father cheering on a falling Stalin statue. She really was so much like him.

“In 1968, though, everything changed. What had been the firm backbone to the KSČ barely held together after continuing internal power struggles and purges. Alexander Dubček came to power in 1968.”

Leóna stopped me. “Mom, I know what the Spring is. I asked what you were doing in the picture.”

I sighed and closed my eyes. “Just listen,” I said. I had to start from the beginning. I could not get to the alley, if I did not start from the beginning. She looked down. I took it as a sign of her acquiescence to the story told my way. “Dubček was popular in a way that Novotný, or other previous heads of the KSČ had not been, from the beginning. But January was not when the Spring began. It was in March that Dubček revoked control of the broadcast media from the state agency to the editors.”

I closed my eyes again, this time remembering being in the apartment in March, the smell of the wood in our floors, the window open, Jiří lying next to me. “I can remember waking up in the morning one day in March, to Marek blaring the Radio Prague, announcing the instatement of the Action Program. I remember I turned to Jiří. We were both looking at each other, and he whispered to me, his voice full of excitement ‘Your mind is free.’ This time, I thought maybe he

was right. He whispered ‘Those things you think into ink in all those notebooks,’ and then he sprung out of bed into the air, ‘you can think into SOUNDS!’ he screamed. I laughed at him. My cautious instinct kept me from being as excited as he was, as always. I did feel though that there was something different about this moment, about the Spring of 1968. There was something in the air, in the way it felt and smelled, that made me hopeful.”

I was bewildered again. I felt emotions not from today, but from then. I felt the hope of a better present, but at the same time I felt the disappointment of having known history, knowing that in only a few months everything would be taken away. A nurse came in with a tray of breakfast. Leóna must have seen my exhaustion, because she put her hand out and said, “Mom, lets not talk about this now, you need your rest.” She turned to the nurse, “You can keep that tray,” and then to me, “I’m going to go to the café next door for a coffee and I am going to bring you a better breakfast than that,” she sneered the insult at the tray.

I was glad for the break. I was so tired. I had never felt so utterly depleted before. Perhaps the experience had taken as much out of me as the doctors claimed. I wished that I was at home and I had my notebooks. I could vaguely remember how I felt during the Spring, excited over the prospect of a new Prague, but hesitant with the premonition that it would be destroyed in the rumble of Soviet strength. I wanted my notebooks so I could remember exactly what I had thought, exactly what I had felt, what I had thought was important to write down. Maybe in those notebooks, I would find the memory that I was looking for. What it was in the photograph that made me feel as though I was looking at a stranger.

Leóna came back with a pastry and a cup of coffee for each of us. The nurse told me I could not have the coffee on account of the caffeine, but Leóna decided that “no coffee was just ridiculous” and passed me sips of the cappuccino when the nurse was not looking. We talked

about the coffee shop next door, which Leóna liked, and then the doctor came in. He seemed concerned that I should not get too excited or overexert myself and other such overly cautious things, but for the most part it seemed for the rest of the afternoon that things had returned to their natural order, and the events of the Spring of 1968 had been laid to rest in their proper place in the recesses of memory.

XIII.

I tried not to be annoyed as Leóna held my arm to walk me up the stairs. It was frustrating to be obviously considered elderly and infirm. I know that I am sixty-seven, but I had always considered myself a young sixty-seven. With all this emphasis on my age, I might have forgotten that I was ever young, had that large wooden trunk not been staring at me the moment Leóna led me into my bedroom. She tried to direct me to my bed, as if I could possibly need more rest after being cooped up in that hospital all day, but I pulled away. I flung open the top with such strength that for a moment I stopped, afraid I had ripped the lid off. When I realized I hadn't, I smiled to myself a little. All of the doctor's worrying, and I had power in my old bones after all. I began pulling books out at random, opening to the inside cover for the date.

June 1959. I threw it onto the floor and reached in for another.

October 1962 joined June 1959 on the floor.

March 1963, floor.

I could hear Leóna telling me to stop, to relax, because the doctor said this, the doctor said that. I didn't care.

September 1967. I was getting closer. But it also joined the others on the floor.

February 1961. Floor. I cursed myself detachedly for not putting these in any discernible order.

And then I found it. July 1968. One month before the Prague Spring was consumed by the raging fires of a Soviet Summer.

“Mom, Mom,” she shook my shoulder, “what are you doing?”

I flipped through the pages feverishly. I read aloud:

It has been in the air already a week. The “Two Thousand Words” are on everyone’s lips in every moment. It buzzes through the air like flies, like music, carried on every gust of wind in every alley. It is a feeling. It is a whisper. It is a whisper and a scream all at once. It is a cry of relief, a cry of warning, a call to unite, and not in the proletarian revolt, but in a mental revolt.

“Do you know about the ‘Two Thousand Words,’ Leóna? When you were young, and you might have learned the history of your country, you were not allowed to learn about this history. Do you really know about the ‘Two Thousand Words?’ I asked her.

“No, I suppose not.”

“Ludvík Vaculík. Published on June 27, 1968, in the newspapers. It was one day after official censorship had been abolished. The ‘Two Thousand Words to Workers, Farmers, Scientists, Artists, and Everyone.’” I had reverted to some stern professorial persona that I had not even realized I possessed. I was addressing my daughter with the kind of tone I might have with young children who could not understand the ways in which the threads of history became the tapestry of today. “This was why the tanks came. Because lack of censorship opened the doors to people even more radical, by virtue of being more moderate and intelligent, than even Dubček. It was a call to act, a call to act to make the Communist party responsible for how they

had abused our hope for a socialist state, not the Stalinist nationwide ghetto that we were in. It warned us of the tanks, and yet we did not expect the Invasion.”

“Ludvík?” I could see Leóna thinking. “Ludvík? Did we know him? Did you know him? I think, I think I remember him.”

“Yes,” I smiled, “He became one of the Charter 77. I am surprised you remember. Of course we loosely remained friends, but,” I paused, “when I realized that although I was willing to risk myself to carry the samizdat, you grew older, and I didn’t-” I trailed off. I did not know how to tell her that I gave up my courier position and even associating with the only group of peers I ever had because of fear for her safety. She was young when I stopped, maybe five or six.

“I know,” she said. “You stopped for me.”

An awkward silence passed between us, which I attempted to diffuse by flipping through the pages again. I stopped. I had found it.

I read aloud:

August 21, 1968. I am writing the exact date today, because these are moments I want to always remember. Not for happiness, but for caution.

Last night while we slept soundly, tanks broke through the imaginary physicality we call a “border” that is vaguely based on a dream of some idealists in the 1920’s. By morning, I was woken by the loud sounds of rumbling. It was the sound of rocks, stones, and cemented street being crushed under the tires of tanks. I could hear shouts in the streets, far away though, an impending danger. It was getting louder, I could feel chaos in the air. Jiří was already up, throwing on a jacket, hopping into the hallway with one leg into his pants. Marek was doing the same across the hallway. They were yelling to each other. I could hear Marek tripping over himself, half-dressed, racing to the radio. The radio clattered to the floor, Marek muttered a

cascade of obscenities. I could not help smiling, imagining him still with only one leg through his pants. Jiří was already following behind him. I heard the radio start as I was getting dressed. The voice that came through broadcast announced the appearance of an illegal radio transmitter, the Vlatva, a Soviet propaganda station. "At the same time we urge you to remain calm. It is the only possible solution. Please do not commit any act of provocation. Do not give anyone a pretext for armed intervention. Do not get involved in confrontations with foreign units, for they would only end in a clash. Czechoslovak radio, the real Czechoslovak radio, stands behind the Dubček leadership." Or something like that.

My heart dropped. My heart dropped into my stomach, down down down. My heart was lost, an empty hole. I had known, I had known that the Spring was too good to be true. This was an invasion. Marek and Jiří were excited, agitated, fueling each other's pedestal speeches with fist pumps and feet banging on the wood floor. It was not long before they both decided that it was time to take to the streets. We had been standing in front of the window, watching people flood out of their buildings to the streets. People shouted things like "Long Live Dubček!" "Socialism yes, occupation no!" or "Killers, USSR, go home!" Both Marek and Jiří decided that it was our duty as Czechs to take to the streets, to heed the Radio Prague's call. I was not sure that I really wanted to go out into the street, the noise was getting louder, and I was afraid to stay at home alone.

In the streets we talked with other people, trading rumors we'd heard. We heard Dubček had been removed from office. I heard it so many times I figured it was true. There were throngs of people, just walking, and no one really knew where. We came to a large street that merged towards Wenceslas Square, and there they were, the tanks. I followed closely behind Jiří. When Marek saw the tanks, and the people crowding up to the tanks, confronting the Soviet soldiers

face to face, he stopped, and insisted over and over again that he had to go find Karolina. I did not want us to split up, but Jiří let him go. As I watched Marek disappear into the crowd, turning past a tank, I had this sudden fear that I might not see him again.

Then one of the tanks started to move, and a crowd pushed us into a narrow alleyway where there was a factory down the alley. The alley was already full of men, and I was pushed further and further into the alleyway. There were people touching me everywhere. A short woman came towards us quickly, and the men were shouting, "Stop, stop! Her, the Russian forewoman!" She came right toward us and Jiří grabbed her. A man stood on top of a metal dumpster. He yelled, "Good man! Thank you for helping us in our mission! We are taking control of the streets, and we will rid our city of Russians by starting with our factory, with one Russian at a time!" He held her arm. "Where are we taking her?" Jiří called back. I tugged on his arm, tried to get him to leave, but I could tell that he had become emboldened by his role of the Czech patriot. He turned the woman around. The alley was so crowded, there was not one inch of my body that was not touching someone. I did not know where we were going, I did not think that Jiří did either. We were all just moving as if being carried by a wave, being pushed by uncontrollable force. I felt myself shrinking, trying to bring every molecule in my body as close as I could to my chest. I thought that if I could occupy less space, I could breathe. Instead, the space I freed was instantly filled with bodies, arms, and legs of others. I was locked in this alleyway. The body heat of men and women shoving and pushing in every direction was suffocating. I felt myself pushing back in all directions, because I was afraid if I didn't I would be pushed under and trampled. The undulation of the crowd was like a sticky pendulous wave of heavy flesh, and I was caught in the middle, forced into the sway of bodies to-and-fro, back-and-forth. Jiří stood next to me, one arm on the woman. I closed my eyes. Why was this happening? I

couldn't feel the Spring air anymore. The buzzing, light, cool, crisp, enlivening air was gone. I was being suffocated. We were all being suffocated.

I closed my eyes tight, and all the movement seemed to slow down. But then I suddenly was afraid I was losing Jiří. Then I looked up. I saw a man with a camera, a beard and round glasses. His eyes were dulled and he held the camera in his hands. He looked sad and apologetic. Time slowed, as if everything were moving in slow motion. All noise of shouting and yelling and the feeling of shoving fell away. Who could have a camera here? A journalist? A spy? I wanted to sprint, but there was no place else to move. I wanted to yell to stop that man. What if he were a Soviet spy, journalist, or informer? My face would be on that picture forever. He was on the outside of the crowd, not trapped in the current of the river of Czech workers flowing downstream to some makeshift prison they had in mind for their Russian forewoman. I wonder what they really planned on doing to her. I doubt they really knew. The photographer ducked out of alley and the action erupted in a giant explosion that rocked the ground and the walls. I felt myself falling and I hit something hard.

I awoke in our apartment. Jiří looking over me dabbing my forehead with a damp cloth. He looked so relieved to see my eyes open. I could still hear noises in the streets. I asked him what had happened. He told me I had hit my head in the explosion and he carried me back to the apartment, and I had been asleep for three hours. He said he had sat here watching me ever since. I touched my forehead and there was blood. He reassured me that it was not bad, and that he had cleaned most of it and I was still just as beautiful as ever. I smiled a little. Jiří had the radio playing. The Radio Prague broadcast that in Wenceslas Square hundreds of people were attempting to make a human wall to prevent the passage of the tanks. The buildings are riddled with bullets, and that it will not be long before the Radio Prague will have to stop broadcasting.

Soviet troops are waiting to occupy the station. The voice on the radio urged that force against the troops was futile.

Then I asked him where Marek and Karolina were. Jiří looked uncomfortable. He told me they had not come back yet.

And then I vomited. Over and over. Jiří jumped back, startled. I vomited the fear that Marek was out in that city, on those streets that no longer belonged to us, but to tanks. I vomited the hope I had for a Czech state. I vomited the disappointment that my fears had been proven right. I vomited the memory of my mother that I will never have, and the part of my father I never knew. I vomited the destruction of our city.

And then I cried.

It is getting dark. And we are still waiting for Marek to come home.

XIV.

“On the next page,” I told her, “I wrote: *Marek is home with Karolina. She looks obviously shaken.* And that was it.”

“What your father might have done as the guard of the Russian factory woman, I cannot even imagine, had my fall not forced us to return back to the apartment. He might have been one of those young men who argued with the Soviet soldiers in the tanks that we saw in some of the photos in the show.” I stopped. “I have to see that photo again, Leóna. There was something I saw in my face that reminded me of...I cannot remember. I thought that reading this would help me remember it, but still, I cannot find it...” I trailed off.

Leóna stopped me and said that she was going to make us some dinner. I had not realized how late it was. Leóna put on some music and I tried to lay in bed and just relax, but I could not keep my mind from wandering back to events that followed the invasion. Filip Andreyovich died of a heart attack a few days afterwards, and I knew that I could not take on the task of being the manager. The Party would come prying into my record and my past and my life, and it was just too dangerous. I left the bookstore and got a job as a waitress in the pub that Marek frequented. It was also after the Invasion, “after watching over you, afraid you would never wake up,” he said, that Jiří asked me to marry him. It was at the bar that I met Ludvík Vaculík, who introduced me to other powerful writers. I enjoyed their company, but refrained from underground samizdat (the movement was just starting then), until 1971 when Jiří was beaten at work when he refused to allow a detail of Soviet officials to board his tram in pursuit of some Czech citizen who was supposed to be an enemy of the Soviet state. Jiří didn’t even know him. A witness told me he was very noble, and that he passively resisted until a large bodyguard of some kind tried to shove past him. The tram turned into an enclosed riot. The bodyguard threw Jiří off the tram and he hit the hard ground at an angle that broke his neck, and he died instantly. I never wrote about this. I could barely bring myself to take any notes after that. Every time I sat down with a notebook and a pen I heard his voice.

“What are you doing?” his voice asked. Always so curious.

“Taking notes,” I thought to no one, to the air.

“But why are you taking notes?” the air retorted.

I did not know anymore. I did not have an answer for him.

I was two months pregnant with Leóna when it happened. I moved in with Marek and Karolina. When I was four months pregnant I decided to help Ludvík and some of the other writers. The more pregnant I got, the easier it was for me to tape pamphlets all around my pregnant belly. I carried them all under my clothes- pamphlets of poetry, of prose, of anything. I became close with many of the writers who later founded Charter 77. I thought of myself as finally taking up the cause that Jiří had believed in. I took my own form of defiance. My training since childhood to be inconspicuous made me perfect for the job. I continued working within the underground network after Leóna was born, until one day, I overheard Leóna telling her teacher, “My mommy reads more papers than anyone else. And she knows everyone who writes them and they’re all even smarter than president Gustáv Husák.” I remember the look of suspicion and entrapment in the teacher’s eyes, and I knew then how foolish I had been to put my daughter in that kind of danger. Right then and there I decided to sever all ties from the community that had become my second family.

Leóna came back with two plates, insisting playfully that we eat in bed. I confided to my daughter that I had never felt so fatigued, so worn before. She laughed and said that maybe it’s because I had been living the past few days constantly thinking about forty years ago. Then she decided resolutely that she and I together were going to bring myself back to the present. Her eyes sparkled when she planned the next few days for us, we would go try out new restaurants, see a film, maybe a show. We would adventure to new stores and restaurants and ignore the old things of Prague, the buildings, the streets, and the relics that reminded me of the past. She told me that she would not let anyone think of me as old, because we were going to seize the day.

She told me that I had to come to Berlin, a change of place would be good for me. Exploration of something new. We talked about making a plan for a vacation in the winter or the

following summer, when I was not teaching and David could come, maybe going to the sea, to Croatia. Something exotic and beautiful maybe.

For the rest of her visit we roamed the city and lived only in the present moment. Leóna's distractions worked. Memories of pamphlets and the bar, of the invasion and notes, grief, happiness, and the past all faded away into conversations on Leóna, David, and hope for a future that was inevitably freer than the past.

XV.

The month of August passed. I finally decided to push the trunk back under my bed. The new academic term was beginning soon, so I began reviewing my lesson plans. I sat in cafes and buried myself in the solitude of my academic notes and papers, and for the first time since I became a professor I thought of retiring. I would be turning sixty-nine that year.

This semester my special topic in Czech literature was the works of the founders of Charter 77. We read the works of poet and playwright (and future president) Václav Havel, philosopher Jan Patočka, playwright and novelist Pavel Kohout, and of course "The Two Thousand Words" by Ludvík Vaculík himself. I tried to detach myself as much as possible from any kind of personal connection to these people, to these works. For the most part, I was relatively successful. Every now and then a memory resumed as I led my class into a discussion on Havel's The Beggar's Opera or Kohout's Nightfrost in Prague. I thought that I was doing well at keeping my emotions neutral, at "not getting worked up" as Leóna would say, and heeding the doctor's advice in the prevention of another August episode.

Then something changed. In November a student caught me in class when I almost passed out lecturing. I had been lecturing, then I proposed a discussion point to the class, and suddenly I felt as if I were somewhere else. I was in a street, somewhere in Prague, I could not place it, and I saw myself, myself when I was young, but in modern day clothing, and then her face became the portrait in Koudelka's book. The photographer's eyes, just as afraid and alone as my own, pierced my eyes and I felt a blinding pain in my head. I must have looked disoriented, because a student was already out of his chair by the time I was falling. I went home for the rest of the day, and back to work the next day, and I put the spell behind me.

Then in early December, I went back to the Neoluxor to find gifts for David, Leóna, and Karl. I browsed through the section of books on architecture for Karl. I moved on to begin my search for David in the children's section, and a large gray book with black lettering caught my eye. I looked up, I was in the art section, photography. *Invasion 68: Prague* looked back at me. I cautiously took the book off of the shelf. I felt almost afraid to touch it. I looked around, and found a bench. I flipped through the pages, looking half-interestedly at the photos of protesters, Cyrillic graffiti urged the tanks to GO HOME, and flaming debris rolled through the street. I skimmed copies of the radio broadcasts and news updates. The photographs were not boring, but I could not focus. I knew I would eventually open the book and there she would be. Or rather I would be. And Jiří.

I found it on sixty-one and two. I sat with the book on my lap, the double page spread staring back at me like an open abyss. My past looked at me and accused me, from next to Jiří, of not being able to save either of us from history. I was begging to be rescued from this photograph, I thought I was accusing the photographer, in his glasses and frightened eyes, of observing and recording and not doing. But that was not true, I was not accusing the

photographer of anything, I was only angry with the photographer because he had exposed me. I was accusing myself, the reflection in the lens, of always being too afraid to stand up for my heritage. Of being trained to keep my mouth shut, of being trained to ignore my Jewish heritage, of being afraid to embrace education, of being afraid to speak out. I was accusing myself of hiding my truths in notebooks, while the true dissident stood up for what was right despite the consequences, like Jiří. For my fear, I was rewarded with life. I was here in the Neoluxor, and Jiří had never had the possibility to even dream of this multiple story homage to books, open borders or real freedom of speech and thought. But why had my fear and strict adherence to a policy of invisibility been rewarded? I felt utterly useless, that my life had been lost to fear.

I looked at my eyes, and I had a sharp pain in my chest that lasted only a moment. As it faded, my mind was filled with the memory I had been searching for since I had first seen the photograph. I saw sorrow and futility in my eyes. I saw myself standing motionless on a street corner and a girl who looked just as I did forty-some years ago, in a bright blue jacket and a red hat. She smiled at a boy, but the look of confusion and hopelessness was unmistakable. Her expression screamed to me that I had one last purpose in my life. I knew this girl and I were linked. I had to save her, she had to know my story. We would save each other. I could bring her out of her place of futility, by virtue of giving her access to my life and my mistakes. She needed to speak, to escape the silencing I had imposed on myself. She in turn could speak my story, and say all the words I had always been too afraid to say myself. I had doubted her existence before, but now I knew she had to be real. I was convinced she was out there somewhere. I did not know where or how I would find her again, but I was sure that our paths would intertwine again.

XVI.

I spent Christmas in Berlin with Leóna, her husband and my grandson. In the past month, I thought frequently of the girl, the ghost of my past I'll call her. I had no idea if I would see her again in Prague, or if she would find me, or how we would meet. I wondered what I would say to her if I saw her again. I wondered if she would be able to see in my eyes, the way I saw in hers, that we were one and the same. This was the beginning of my obsession with my ghost, although I had no idea how to really pursue this obsession. I had to be prepared if we met again, so she could understand that our paths were meant to be united. That she was meant to come along forty-some years after me, so that she would not repeat my mistakes. She could save my past and I would save her future.

I never told Leóna about the vision, or about the second fainting spell. I returned to Prague in January and went immediately to the Neoluxor to purchase Koudelka's book. I had an epiphany, that even if she could not see through the years and age that we were identical, she could see me in the photo. She would see herself in 1968.

After I bought the book, the preparation for some uncertain meeting between the two of us preoccupied all of my thoughts. I threw myself into my lessons during the day, and my thoughts of her at night. Every night I lay in bed building her face in the shadows piece by piece. First the eyes, then the lines under her eyes, then the nose and the half-parted lips, the hair falling around her face, and lastly the burgundy red cap. Every night I went through this exercise, so I would not forget, so I would recognize her perfectly if I were to see her again.

I had no idea how I would best tell her my story. At first I began to record some kind of memoir, and then I suddenly remembered the notebooks that I had buried again in the trunk

under the bed. I organized them meticulously. Once I had them organized, I was satisfied. My feeling of satisfaction lasted maybe an hour, but I was not sure what else to do, but wait. I vibrantly and passionately taught the history of our Czech struggle for literary and personal freedom. I almost imagined directing my lectures at her. I felt as if by imparting the general message of the importance of the literary voices of our country that took up the struggle of dissidence, that I was speaking my regrets for not putting myself forward with them. The more attention I gave those who were not afraid, the more I attempted to atone for my own fear.

I was just waiting, waiting for something to happen. I felt the deceptive calm. The flat air hid the shocking charge that lay dormant in the atmosphere, waiting to be triggered whenever I opened a door, turned the corner, and walked through the streets. But nothing happened. The more I waited, the tenser the air around me became. It was saturated with my obsession of the vision of my present day ghost. I did not know what to do, so I waited, tracing her face each night in the dark, and reading every page of my notebooks, 1959 to 1971, every word, scribble, frustration and fear that I wrote. And then finally something began to happen to me.

I began to see her everywhere. I saw her burgundy red cap in the street. I saw her strange green boots on a girl in the library. I saw her face on bus ads. Each time I saw a piece of her form out of nothing but the charged air, I had a head pain, and then a chest pain, and had to sit down, or grab a light pole, or sit on a step. By the time I recovered, the girl I thought had been her would not be, or the red cap would be gone. There were other visions too. I saw the photographer, standing with his beard and his round glasses, his eyes dulled, camera hanging loosely from his neck, looking as if he were posing for a prison inmate photo. I heard sounds or saw images that I had described in my notebooks. I was teaching class, lecturing, when suddenly, as clearly as if it were happening in front of my eyes, I heard young Marek's voice, unshakingly

asking my father, “Where is Matka?” I heard my world fall down in the collapse of a lie I had never truly understood, and I heard loud sobbing, so loudly, it was in my head. I stopped teaching, put my head on the desk and my hands over my ears. My class stared in silence. The sobbing stopped, I looked up, and regained my composure. My students looked afraid.

A few weeks later, I was in the store, buying groceries, and I smelled vinegar in every aisle. I saw Tetka there, holding a bottle of vinegar and laughing, telling me with a wink that she had heard it was fashionable in Paris to rinse your hair with vinegar. I had a chest pain, fell over onto the display of canned vegetables, spilling them everywhere. A woman came up to me, asking me if I was alright, but the pain had faded as quickly as it had come, and I assured her it was alright.

I could no longer keep the past from the present, I could not order the passage of time. Although I was slightly afraid I was losing my mind, the more hallucinations I had the more convinced I was that my bygone double did exist, and that I would find her again.

At the end of the semester a student reported my fainting spells to my department chair, and they suggested that I rest through the summer and take a sabbatical in the fall. They also called my brother Marek, listed as my family reference, to alert him of what they called “my condition.”

The semester was over in the beginning of June. Marek called and came by, inquiring angrily how I could have let myself be so negligent of my health. Although Marek was my senior, and drank many more beers than I did in my younger life, he took his health very seriously from the day he had his first grandchild. He and Karolina went on long walks and scrutinized the healthfulness of their diets. I had never told anyone about the girl I had seen, or any of my visions, but I knew now was the time to speak. I told him, from beginning to end. I

told him about the first day I saw her. I told him about looking for her, I told him about forgetting about her, I told him about remembering her again, and I told him about preparing to meet her. He listened in silence, but the look in his eyes was one of concern and worry and not interest. His only comment afterward was, “Yes, that is all very strange,” and then he changed the subject quickly to chastise me again “for not looking after myself.” He asked if I had said anything to Leóna. I told him no, and begged him not to. I did not want to worry her. He told me he would come again and see me the following week, and that if I had not told her myself then he would.

In the next week I walked miles over the city, half in hopes of seeing her, and half just to quiet my mind. Realizing that I had no notebooks describing anything after Jiří’s death, I began to compile notes for my enigmatic double on what I could recall of that time. I tried to make a list of the works that I carried for samizdat. I wrote notes about my first experiences as a professor after the Wall fell. The days passed, and I never called and told Leóna. Marek’s second visit was arriving.

It was June 18th, 2009. I had told him to come with Karolina in the evening for dinner. He seemed hesitant, questioning whether I was well enough to handle entertaining. I told him nonsense, that he and Karolina were not company that I felt I need to entertain, after all I had lived with Marek most of my life (and Karolina for at least ten years). Besides, I insisted, I was fine.

They arrived at six. I had made roast pork and dumplings. Although they protested (the dish is not exactly the healthiest), I insisted that it was for old time’s sake. I laughed, directing this to Marek, “At least now we have pork to go with the dumplings.” I had not told them that I had also planned to serve kolače cakes. They were sitting on the oven, separated into little yeasty

balls, rising, and waiting to be put in the oven. Again, a treat we could have never afforded as children.

I could tell that Marek was waiting until after the dinner to talk to me about my health, to insist that I call Leóna. I did not want to worry her. I felt strange, yes, but I did not feel as if there was some overt way in which I was neglecting myself. I had never had any health problems before, and I had had no spells at all since Marek had seen me last. They did not understand, there was something happening, something happening around me that I could not control.

I got up with the ruse of taking the used dishes back to the kitchen, and prepared to put the kolače in the oven. But as soon as I touched the tray, I saw the most vivid image I had seen yet. I saw the girl, my ghost. She was unmistakable, although she did not appear in this vision as she had the first time I saw her. Somehow I knew that this moment I was seeing was the present. I saw her wandering, through aisles of books, in low light. I felt the most intense spasm in my chest, as if a hand had wrapped itself around my heart, and squeezed with all its might. I was standing behind some kind of shelf, and she reached toward me, and then, I fell to the ground, pulling the tray of kolače with me. Karolina and Marek rushed in, and I knew they were saying my name, even though I could hardly hear them. Everything went black for a moment, and then I saw flashes of dim light and it seemed as though someone were blowing a fan over my face. I heard the sound of pages rustling.

XVII.

I faded in and out of consciousness. I knew that I was in the hospital. My eyes would flicker and I would see Marek pacing slowly, on the phone, I could hear him telling someone,

likely Leóna, about what he called this crazy obsession with some girl. Then sometimes in the flickering light I would see a strange room, and hear people speaking in broken Russian, like beginner's Russian. Or other times I heard voices in English. I wondered, was I seeing glimpses of her life?

I fully came to the next evening. Leóna was there. So was Marek. She must have taken the first train. At first they did not realize I was awake. Leóna was asking him, "I don't understand. She said that each of these episodes is preceded by a vision? A vision of herself? I don't understand," she shook her head.

"She seems to think," Marek started, and then noticed my open eyes. He came forward to my bed. "You're awake," he said, and took a deep breath. He seemed relieved. "How are you feeling?" he asked.

"I feel tired," I told him, "just very, very tired."

"Mom," Leóna said, "how could you not have told me about all this? How long has this been happening? Not since I was last here?"

"No, no," I assured her. "It has happened with more and more frequency since...November I suppose..." I trailed off.

"November?" She sounded appalled. "It's June!"

"Leóna," Marek said softly and touched her arm.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I just, I just don't understand."

So I explained to her for the first time. I told her about how I saw the girl in the street. I told her that I was afraid it had never been real. I told her about all of the visions. I told her that if anything were to happen to me, I wanted Leóna to take charge of the notebooks, that I wanted

Leóna to save them, in case the girl were to come look for me. I told Leóna that the other girl needed to know my story.

“Leóna,” I said, “I do not know where this girl is from. I am beginning to suspect that maybe she is American. I have been having these dreams, as if I am seeing into her life. I want you, if need be, to explain and read the notebooks for her. Can you do that?” I asked her.

She stared at me, her jaw slightly slack. “You’re serious,” she said.

“Yes, I am serious. I know, I have no doubt in my mind that she is out there. I want her to know, I want her to know, I want her to know,” I kept saying.

Leóna looked frightened. She nodded. It looked like she was trying to convince herself. She said, “I understand, I really do. Why don’t you get some rest.”

I really was very tired. “I’m thirsty,” I told her.

She looked relieved to have a reason to leave. “Of course,” she said, “Marek and I will go and get you something to drink.” She took his arm and they left the room.

I knew that Leóna did not understand, but I also knew that in the end she would do what I asked. She would not lie to me. She would keep the notebooks, and if the girl came, she would pass them on. I could see Marek and her talking outside the window, looking grave. I could tell they both thought I was losing my mind.

Was I losing my mind? I thought back to when I first saw her, how I had thought maybe the whole scene had been a figment of my imagination. No. This was different. I could feel it. I could feel it in the air. Something was happening around me. The charge in the air was building. I closed my eyes. I was asleep before they came back with the drinks.

I had fitful dreams. Again, I saw flashes of dark and light, like black slat shades on the brightest white day. I heard voices in English. It was hot, dark, and suffocating. I saw the alley. I

saw the photographer, his round glasses, I felt the oppressive sensation of being in a sea of bodies. I saw the photographer, his beard. I looked at him angrily. He was putting us all in danger, didn't he know that? He looked at me blankly, and disappeared into the air. I tried to tug on Jiří's sleeve, to point out the photographer, but where he should have been was empty. Everyone else was motionless, or rather, frozen in movement. I was trapped in this façade, it was not an alley at all, but some kind of two-dimensional glass prison, like a slide under a magnifying glass. Then blackness and pressure, as if I was in a line of people being squished together, sandwiched by bookends. It was pitch black. Some one picked us up in the dark, all of us in between our bookends, and were carrying us. I got the impression I was in some kind of hot, dark bag.

I could hear the doctor telling Leóna that my condition had worsened. My fever had spiked, I heard him tell her, but I could not see them. I felt the most refreshing breeze, again I heard the rustle of pages, and through the dim flashes of light I saw the ceiling of a room I had never seen before. I tried to get a better look, but just as quickly as it came, I descended into stifling darkness again.

I passed two days like that. I had been in feverish, fitful darkness, when suddenly I felt as if a window had been thrown open in front of me, passing a gust of wind by my hair, my face, and my sides. At that same moment, I saw a blinding bright light. At first I thought I was coming to in the hospital, and the doctor was standing over me with an examining light shining over me. My vision was blurry. It was so bright and hazy. There was a woman standing over me. I couldn't quite focus, but I could tell this was a woman I had never seen, and a room I did not recognize. The woman looked at me. "What are you doing in this book?" she asked. Slowly, cautiously, from the other side, a girl leaned over me. My vision became clear. The girl. It was

her. I saw her face. I saw my face. I saw our eyes. It was the girl from the street, two years ago, in Prague. She looked at the woman, and then back at me. “Wow, she really does look like me,” she said.

On June 18th I was admitted into the hospital. On June 19th my condition worsened, and on the 21st I died, my obituary the next day read. I was a distinguished professor of literature at that Charles University who left behind a daughter, a grandson, and a brother. What they did not know was that I had died happy and satisfied, knowing that I had been right all along. She was there, we had found each other, my replika.

APPENDIX A

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

replika- in Czech means both a) double, physical replica and b) a rejoinder; reply; response

Pražský Hrad- Prague Castle

Karlův Most- Charles Bridge

Malá Strana- Little Quarter

Malostranské náměstí- the name of a street and a metro stop in Prague

Mostecká- Prague street

Teta- Aunt

Tetka- diminutive or term of endearment for Aunt

Tatá- Father (Daddy)

Matka- Mother (Mommy)

APPENDIX B

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL REFERENCES

All of the following are sourced from the author's prior work, "Repression, Literature, and Identity: The Growth and Metamorphosis of Czech Nationalism in the 20th Century," a thesis published in 2009 at the University of Georgia.

Samizdat means literally "self-published" and refers to the underground literary networks used across the Soviet Bloc for the dissemination of censored works. This practice built the foundation of resistance movements in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970's and 80's (52, 58-9).

The Prague Spring was ushered in with Alexander Dubček's election. In March of 1968, Dubček revoked the control of broadcast media from the Main Administration of Press Supervision and returned control of content to editors-in-chief. By April, he had enacted the "Action Program," calling for the acceptance of debate, freedom of speech, freedom of movement abroad, and legal guarantees of the personal rights and property of citizens. To add to these radical new suggestions, it called for the "full rehabilitation of victims of 'legal transgressions in previous years.'" Economically it liberalized foreign trade and reduced the role of state planning (53-4).

The invasion of Prague in 1968 was intended to "normalize" Prague and return it to the pre-Spring status quo. "Operation Danube" was the invasion of Czechoslovakia by military units of East Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, and the USSR on the night of August 20. The Warsaw Pact invasion of Czechoslovakia was the largest military operation in Europe since World War II, amassing half a million soldiers, over 6,000 tanks, 800 airplanes and some 2,000 artillery pieces (54-5).

BOOK ONE

III.

p. 14- The *Rudé Pravo* (or *Red Right*) was the official newspaper of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. *Svobodné Slovo* (or *Free Word*) was another publication that was nationalized, but run instead by the Czechoslovak Socialist Party.

BOOK TWO

I.

p. 17- In October 1949 Action B ('class warfare') was instituted in Czechoslovakia. Within six weeks about 10,000 people had been arbitrarily arrested and sent to labor camps. Leaders of other political groups, such as women's rights activist and leader of the National Socialist Party Milada Horakova, were executed in show trials (50).

IV.

p. 31- Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, in power from 1948-1992. Largely considered a puppet government of the Soviet Union (49-50).

p. 31- T.G. Masaryk, the first President of the First Republic of Czechoslovakia, from 1918-1935.

p.32- *The White Plague*. The play sets the appearance of an incurable disease in the setting of a state mirroring Nazi Germany.

p. 33- The Battle of White Mountain refers to the battle that began the Hundred-Years War, in which the Bohemian land-owning elite were expelled from their lands by the much stronger Habsburg army. Many Czechs historically considered this the moment in which the Czechs were forced under the yoke of the ethnically German Habsburg Empire (4).

p. 33- Jan Hus is a national Czech hero, the iconic Czech victim. He spoke against the Catholic Church for not allowing the laity to consume the Blood of Christ or drink from the chalice. He is martyr for the people for refusing to recant his criticisms before a council of the Church, citing his motto *Pravda vítězí*, or "Truth prevails" (3).

V.

p. 37- During the Battle of Zborov in 1917, the Russian based Czechoslovak legion fought in the first directly confrontational battle with Habsburg forces since the Battle of White Mountain. Many Czechs felt that the Battle of Zborov signified a "retaking" of the Battle of White Mountain of 1620. It became immortalized in the newly independent post-war state as a national holiday (15-6).

VI.

p. 42- A reference to the character Švejk from *The Good Soldier Švejk and his Fortunes in the Great War* by Jaroslav Hašek, who came to be emblematic to the Czech population for his method of resistance by feigning ignorance.

VII.

p. 61- A reference to the reputation of Czech soldiers in World War I evading service for the Habsburg Empire (12).

X.

p. 66- As referenced in Book One, Koudelka had only smuggled six photos out initially, and won numerous awards anonymously for his documentation of the invasion, the largest amassed force since World War II, the culmination of the tank power five of the Warsaw Pact signers. He was under threat of exposure and silencing because he documented the truth that Czechoslovakians did not have choice in the politics or daily life of their own country, while the Soviet Union did everything in its power to hide that.

XII.

p.72- The “Action Program,” calling for the acceptance of debate, freedom of speech, freedom of movement abroad, and legal guarantees of the personal rights and property of citizens. To add to these radical new suggestions, it called for the “full rehabilitation of victims of ‘legal transgressions in previous years’ ” (54).

XIII.

p. 75- “Some idealists in the 1920’s” refers to the three diplomatic figures who helped to found and led the First Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 (Milan Stefanik, Tomáš Masaryk and Edvard Beneš).

XV.

p. 82- Although the Charter itself was not literary in nature, many of the founders and writers who contributed to the criticism of the government’s failure to protect human rights (such as intellectual freedom) had literary backgrounds (58-9).

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