

**LOST INSIDE THE  
HAPPY NOISE**



# LOST INSIDE THE HAPPY NOISE

*Jim Lukach*

iUniverse, Inc.  
New York Lincoln Shanghai

## **LOST INSIDE THE HAPPY NOISE**

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iUniverse, Inc.

For information address:

iUniverse, Inc.

2021 Pine Lake Road, Suite 100

Lincoln, NE 68512

[www.iuniverse.com](http://www.iuniverse.com)

ISBN: 0-595-33136-X

Printed in the United States of America

For 8.C. and everyone at the III Zakladna Skola, Senica, Slovakia

1991–1994

and for Dave Emery



*“It also occurs to me that we live because there are a number of encounters ahead of us for the sake of which living is worthwhile. Encounters with people who will emerge when we least expect them. Or else encounters with other creatures whose lives will touch on ours with a single shy glance. What more could I say...”*

—Ivan Klima  
**Love and Garbage**

*“The word ‘good-bye’ is drifting in the air around me and I can’t seem to catch hold of it. The entire city is a good-bye.”*

—Cees Nooteboom  
**The Following Story**

*Some things are best alone  
And sometimes I’m best left alone  
And sometimes I’ll see you in the water at night...*

—Sugar  
**That’s a Good Idea**



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## *Senica, Slovakia-1992*

The room smelled faintly of lemons as if the hand of God had reached down and with His fingernail scratched the oily skin of the fruit, splashing the walls of the two-room apartment with its scent. The man, barely awake, reaches deep into the refrigerator and wraps his hands around a cool bottle of mineral water. He lifts it to his head, rolling the clear green bottle across his forehead. "How strange it all is," he thinks. "My life so far away from home." He stares at a forest scene wallpapered in the bedroom. Long before he was placed here, someone had hung a pine forest, two sheets of the same scene side by side, like looking into a cracked mirror. He smiles, his mouth tasting of stale cigarettes and cheap rum and somewhere in between them her mouth, the taste hidden like a hippo barely submerged in a far-off river. He laughs to himself, reaches for a half-smoked cigarette and says aloud, "You know, from here it will be one long downhill slide. I'll never feel like this again." He flops down in a chair, green bottle in one hand, cigarette in the other and watches the smoke drift towards the ceiling and curl around the overhead light like a cat going to sleep.



# *Battle Flag*



## *Introduction*

I once taught English for beer, shots of rum and all the filterless cigarettes that I could smoke in an hour. I sometimes taught it as a favor to my colleagues or because it made me feel like Mother Theresa. I taught English to get into a woman's pants or because I was in love. I taught it for my dinner, for trips to castle ruins in the Small Carpathians and for five liter demijohns of village *slivovica*. But most of the time I taught just to see where it would go, who I would meet and how would it all end. And sometimes I even taught for the money.

For every story there is a beginning, the logical jumping-off point, the fountainhead of narrative where "once upon a time" shoots high into the air and what falls are the stories that bind everything together. Sometimes the beginning is not so clear, but hidden and mysterious like the source of the Nile and so it is with my time in the Big Village—how it all began and how I got there. The version I recite most often, "Once upon a time I was in graduate school in Wichita, Kansas..." is the easiest one to tell because that was in the fall of 1989 when the Berlin Wall came down and something deep inside of me said, "Go." That is not the only way my story begins. It goes back farther than that and lies somewhere in Milltown, New Jersey, somewhere with my parents, somewhere in a young life spent with books, but all of that muddles my story. The truest way to begin my story is: "Once upon a time, I had a set of balls."

People tell me that I need to let it go and move on to the next thing. I am not very good at letting things go.

What follows will not make sense if I don't say something about the person that first went to Slovakia in January 1991 versus the person I have become. I was a believer then, willing to make the leap of faith that if I threw myself completely

at life everything would work. Life would protect me like wearing the Ghost Shirt or a scarab around my neck. I carried the battle flag with me—leave myself open to everything, refuse the word “foreign,” accept all invitations, label no experience as “bad”—although some might hurt more than others—that is the way it should be. And always try to be the last one standing. Most of all it was about being an American, the America I wanted people to believe existed—not CNN, not MTV, not franchised food and certainly not tanks rolling across the desert. In the years that would come, when the people that I had met would turn on the TV and see us doing something stupid—like now—maybe they would think back and say not all Americans are like that, we knew one once. I was the young American. Was it a myth? Maybe, but it was my myth and my battle flag.

I once thought that everything that happened to me was interesting. Now I think that everything that happens to me just happens. I once thought that I gave myself up to life and now I think that I have just surrendered to it.

I once learned playground Slovak from the kids I taught, hard slang that was part Slovak, part Czech, some German, but all Zahoracky. And in return, I translated lines from movies and taught them to read with a New Jersey accent. I remembered Slovak phrases from my great grandparents, words long buried and thought forgotten, hidden and encased like a tulip in a bulb. I learned all the curses and more ways to say “fuck you” than I ever thought possible. I memorized the names of insects—*vcela*—that sounded like the noise of bees’ wings and the names of flowers and trees—*snezienka*, the “Little Snow Woman,” the first flower of spring, or *smutna vrba* for the willow and my favorite, *breza*, that sounded like the wind moving through birch trees. I carried a small notebook with me, jotting down words that I committed to memory, common things that suddenly became exotic—chewing gum—*zuvacka*. Crow—*vrana*. And another favorite—*sviačka*, for the simple candle. I used to dream in Slovak, but now I use words like *best practices*, *socialize the idea*, and *cross-business silos*, words that I can’t even begin to translate into English or begin to fit them inside my dreams.

People tell me that I need to let it go and move on to the next thing. I am not very good at letting things go.

I once taught 30 English classes a week at the III Elementary School on Sadova Street in Senica, Slovakia. And when those classes were done, I taught private lessons. I filled my days with mad people and I was mad myself and in love with every-

thing. On teacher's birthdays or name days, we were invited to their offices in between classes and made to drink glasses of wine or *slivovica* and served cakes and small-open faced sandwiches. Twenty people crammed into an office, glasses and plates being passed overhead. They made us sing *Happy Birthday* in English and we went back to the classroom with a buzz. Sometimes I would send my girls to the center of town to buy flowers for the occasion and Dave and I would show up, flowers in hand and always in threes because things in three brought happiness and those in twos brought mourning. Now, we meet in a small conference room, throw down some ice cream cake, mumble through *Happy Birthday* and small talk while looking at our watches. Then we go back to work.

Did I mention that I have trouble letting things go?

Many people have said to me, mostly in anger, if it was so great there then why don't you go back? Sometimes when things are over, they are over. I used to know when it was time to leave.

When I came home from Slovakia, I answered an ad in the newspaper and applied for a job with the CIA as an undercover operative. They were looking for people who had lived abroad, spoke a foreign language (though I wasn't sure how desirable Slovak was in the intelligence community) and possessed a sense of adventure. And who doesn't think of themselves as adventurous? I sent them my resume, noticing the final disclaimer stating that if I didn't hear from them in 90 days to consider myself not adventurous. But I did hear back and I was asked to attend a "Business Development" meeting at a local hotel. Two spooks talked about the "Agency," but two words: "central" and "intelligence" were noticeably absent during the discussion. I interviewed with one of the operatives in a hotel room. We role played about a situation in Turkey. It was the best interview that I ever had. Weeks later, they flew me to D.C.—suburban Virginia to be more exact—where I underwent a battery of tests and questions in a series of non-descript office buildings. An entire day was spent on a multiple choice test where the same questions kept appearing in different forms: *Are you afraid of deep water?* *Are you afraid of things without end?* Yes, I am, very much so. I still expect a phone call in the middle of the night like *Le Femme Nikita*, when the Agency will send me into action, flying me to the far corners of the world to put underwear on someone's head.

I once returned to the home of my ancestors, a small village on the edge of a great pine forest in the land of Bura. I visited with an old woman who had seen things change and then change again. She remembered the name Adamec and the people that lived there. She served me *slivovica*, plum brandy that was going yellow with age, and it passed smooth and clean over my tongue and I could feel the visions in the bottom of the bottle where I could walk across the bridge that joins today and yesterday. She spoke of my grandmother as a young girl, arriving from Vienna on top of a hay wagon and of sitting with my great-grandmother when a stranger suddenly came out of the dark forest and sat with them. When my great-grandmother looked under the table, the stranger had the cloven feet of the devil. After the stories and the *slivovica*, I left her sitting at the table. She watched me carefully, staring at my feet as I walked out the door. I walked through the center of the village, past the church and the lone pub to where the forest began. I glimpsed the future between the trees, and a day when the stranger would come out of the forest to visit me. My therapist would call him disillusionment, but I would know him by another name.

I once thought that other people missed out—they missed the chance of seeing the world change, they missed seeing how crazy beautiful life could be. But it was really me that missed the chance, the chance of ever being content. Last week in the mall, I broke down and cried. I'm not sure why. "My Girl" was on in the background, people walked around happily buying things and I started to cry. It was uncontrollable—a sudden feeling of loss. I stood outside of *Forever 21*, the irony not lost on me, sucking snot back into my head and wiping my eyes into my sleeves, leaving a trail of tears and knowing that there were some things in life that I would have and others that I would not. Happiness would be elusive like the long-plumed bird that flies backwards and contentment would be a far-off land.

There is a street in Budapest on the far side of Castle Hill that overlooks the Buda Hills. In the autumn, the trees explode in a riot of color and the leaves pile in corners and blow across the road, forming a postcard of the season. The road runs the length of the hill and on the far northern end are a row of canons that menacingly overlook the city. In the fourth one, a relic from some forgotten war, I have stuffed a small notebook into its mouth. It is filled with secrets, half formed thoughts and a record of all I felt and how to get back to them. It is the beginning of the Book of P—Petra, *Popoluska*, Palo, stories of *polievka* and *pivo*, U Pavlina and the first trip to Praha. It is the safest place to keep it and I know

where it is. One day, when I stop whining and get myself together, I am going back for it. It is a postcard of all things I need to remember.

July 1, 2004—The approach of this day has been lost in the whirlwind of change and the coming divorce. I have been lost in the sea of guilt with nothing to hold onto except questions that I don't have answers for—what have I been doing for the past ten years and how much I am to blame versus where is the point that I am able to let go, but I am not very good at letting things go. Ten years ago on this day I left the Big Village, got on a plane, came home and spiraled out of control. I have no explanation as to how these ten years unfolded or why I isolated myself from the people I was once closest to. Perhaps some things happen because they just happen or else because I let them. It makes me question my own authenticity and ask, where did I stray from the path? Wasn't it clear at some point? I once seemed on the way. Maybe I am no longer authentic, but at least the pain is. It would be easy to spend this day in reflection, comparing then and now, but what would be the point? Who else would it matter to and why should this day be any different than those that filled the past ten years? I will stumble through it, bathe in the guilt of everything, show up to work, go home and wash in the blue light of the television.

People sometimes ask me if I am angry. And I say, Fuck yes, I'm angry. I easily get pissed off and go on long rants—about work, about the war in Iraq, about society and about myself. I frequently use the word “cocksucker.”

When I came home I fell into the comfortable 9-5 rhythm of suburbia with a job that had benefits and a life that had none. And so I slipped into it, lived the prescribed life, put away the battle flags and surrendered. I tucked away my time in Slovakia and filed it under “nice time”. Did I scream yet that I have difficulty in letting things go? I have walked around for ten years in a daze and I am tired and at the point where I could give up, buy the fucking dream and let it all slide into a 401k. Isn't that what you want me to do? But...there are moments, simple ones, like the wind moving through the tops of trees or walking outside the office and the air inexplicably feels, tastes and smells like Budapest (*it was somewhere on the back of Castle Hill, removed from the Danube that I unexpectedly found myself—euro, mad, and in love with everything*) or in the suddenness of a word that appears comet-like and cyclical in my mind—*pivo, polievka, Petra, Popoluska* and I reach for the battle flags, unfurl them and wrap them around me like my mother's arms and begin to feel it all

rise in me again and I know that I am close to throwing myself back on top of life because once upon a time, I had a set of balls.

## *Sellout*

The road to the departures' drop-off at Newark is jammed with cars and buses filled with early risers and coast-to-coast commuters, people like myself: joyless travelers and corporate sellouts. The morning is gray and cheerless and in the distance the Budweiser brewery sign blinks out a rhythm that is strangely in sync with the word *re-pen-tance*. My driver nervously plays with the radio and I can tell by his face that he doesn't think I will make my flight. We share many things. He is from Budapest. It is my favorite city. He distrusts Slovaks. My entire family is from Slovakia. We both think that Peter Esterhazy and George Konrad are the best writers on the planet. This said, he is worried that I won't make it and I feel for him because I don't care.

I have traded adventure for comfort, consume snippets of office gossip like French fries, mentally add up my frequent flyer miles and aspire to the lofty heights of Business Class. It's all part of my current life: broadband access, web ready global branding, medieval Venetian corporate politics, edutainment, advertising and corporate DNA. Ten years ago, in a moment that still surprises me, I dropped out of graduate school to go teach English in Slovakia. It came in a vision, bathed in the holy blue light of television. Jane Pauley appeared on the screen Fatima-like, washed in the water of Lourdes to announce that the Berlin Wall had fallen. And I heard the call.

*Have you ever felt what it is like to be a pilgrim? Have you ever made a journey of discovery? Have you ever gone somewhere because you had run out of options?*

I went tramping with Leco through middle Slovakia, hiking and climbing in the Mala Fatra Mountains, sleeping in patches of trees on the side of the road and smoking foul tasting filterless cigarettes. We drank beer in *chatas*, chalets tucked in the basins between mountains and the only way the beer got there was on someone's back—a keg lashed to a pack and brought up on the steep trails from the villages below. I cheated Leco at cards, taking pot of cigarettes after pot of cigarettes. At night, wild boars came to the edge of our camp, their tusks curling into their faces and their red eyes shining like neon cherries. We didn't shower

for a week and Leco finally caught on that I was cheating him, but it was fine because we smoked all the cigarettes together anyway. Now, I travel with an extra pair of underwear and toothbrush in my carry-on just in case my luggage gets misrouted.

It's getting late. It would almost be faster to get out and walk to the terminal and I can tell by the way he looks at me in the mirror and his constant glances at his watch that my driver is thinking the same thing. But have I mentioned that I don't care? I am a designer of pretty things—words and web pages, virtual truths and false impressions. I have a cube and in it I keep pictures of Camus, Kafka and Hrabal like they were my family. I tell my co-workers that the men in the pictures are my uncles who had gone out before me. I celebrate their birthdays and remember them on All Souls. I say silent prayers to them.

*When I pretend that I am dead...*

The first night I met him we went to a bar in Bratislava called, "Rock, Pop and Jazz" where we drank double vodkas chased with warm Pepsi and listened to old Queen songs. We stumbled out into the cold March night, through Hviezdoslavova Square, past the National Opera House bathed in searchlights. We bummed cigarettes from the hookers outside of the Hotel Forum and finally found ourselves at the main train station in Bratislava without a train. He told me about growing up on the Chesapeake and spending summers sailing from Maryland to Virginia, past the wild horses and back again. He told me about long nights coked out at the Merchant Marine Academy and finally being thrown out. We talked about Anna the Dandelion Queen and how I accidentally found her outside of Senica on the road to Hlboke. I told him that sometimes the moon is so low in Senica it looks like it is hanging on a broomstick. And now the only thing dangling in front of me is the golden carrot—the new car, the new computer, spices from India, princesses from the land of Ur and a lifetime of numbing happiness.

*And in the womb of your gray cubicle do you sometimes feel that balloons will suddenly fall from the ceiling with some New Year's Eve hilarity?*

K. comes into to my cube and puts a cup of coffee down on my desk. She hands me a list of "action items" and promises that after the conference call we can "talk off line" about some issues. I live a life of lists: things to do—add things, subtract things, rework, refurbish and retrofit. Things to plan—project A to

project B, dinner, children, and retirement. I keep a list of complaints and grievances that get me nowhere. I don't know why I should complain. I have a cube with a window. Sometimes the old me comes to visit and I am surprised that I still recognize him. We drink coffee and he lights up a cigarette. I tell him that he can't smoke here but he doesn't listen. He makes fun of my shoes and clothes, but these are our rituals and soon the conversation turns to the old days—afternoons swallowed whole at the Hotel Slovan, the night on Long Street when the wind smelled like wild mushrooms and the look on Paul's face when he spoke of Africa. He turns quickly on me "What about Marcela? Have you thought of her recently? What do you think she is doing? Do you remember the look on her face and the feeling in your heart? Can you remember any of these things? What does it mean to you?" He leaves a photo on my desk, his coffee grows cold and he disappears into the maze of cubes. In the photo, Lena is walking up the stairs to the III Zakladna Skola, turning to the camera, a smile sliding across her face. It is so distant that I find it almost impossible that I was that person standing there in late spring watching her walk up those stairs, the scent of roses drifting from the school garden, the clamor of children's voices, the softness of the afternoon, the thought of beer and cigarettes and all the possibilities of the coming night. I buried the photo in my "To Do" pile and stared at the computer screen until it was time to go home.

*Isn't it pretty to think so?*

When I was 15, I found a copy of *The Sun Also Rises* in the attic among my father's college books. Before I finished the first chapter, I knew that I would go to Paris. I knew that I would fall in love there. It would be autumn. She would be tall and lean with hair the color of a crow's wing and smell/burn like a fire. I would write a book about love and Paris. My 15 year old head was filled with every Parisian cliché—but are they still clichés when you don't realize that they are clichés? I made it to Paris. And I went in autumn when the leaves were turning along the Seine and when the afternoon light poured through the stained glass of Notre Dame and fell fractured onto the floor—a mosaic of light, like autumn leaves in a puddle. I went to Paris on a school trip from Slovakia as a chaperone. I was in charge of two girls—Petra and Zuza—both my students and both 13. We had just come through the applied arts section past the Louis XIV chairs, past the dead and empty vases of the Louvre and Petra was saying—"if I have to see one more vase I'll die." I agreed. We came to a door at the end of a long hallway. Zuza opened it and we found ourselves on a balcony overlooking

the city. The sun, beginning to set, backlit the entire city, streets disappeared into the shadows, trees softened and melted into Monet-like impressions and streetlights popped on, surrounded by a halo of misty light. A waiter stood outside of a café in a stiff bleached white apron, smoking a cigarette and waiting for the dinner crowd. Petra and Zuza, now quiet, stood close to the railing as Paris pulled on all of us. One by one, Sacre de Coer, Notre Dame and every other church in the city began to toll 5. In a moment that hangs like the crucifix on the end of a rosary, the city stretched out below us—autumnal, clichéd and forever Paris.

*Because of You-Because of Me*

My driver sees a break in the traffic and squeezes his Town Car into an open lane assuring that I will make my flight and I will make it to Atlanta. I see how it works. I show up everyday and that should count for something. I make 56k and probably give them 60k worth of talent, but I don't complain. Besides, what would I do with the extra money? Buy something bigger, faster, hipper? Numb myself on wine and dinner? In my briefcase, I keep a handwritten note, something I wrote down in a hurry, on the back of a bar bill from Fero's. It says:

*My best moments in the classroom were when it all seemed effortless. It never felt like a job. I never punched a clock. I never said to myself, "I can't believe I gotta go teach tomorrow." I would have even taught for free if they had let me. But I took my 3000 Krowns a month and spent it like easy money. All the while St. Luke sung in one ear, "Man cannot serve two masters" and Jack in the other, "Go moan for man." And that's what I did when I thought of all my poor friends at home who bought the dream, went to a job everyday, came home, ate, slept and then did it all over again the next day. I felt like a criminal.*

*There were moments in class when Marcela Bambino would call me over to her desk with an urgent wave of the hand and when I got there all she wanted to do was to tell me hello. And that hello would hang out in the air until I wanted to catch it and put it in my pocket so I could look at it later. That's when it was effortless and all the connections were right in front of me like Marcela's hello. Man cannot serve two masters and I'd serve Marcela long before I'd serve god. I moaned for my friends who'd never know Marcela and never see the connections between her and everything else. I felt like a criminal because it was all so damn clear.*

Nothing will ever be clear again. I have bought the dream. Inside, the airport is almost empty, surprising considering the traffic. The shops are just beginning

to lift their iron gates. A flight crew stands at security, sleepless, smoked out and caffeine high. Garbage cans overflow with fast food wrappings and I am unprepared for my meeting. A young woman with hair the color of a crow's wing rushes past me, her baggage trailing behind her, the wheels clicking out a curious rhythm that sounds like "*Re-pent-tance, Re-pent-tance, Re-pent-tance*".



ing the blond Finnish girl on my small bathroom floor with both their feet intertwined and hanging out of the door and into the foyer while the rest of us sat in the kitchen smoking terrible Bulgarian cigarettes and talking over the two of them in the middle of their passion. Finally, after ten days, I threw them all out. Petey and I fought on the stairs and the neighbors came out of their apartments to see the show. A week later we laughed about it and pulled the cork out of another bottle of *slivovica* and lit another BT that the girls left on their way out the door. Peter ran his fingers through his hair and laughed about how strange it all was.

### 3.

Lena shared her desk with another girl named Lena and one day I will paint a picture called, “I Never Met a Lena that I Didn’t Like.” I will capture them in spring, sitting in the desk in front of the teacher’s, hiding behind a vase full of lilacs and the picture will be so lush you will want to walk up to it, let it run through your fingers like warm sand, press your nose close to it to smell the heavy dreamy scent of the purple flowers and try to catch the faint taste of spring in Zahorie coming through the window from behind the two Lenas and into your nose, passing across your tongue where it inexplicably tastes “green” and cool like well water and buzzes in your head sunshine thick and all of this will work over you until you want to stand close to the painting and lick it, afraid that you may have missed something.

### 4.

Every Wednesday evening I went to Silva’s apartment in Sotina for an hour’s worth of English conversation and as soon as the 60 minutes were up, her father would burst into the room and announce that the class was over. We would all go into the living room and Pista would open the cabinet next to the television and pull out a bottle of *slivovica*. This was payment for the English lesson—shots and dinner. The nights always went on too long and he wasn’t happy until I was completely hammered and stumbling into the elevator. But her mother cooked lovely dinners—classic Slovak dishes that reminded me of my grandmother and besides, Silva was one of my favorite students. Pista poured me *slivovica* like I had been working overtime so much that one night when I went home and threw up in my bedroom because I mistakenly thought that I was in the bathroom. After that, Silva and I decided to meet and speak English in the center of town on a park bench where we watched people walk by and where I could remain sober.

## 5.

Every year on my birthday I would try, Christ-like, to walk across the River Myjava. The river ran cold and murky in March, the color of coffee and cream, high to its banks, swift with melting snow from the hills outside of Mjava—the same hills that foreshadow the end of it all, the last weekend, the goodbyes and the photo of Marcela Bambino that I still carry with me. After the party and the bottles of Skalica red, Dave and I would walk down to the river. Less than two miles upstream, the river was dammed, where it backed up past the gardens to Sobostie forming the Kunov Reservoir. And what did it say about me, the connection to water, to Christ, to this very place? One year, the water held my first step for an instant, buoyant and I could see to the other side, my steps laid out predetermined. Is that what they call, ‘the way?’ Then I crashed into the swirling waters, knee deep, Dave laughed, a bottle of wine at his lips and we decided to go off and find Luba.

## 6.

I was still drunk after a long night with Powers and Carrie when I passed out on the train from Bratislava—missing my stop at Kutý and waking up on the outskirts of Brno in the Czech Republic just where the villages ended and the broad plains began. I watched the sun rise over the city, outlining the cathedral and the sinister Spilberk Castle. It was late March, the vodka, beer and nicotine swirled around in my head, but there was something in the cold morning and the glassy frost covered meadows that said spring was near. Three months earlier I had been shoveling horseshit on a farm in Central New Jersey and now there I was hungover drunk at a village train station. I don’t know what I will do when the next train arrives. I guess climb aboard and go south and somehow try to explain that I don’t have a ticket, that I had missed my stop and that I am new to this place.

## 7.

My flat was on the edge of town on the road to Kunov, the reservoir, Sobotistie, and finally Myjava where the green hills began to roll and swell until they crested somewhere near the Polish border. My two rooms overlooked a dusty courtyard formed by three identical buildings—faded Stalinist white monsters that the Slovaks translated as a “block of flats”—a term from the British English books we used at school. In the spring and summer, swallows built their saliva nests under the balconies and in the eaves of the building. They moved in front of the windows flying in concert like schools of fish, darting and chasing their meals. Occa-

sionally one would bash into the window, shocking me awake like an alarm clock or the thought of deep water, and fall two stories below—where my neighbor Monika would pick them up and nurse them back to health.

**8.**

The day after Dave and I pointed loaded handguns at each other in the police station during Pista's birthday party, we went and sat out on the road to Hlboke—a dirt tract just wide enough for an old Soviet-built tractor and lined with cherry trees whose branches reached out over the road—touching like a cathedral ceiling. The road divided two hay fields, providing a windbreak to the houses at the edge of the city. We walked slowly down the road, stopping halfway to Hlboke and sat on the edge of the field that stretched westward to the mountains of the Maly Karpaty, green and vaguely Appalachian. Dave pulled out a small bottle of homemade *slivovica*—payment for English lessons—and took a long pull from the bottle that caused him to shiver and cough slightly. I told him that I would “give” ten years off of my life to fuck Iveta—a lean, dark, woman-of-the-night Transylvanian beauty. He told me that the way things were going, I would have to pay up before I reached 35. A breeze came across the field, warm and carrying with it the scent of fairy tales and the possibility of wishes being granted, but it moved over us and into the trees where the cherry blossoms rustled and slowly fell to earth, covering everything like fresh, new snow.

**10.**

Ravan tells me that this time he is sure that his play will be performed as written. The owner of Chaplin, the pub where Ravan reads every Tuesday, is going to let him put on his play. The final scene, as it is written, has the scorned lover firing arrows into the audience, so everyone may taste the bitterness of love. Ravan fails to see this as a problem and that is why I love him. He orders two more beers for us and becomes animated with the prospect of production. “Of course, you will play the lover,” he tells me. “Picture the response when arrows start to fly.” By now, night has fallen in the Big Village, winter's brief return. From the bar on the second floor of the Hotel Branč, we can see the entire square. People rush home for dinner through circles of light dropped by the streetlamps. Traffic has slowed and only the trucks heading south gurgle and puff their way out of town towards the Carpathians. “What we do need is a believable actress. Someone the audience will fall in love with when you do. That way they'll really feel the ending.” Ravan takes a cigarette from the pack on the table. In his mind he runs through a list of women, all of them actresses, but none who can really act. “What about Ivana?”

I.F. comes through the door and shouts for the whole bar to hear, "I hear the secret police are looking for you two!" He walks along in long strides covering the distance in the half the time it would take me, but I.F. was always like that, impossible to follow. He is the recognized master of our small group, mostly because of his age, but also because he is madder than all of us, even Ravan. Two days before the Revolution went into full effect and was on every television, I.F. stood in the center of the square waving the Czechoslovak flag and crying for freedom. In his other hand, this crazed John the Baptist held the leash of his goat, who wandered around his feet. Most people kept their distance waiting for the police to come. They never did and I.F. looked the plague in the face and called it out.

Ravan turns his tale on him and almost immediately it turns into an argument. It always does, argument for the sake of argument. I.F. wants to know what sort of arrows and what kind of bow. A cross-bow or a long-bow because that makes all the difference. A long-bow is cheap theatrics, but a cross-bow brings medieval intensity. I drift and fade in the conversation. The play will never be produced, but there will be a next one and another one after that.

A girl sits at the table next to us, young, maybe seventeen or eighteen with the eyes of a professional mourner and a graveside demeanor. She is dressed all in black, taking off a long black coat that reaches down to her ankles. She looks around the bar, her eyes stopping at every table as if she must be waiting for someone. I try to get her attention, fill up some part of those eyes trying to convince her that I am the one. She brings out the Baudelaire in me, my own personal flowers of evil. Out of her black bag, she takes a white cigarette box that is as conspicuous as the black trunks of trees set in a winter landscape. She is the kind of woman I would get involved with just to see how terribly it would end, what horror would fill my days without her.

A young man comes through the door. She rises and meets him halfway across the room. They kiss and hug. Her eyes sparkle like Genesis. This is enough for me. I tell Ravan and I.F. I am going home and they barely hear me above the debate. I take one more cigarette from the table. I walk little steps, turn and fire my cross-bow with medieval-like intensity into the crowd. First Ravan. Second I.F. Third the young man. I save the final arrow for her and shoot the girl with the eyes like a professional mourner just above the heart. The room fills with the smell of the rotting, evil flowers of spring. I turn and walk through the doors, down the steps and in and out of the circles of light.

## 11.

### **The Museum is Closed on Mondays**

Little exists of us now, but if you are one of those who need proof, then climb the three flights of stairs to my old flat. There you should find a table. It is the only one in the apartment. Once you are in the kitchen, get down on your hands and knees and crawl underneath it. Our names are there, carved with the broken end of a pencil. That should be proof enough. It is easy to speculate on the beginning and end of things, especially a love affair, but here is the middle, the breathing, throbbing, sweating middle of it all. Two names, a date etched into wood, minutes before sex, the physical evidence we need on the bottom of a kitchen table. It is the one thing I am sure of now. The rest is tempered, misfired in memory, like the taste of her mouth or the look in her eyes.

Touch the curtains. Feel the heaviness of the synthetics. Slowly draw them back and look out to the sidewalk below. Pretend it is the evening, the sun just down and you can see her walking in and out of the circles of light dropped by the street lamps. If you cannot picture her face, then think of me standing there night after night waiting, no expecting, the impending apocalypse to come. And it does not come in full, but fleeting glimpses, the winged gargoyles or the sun melting into the mountains, rendering all into darkness. Light a cigarette, think of love, curse her, pray for her, and listen for a knock on the door. When she does not come, smoke another cigarette and wait.

Look into the bedroom. Think of her lying on the bed, her hair falling down around her shoulders, hair the color of a crow's wing. Try to comprehend the joy of her, the expectation, and the taste of red Skalica wine on her lips. Feel the scar on her knee, the one from volleyball and the texture of her skin on your tongue, as surprising as the first storm of autumn. And savor the look in her face, the one you could call love, in the moments before climax. Savor it, capture it in your memory as true as the carving underneath the table or as real as your right arm.

When you are through and ready to leave, open the refrigerator door. There should be wine there, hopefully red. Pour a glass for yourself and drink to the two of us and the picture you have formed in your own mind. Drink to our health and yours as well, for the apocalypse is impending and love has died, been reawakened and died again. Drink one more glass for her and me and for all the memories forgotten and the ones that are forever with us like a wooden leg. And then, when you are finished, cork the bottle tightly for the next pilgrim, close the door behind you and walk down the steps and into the bright light.

Walk the way to her house, down the street where the branches of the cathedral cherry trees reach out overhead, blossoms falling snow. Imagine her hand in yours, the brief touch of shoulders or forearm against forearm and the thought that this woman next to you is the one I loved. Walk through the shadows, hear the singsong in her voice, feel her tongue in your ear. Walk her down Long Street, which runs all the way to the train station and listen to the trolley car wind rushing at you and try to remember the musty, dank smell of night when everything, the wind, the street had the same earthy smell, full, alive, throbbing, like the smell of mushrooms growing in the forest after an autumn rain.

## 12.

It was the summer of Anna the Dandelion Queen when Dave and I were drunk nearly everyday. We got drunk in the apartment in Sotina. Drank beer all night at the Hotel Slovan. Got drunk on the anniversary of Hemingway's suicide, lying in the grass, straining to see the stars through the city lights. We got drunk on the train to Poland with Powers, frightened out of sleep by Polish passport control and we all laughed, nothing lost in language, split a bottle of vodka in Cracow, drunk in Warsaw, sat on the edge of the sea in Gdansk, drunk in Berlin, drunk in Prague, and then drunk and in love in the largest Communist youth camp. Lindsay and I drank dark cool bottles of *Staro Pramen* on the edge of a lake while she tried to explain the rules of cricket. We put on a mini version of *Romeo and Juliet* for the kids and I played Mercutio just so I could say, "Tis not as wide as a church door/Nor as deep as a well/but tis enough. Zounds. I've been peppered." Each night we'd walk into the sleepy village, the softness of the night falling like cinders and moths smashed their heads into the hissing streetlights to the lone pub where we drank sweet dark beer. The two weeks ended with a sudden good-bye and the greatest train run of all time with Dave and me sprinting the length of the platform—loaded down with full packs and the events of the last two weeks—onto the back of the moving train just like they do in a Jimmy Stewart movie. And for the sake of memory, I place Lindsay at the train station, laughing and waving goodbye, even though she was already far away on her way to Russia, so Dave and I found an empty first class compartment where we threw our bags on the overhead racks and I lit a cigarette and Dave pulled two bottles of beer from his bag and then we saluted each other, took a long sip and began to laugh because it was only July and the summer wasn't even half over.

14.

He insisted on taking us wild boar hunting. His mother lived in a small village in the hills outside of Brezova with no running water and at night after drinking beers I had to navigate around a pack of dogs on the way to the outhouse. Pista woke us early—the morning just barely gray—and served us a breakfast of home-smoked bacon, cheeses, and fresh vegetables from the garden in the back. We finished off with a couple of shots of *slivovica* and piled into his old *Moskva* and went into the hills. We arrived at the crest just as the sun was coming over the horizon and he handed a rifle to Dave and me. I had never killed anything of any size and didn't plan on it today. We split up—Dave with Pista and me and Silva. We sat in a hunter's stand overlooking a wide meadow and waited for wild boars. Silva and I dozed in the sun and were surprised by Dave and Pista coming out of the woods pointing to the middle of the field where a small deer was grazing. He said my name, as to say shoot. I raised the rifle, put the deer in my sights and then moved far to the right and pulled the trigger. The deer bolted into the woods and I thought about Nick Adams. Silva laughed and knew what I had done and Pista stood cursing. We drove back, our rifles in our laps, hoping to catch a boar as it crossed the road, and it all felt like a safari.

15.

*I wanna be adored*

One night in the Jopi Bar over beer, cigarettes and a rambling conversation about the battle of Stalingrad and Bohumil Hrabal falling out of his hospital window, I announced that I would now give 15 years off my life to fuck Iveta. She was all things eastern to me—dark and scented with labyrinthine pine forests and freshly mowed hay. She was a dancer and my chance to go Degas, paint her slender body into memory of her bending over the *barre* staring at herself in the wall length mirror with her dark dancing blue eyes casting a slight glance off the canvas towards me to make sure that I was still looking at her. She would have been one of those ones. One that would last long in memory, hovering over the bowl of Coca Puffs years later while the wife is bitching me out over something deserved or not and the pink kitchen would suddenly fill with the scent of pine and the blinding spot of light as if thrown off a wall-length mirror. It would be worth it, the fifteen years. But in the end, as with all things, I lacked the decisiveness and so the conversation turned back to Hrabal and someone said that the writer's death may have been a suicide.

## 16.

*...and it almost blows my mind*

She mouths along to the song, singing, *I know that you are almost in love with me/ I can see it in your eyes.* We bounce around the room, the narrow space between the kitchen table and the unused black and white TV push us closer together, bodies almost touching, the space between us as thin as cellophane. The tips of her hair hit me in the face like live wires sending the message of love down my spine and her breath is warm and sweet from half a bottle of eastern Slovak wine. Perspectives change, viewpoints shift, our references framed by guitars and alcohol and soon we are up above the room, floating intertwined and lost in the music. It is almost right, this one could pass for love and if this was horseshoes, it would definitely be a leaner. And sometimes a leaner is good enough—guitars filling the room, the dizzy anticipation of sex, heads swinging back and forth, the candle throwing our mad shadows across the wall until it is my turn to sing, *The breeze blowing softly on my face/reminds me of something else...*

## 17.

*if you want to buy me flowers just go ahead now...*

I taught them the words to *Two Princes* by the Spin Doctors, lip-synching and dancing around the small room in the school library where we met after school once a week for a conversation class. We crammed in among the bookshelves and in the rare moments when there was silence, you could hear the words spilling out of the books, hissing like a small leak. These were my kids: Katka, Stano, Zuza, Lukas and Marcela Bambino. My first winter in Senica, when everything was still new and the culture and landscape were sweeping over me like the pounding surf—pulling, eroding and reshaping, I was happily lost. In the classroom, I was nothing more than an assistant. Luba P. explained points of grammar and vocabulary and I helped with the reading and pronunciation. I had little responsibility beyond showing up in the morning which I did with love. During Luba's teaching segment, I sat with the kids in their desks, pulled girl's pony tails and threw spitballs at the boys. I loved them. One day, still early on, Luba P. was handing back quizzes, it was one on the numbers and as it was custom she asked each child their grade and then recorded it in the class book. The quiz was easy and everyone did well. There were lots of perfect or near perfect scores. Then Luba called Marcela's name. She stood and said, "One"—a perfect score. Marcela turned, looked at me and there was something in her eyes that momentarily filled the emptiness. Emotion slammed through me welling up from deep inside from

someplace new and untouched, wilderness. I left the classroom and cried in the hallway until I thought that I would throw-up. I dried my eyes and sucked the snot back into my head and with a madman's knowledge I knew that nothing would ever be the same again.

**18.**

***waiting in line at the fortune teller....***

My grandfather died in October when autumn was in full effect and everything felt like a Bob Mould song. Dave and I had just spent an alcohol soaked weekend in Ostrava near the Polish border visiting his friend Kirby, who like us, taught English. From Kirby's apartment you could count 32 smokestacks spilling smoke across the horizon. He took us to a party where there were lots of other expat teachers—mostly Brits and Irish. We almost got our asses kicked when some drunk guy thought Dave and I were going to throw the keg off the nine story balcony. There was pushing and shoving in the middle of the living room until Kirby calmed everything down. We all got drunk together and I found an Irish girl that I fell in love with for the night. We laughed about the *Quiet Man* and danced in the living room when they rolled up the carpet and played songs from the 80's that ran like a soundtrack to another life that I once happened to live in by mistake—New Model Army, the Smiths, Altered Images. And when the keg was tapped and the night was over, I walked Katie down the nine flights of stairs, stopping to kiss her halfway down on a landing and every landing after that, until we ran out of stairs and landings and we pushed the door out into the gray morning, where the smokestacks spewed soot into the air and it fell like snow all around us.

**19.**

On the way out of town the bus stopped at the dairy and we loaded crates of milk underneath the bus, among the skis and equipment and when we ran out of room we put them in the center aisle. We had enough milk for the entire ski trip and extra, just in case it started snowing and didn't stop. The factory owned a small lodge in the hills near the Czech border and let the local schools use it for a week at a time. It snowed the entire way there. The kids sang, *Tancuj, Tancuj* and Laco passed me a bottle of *slivovica*. The lodge sat on the end of a winding road, where every curve made me think the bus would tumble into the snow-covered pine trees. And the hills curled in close, blocking out the late afternoon sun and the pines grew long in the fading light and the whole valley seemed set aside and

out of time. It snowed and snowed. Pine branches crushed under the weight and we skied everyday and at night drank vodka followed by spoonfuls of horseradish. One drunken night, I climbed up the mountain with skis under my arms, barely able to follow the contours of the earth through the deep snow. Laco stood at the bottom of the hill, waiting. I skied blind, through trees, following the trail of my heartbeat, guided by the song of stars and the taste of love. When I made it to the bottom, Laco asked me why I felt the need to ski in the dark. And I told him that I don't think I would ever know, but it had something to do with dying and the fact that I was very drunk.

### **Crashing and Burning**

Her therapist called me a lost soul. Mine called me disillusioned. There are very few tomorrows and all my yesterdays are wrapped into a tight paper ball slowly coming unraveled. I know that my time there has damaged me, cost me a marriage and left me with a lingering feeling that I can walk out of anything and just around the corner will be something crazier, wilder, a bigger rush. The only thing I can't walk away from is the Big Village. I think about them often: Studio Senica, all my Marcelas, Lena at the door, Herr Director, the faces in the crowded teacher's room, the kids on the street who whisper my name to their parents as I pass, and finally a table outside of U Pavlina, the sound of the outdoor cinema filtering through the trees, a soft night, Peter, Palo and Dave around the table, cigarette smoke drifting through the courtyard and Fero stepping out of the light, four beers in hand and an overwhelming feeling that the night could go anywhere. It leaves me feeling empty and blessed. My passport is in the drawer and the pack is under the bed. It is all too clear and all too easy. Sometimes the easiest way out is the front door and sometimes life is just one big train wreck. But I need to ask one thing before I leave. When I die will you come and place flowers on the site where I crashed and burned?

## *Waiting for Miriam*

The night that I returned from the funeral in New Hampshire, I dreamed of Miriam with such clarity that my first thought was that it wasn't a dream at all, but a glimpse of things to come or a rerun of a certain time in my life. In my dream, there was a knock on the door and it took me an impossibly long time to cross the living room. I felt every fiber in the carpet singularly and individually like I was blind and reading *War and Peace* in Braille. The scents and smells of the condo washed across my face and splashed down my nasal passages and across the back of my tongue where each one stopped to be recognized and categorized—the oily grilled salmon dinner from two days ago, Eileen's "Autumn Rain" candle burning in the bedroom, the wet smell of cat and the scent of bananas ripening. Yet, occurring simultaneously as it could occur only in a dream were a thousand words and feelings, each one tempered by death and loss leaving an emptiness in the bottom of my stomach. The front door was heavy and when I was finally able to pull it open there was Miriam. And that is where it ended. I woke to find myself cut in two by the sunlight coming through the bedroom blinds.

The appearance of Miriam was no surprise. She had a history of showing up unexpectedly in visions or in strange places like the bus station or an unnamed city street. The last time that I was on the verge of losing everything, I ran away to England where I stayed with a friend and spent my days in the British Museum staring at the cat mummies and the cool black statue of Bastet with a ring in her nose. When the weather turned warmer, I bought a bus ticket to Bratislava, Slovakia and spent the next 24 hours traveling in an encapsulated Slovak world through the middle of the continent. I didn't tell anyone in Senica that I was coming. When I finally crossed the Danube and into Bratislava, I turned to all things familiar—Petra cigarettes, a bottle of *Zlaty Bazant* beer, and a garlic *langosh*—a Proustian overload of words and faces: *elektricka*, *Maly Karpaty*, *dva krat pivo*, Tanya, Katka, all of 8c and the Jopi Bar. I boarded another bus going north, passed through familiar villages where SID LIVES is splashed on the sides of cottages and finally over the Maly Karpaty into *Zahorie*, the land behind the mountains, and into the valley where Senica sat with her white towers and striped

smokestacks and that is when the full weight of my return struck me in the face and the streets rose up to meet me, the cemetery candles flickered as the bus passed and for a moment I felt that I had never left. The bus pulled into the station and standing on the platform was Miriam—waiting. She had no explanation for being there and barely seemed surprised at my arrival. She walked with me to the end of Sádova Ulica where we stopped and stared at the III Primary School where we had first met. She said goodbye and we made vague plans to meet in Smrdaky—where we would inevitably find each other.

Her classroom was opposite the office I shared with Dave and three other Slovak teachers and Miriam was frequently at the door. I was easier to like then, especially to an 11 year old. I cared more. I was funny without my current bitterness and most important I was open to all things around me: money to spend, liquor to drink and women to love. Her classmates would send her to leverage our friendship into either holding English class outside or to hold a “dinner party” a special class where we set up desks to resemble a long dinner table and carried on conversations in English. After about 15 minutes, all semblance of order broke down: the quiet dinner music became the latest dance track, Petra chased Palo around the room and Havel’s picture stared down on all of us.

One day in February when all the trees were black and stood in stark contrast to the fallen snow and the smell of pollution from the factory hung close to the ground, burning our throat and noses, Miriam mysteriously called me, “Dad.” Unprovoked, she looked up to ask me a question about something in the English book, “Hey Dad, could you...” And it hung there for a moment for all to look at, floating and drifting like a tethered balloon, words that would pull and tug on me slowly, eroding all that had been, and resound through all the empty relationships, the bullshit people I would meet at work, the half attempted love affairs and the people I’d spontaneously hate and wish would die sitting through rush hour on the way the work. And above that, there would still be Miriam. She watched the words come out of her mouth like a character in a comic strip and so did the rest of the class who nervously laughed and watched the two us.

That same winter, Miriam and all the eighth graders that I taught began dancing lessons. Every Wednesday, they pushed the tables aside in the cafeteria, the place still smelling of cabbage from lunch and practiced the polka, fox trot and *czardas*. I would occasionally stop by on my way to meet Vlasta to watch them go awkwardly through the movements: Jozo gingerly grabbing Gabriela around the waist, Stano stepping on Jana’s feet, and when there weren’t enough boys, the girls paired off—Miriam dancing the polka with Lajdova—reminding me of my aunts Veronica and Marie dancing polka after polka, twirling through one of my

cousins' weddings and here again acted and reacted over and over a thousand worlds over, the 1, 2, 3, the dance master slapping the beats out on his thigh "Raz, dva, tri, raz dva tri," and *Skoda je laska* playing softly in the background. The doors closed behind me and off I would go to my private lessons or to meet Peter and Paul and drink the night away or chase women—all three beats at a time, the night passing *raz, dva, tri, raz dva, tri*.

After the eight weeks, learning a dance a week, they held a final dance for their parents. The weather had turned warmer and the poplar trees around the football stadium were in full bloom. The afternoon was softer than anything I ever could have imagined, dusk beginning to fall, light blending with memory twisting and turning the past and the future spinning them together into the hard copper wire of the moment, shadows creeping like ivy across the hills around Senica, hills that roll and crest until they spill over the Polish border, and closer—a single hill where Palo and Jana sit forever in memory and another with castle Branč fading into the coming darkness, watching over all of us. Halfway through the park, near the statue of Novemeskeho the poet, I meet Petra. Petra opted not to take the dance lesson for reasons that I never understood, but I had seen her standing outside of the cafeteria watching every lesson and I half suspected that she regretted her decision, but I was happy to have her with me there—a brown-eyed, brown-haired girl, quick to laugh and who I was forever connected to because we had seen Paris together—destroying every clichéd notion I had about the city, but that is a story for another time and another life. As we approached the school, giant raindrops began to fall, splattering the pavement of Sadova Ulica and we ran in between them like we were dodging shrapnel.

The cafeteria was tied in crepe paper like so many rites of passage that were wrapped up in paper, streamers hung from the ceiling and vases of blood-red carnations sat on the lunch tables. Every table was filled with parents and Petra pointed them out to me: Gabriella's parents—Mr. and Mrs. Tulak, Stano's mother and Mr. and Mrs. Jamriszka, Jozo's mother and father. We found a table near the back, next to a woman and small girl whose eyes had the same cracked blue that looked up and accidentally called me dad. Petra said hello to Miriam's mother and her little sister. We sat down and let the dance unfold. The students entered the room in pairs, suddenly transformed from the kids I saw everyday in the classroom into young men and women—the boys dressed in suits with their white socks showing out of their black pants and the girls blooming in their spring dresses bright with flowers. They danced the waltz, the *czardas*, fox trot and we politely applauded after each dance, gently laughed at their awkwardness and I began to feel the evening pull and tug on me—suddenly feeling the inevita-

bility of leaving after three and half years, of the day that I would throw everything in an army duffle bag and go into the dark spot that I identified with the future—resigning myself to 9 to 5 workdays, office politics, a marriage that would go bad because of the days/months/years that I would spend mentally revisiting this place, this moment. They chose me to judge a dance contest, where I walked through the dancers, tapping them on the shoulder and sending them to the side of the room. In the end, I chose Marcela Bambino and her partner not because she was a great dancer, but she was like me and not destined to win much.

At the end of the program, the students asked their parents to dance, sons and mothers, fathers and daughters, a moment marking a change in life that they were no longer grade school children, but on the verge of a great journey. They walked to the tables and taking their parents by the arm led them back to the dance floor. And in a moment that I still see with tremendous clarity that screams, “epiphany,” Miriam stood at the table. She explained to me that her father could not make it to the dance and nothing would make her happier than if I would dance with her. Time crept to a slow crawl. Her mother smiled with approval. Petra touched my arm and Miriam led me to the dance floor. We stood opposite each other, she smiled, her eyes shined and I gently took her around the waist. I suddenly felt that I was standing under a heavy shower of water, that this was one of the moments I was put on the planet for, the reason for coming to Slovakia, a reason for forgetting words like *career*, *exposure*, *corporate intelligence*, a moment wrapped in crepe paper and tenderness, one that transcended nationality, age, personal history, a moment that still only says one thing to me and that word is **LOVE**. We danced a polka, spinning around the room, blurring faces, spinning tables on their ends, crushing the light into the top of a thimble. And when the dance was over, I left the school and found Peter, Paul and Dave in the Jopi bar and drank double vodkas until the future went away.

My final month passed in a blur of summer green, farewell dinners and *slivovica*-soaked evenings. I walked through the thirty days like a ghost, hovering slightly above my body, possessed by the moments until time evaporated and was small enough to fit in my pocket. I packed my things into an army duffel bag, took the long ride to Vienna, boarded a plane and went home. And now, when I am on the verge of losing it all again and there is no London to run away to and the monotony of 9 to 5 becomes spirit-crushing, the willfully destroyed marriage threatens to swallow me whole, I sit and wait for the re-appearance of Miriam and the softness of an evening in May—waiting for the thought and memory of her to rise and wake me like a long lost melody, like the *raz*, *dva*, *tri* of the polka.

# *Thoughts on Winters Spent Away from Home*



*For Marcela P.*

If my Slovak was good enough or your English, then this would be easy to write—but time has changed few things. Outside, the snow falls quietly, dulling the sounds of Route 1 and everything is muted as if held under a blanket. It clings to the trees and the cars—blurring edges and angles into an indistinguishable white mass. I am unsure of many things and it is easy to fall back into the old time and think of you. The snow covers time, tempers distance and I am quite sure of all I remember.

I think you were too young to remember my first winter in Senica, but I can see all of it with the clarity of those cold mornings. Sometimes when the night is quiet, I can recreate the feeling of being there—the sweet sickly smell of the factory hanging close to the ground in the freezing air, the yellow glow of the street-lamps dropping circles of light on the snow covered sidewalks and the sound of children’s voices calling my name from behind the trees as I walk through the park. But it passes too quickly and I cannot make it last. The streetlight outside my window slices through the blinds, casting finger-like shadows that clench me in the oily grasp of memory.

I don’t think you would be surprised if I told you that Senica wasn’t the Europe that I had pictured in my dreams. It didn’t have the cobblestone side streets, the cafes or the hulking cathedral that would loom over everything I said, did or loved. Instead, I found a place not very different from my own home—a place you equally wouldn’t have thought of in your dreams of America. A tourist would have been disappointed if they showed up unexpectedly in either place—two towns on the edge of a map, or the end of a train line. But my second day there, the clouds lifted, the town was bathed in a veil of icy blue light, and in

the far distance the ruins of Branč Castle stood in broad relief at the top of a lone hill, watching over all of us.

My first winter in Senica was the coldest—snow fell regularly and in February the wind whipped around from the east, bringing Siberian temperatures and jokes that nothing good ever came from that direction. It surprised me how early night came and how I found refuge from my one room apartment at the Hotel Slovan. It was more of a home than the worker's dormitory room where I slept. Most days, I would go there after classes and sit at a table near the windows where the last rays of the sun mixed with the heaters fogging over the glass and the outside world passed by as if in a dream. I read short stories or wrote letters home that would go unanswered or else just sat smoking Sparta cigarettes watching the blue smoke curl into the air, drift to the ceiling and wrap itself around the lights like a cat going to sleep. Martin the waiter would watch over me closely, never letting me get to the end of a beer before another one was on the table. But everything was on the table then—that was Slovakia. Place something there and it was for everyone: cigarettes, a bottle of wine or the past. Not much time would go by, maybe two beers, before Peter would come in, laughing, ready for a beer and everything else that the night would bring. Soon after Peter, Dave and Palo would come through the front door, scan the room and join us at the table near the window. That is how I would paint them all—freeze them around that table: the ashtray slowly filling with cigarettes, Peter running his hand through his hair leaning over to joke with the waiter, Palo telling stories about Africa as he lights another cigarette and Dave tilting his head back to finish one more Trnavan beer and I would call it "Everything was on the Table" because it was. The Hotel Slovan is gone now like so many other things—changed into a bank to help fuel the new economy, but sometimes new isn't better, sometimes things were fine the way they were.

Now, the clock blinks 11:11—the wishing time and I have sixty seconds to ask. I ask for clarity. I ask for vision. I ask for the snow not to stop. It was not long after a snowstorm like this I left New Jersey for Slovakia. Ten years have past since I threw my backpack and army duffle bag into the trunk of my parent's car and drove out of Milltown and on to Route 1. Snow banks piled on the side of the road and it was like driving through a tunnel. Radio reports talked about the latest air strikes on Baghdad and my mother asked me again not to go. Passing Cook College, I consider it, but too much is in motion to stop it now. I close my eyes and think of snow. The clock reads 11:13.

You would find it funny the things that I remember, like the fish sellers or the falling Christmas trees. I remember leaving school and walking towards the cen-

ter of town and somewhere near the bus station a parade of ancient Russian trucks came out of the hills and into town. Strapped on their backs were huge tanks of water and as they went by I could barely make out the appearance of movement behind the murky glass. At the lone traffic light, the small parade split up with some trucks going straight through the center, others turned to the right and the remaining turned to the left with water spilling from the tops of the rocking tanks to the road below. The tanks were placed in front of all of the small grocery stores throughout the town and when I first approached them I was surprised to see a crowd of people gathered in front of it like it was a giant television. Everyone stood on line listening to the booming singsong voices of the fish sellers. "Fish for sale, the fattest, moistest bottom dwellers in the land. 15 Krowns a kilo. Fish for sale!" Some of the carp swam sluggishly through the brown water, but most were content to lie on the bottom blowing bubbles. An old woman singled out her choice with the tap of her cane. The crowd applauded with approval. In one deft motion, the fish seller reached into the tank and pulled an arms length carp out by the gills and continuing his movement, landed it on the scale with a wet slap. "Lady, this is a beautiful fish. Your husband will be a happy man and for only 85 Krowns." People bought fish after fish until the tank was nearly empty and hurried home with flapping fish tails hanging out of their wicker baskets, all of them in a rush to get the fish into their bathtubs where they kept them until Christmas Eve.

Just as the appearance of the fish sellers marked the beginning of Christmas week, the falling Christmas trees signaled the end of the season. The day after the Three Kings, we walked through Sotina, surrounded by the seven-story apartment buildings. You were going to Silva's and I was going to see Dave. I remember practicing English and speaking to you about Christmas in Smrdaky when Christmas trees began to fall out of the apartments to the ground below. Some flashed bright in the winter light, tinsel catching the sun on the way down, others fell with the dark speed of an elevator unleashed. And what I remember most clearly is how unaffected you were—as if you saw falling pine trees everyday. You went on with your conversation, slowly forming your English words, careful not to make a mistake and all around the trees fell. Little children scrambled from tree to tree poking their arms through the biting needles trying to find an unbroken ornament. You suddenly looked at me and in your eyes I watched tree after tree fall from seven stories high and I knew exactly how it felt.

One day in February you knocked on the office door and asked me if I wanted to go to Smrdaky with you to visit your family. The snow fell covering everything, taking the angles off of buildings and the steep pitch of the church roof,

rounding the edges of cars until one thing was indistinguishable from another—except the two of us—12 year old Marcela and 24 year old Jim, student and teacher, Slovak and American and the snow even began to blur all of that until we were just two people walking down a snow covered road in a snow covered land. There is not much more to say about that day. Your parents took me into your house, gave me *slivovica* and cakes. Your sister played the guitar. We all walked through the orchards outside of town, the snow spilling in the tops of our boots, and your father built a snowman and called him, “Our American Cousin.” When it was time to go, your family kissed me and filled my pockets with cakes like they had known me all my life. On the bus ride back to Senica through Rybky and past the snow-covered poppy fields I thought about perfection—a day without expectations or envy but filled with snow, the taste of *slivovica* and the look in your face.

I am still searching for another day like that and the sight of falling snow outside of my window makes me think that it is possible. It will be forever snowing in my thoughts of you and that afternoon in Smrdaky when for a brief moment it all came rushing together and made perfect sense. I hold that moment in my hand like rosary beads and take it out on moments like this when the snow falls and the night is quiet and let it slide between my fingers. Outside the snow falls, the streetlight drops circles of light on the snow covered sidewalks and I am haunted by the sound of children calling my name as I walk through the park.

## *Lena at the Door*



### *All the boats were blue*

It came as a relief after a month in the States, to return to the Big Village—a 19 hour door-to-door trip from Harrison Ave, Milltown, NJ to Senica, Slovakia by way of JFK to Vienna—crossing the invisible boundary somewhere over the Atlantic that reached up from the dark water, dividing my life in half, the past from the present and the things that I was versus what I wanted. And from Vienna it was a bus ride across the Danube and into Bratislava with its squat over—turned coffee table castle and then by *electricika*—for what other name could there be for the streetcars that rambled and tore through B-ville’s old town and up the hill—bell clanging to the main *Hlavná Stanica* train station only to board a local train going north towards the Czech border. Then there was the required change at Kutý where Dave and I missed a whole afternoon of trains—and onto another local that crossed all of Zahorie—the land behind the mountains—until it arrived in Senica where a bus took you down Long Street to the center of town. From there it was a few blocks by foot to my apartment near the edge of town on the road to Kunov. I had little room in my heart for the U.S. I fell out of love. I would come to love her again—the spiny arch of the Kittatinnies in western New Jersey, Interstate 80 running along the course of the Platte in Nebraska and hiking up the long approach of Cadillac Mountain in Acadia with the entire North Atlantic opening up behind you and you don’t even have to look at it to feel it—but that was far into the future and much was to happen before I was able to love her again. My head and heart were filled with Slovakia and the Big Village. At 27, it seemed impossible to love two things at the same time. Later on I would know this is not true, but only that it is difficult to love things both similarly and equally.

When I was home, my friends asked me what there was to love in a \$100 a month job in the former Eastern Bloc. I didn’t have the words then or maybe I didn’t have the inclination to tell them the real reasons, so I told them stories,

misadventures about throwing rocks at the window of a tall-dark woman that I loved and how that each pebble I threw brought no response, until I threw a handful of rocks that clanged off the window and hit me on the way back down, pelting the sidewalk next to me and how in a sudden moment the window flew open—just like it would in the movies—and instead of bringing my dark-haired Slovak Juliet to the window, a man in a greasy t-shirt—the bedroom light washing over him—unleashed a waterfall of expletives that fell down the side of the apartment building and onto my head where the only thing I understood was “kick your ass...” I left out how it felt walking down Long Street with her, past the cemetery where the red grave candles flickered like the Holy Spirit and the night was cold, but the wind that rushed down from the train station held the possibility of spring and smelled like the scent of wild mushrooms growing in the deep forests after the rain. I told them stories about the classroom—teaching Slovak kids to sing *Do Wah Diddy* and *Da Do Run Run*—just like Harold Ramis in *Stripes* and again the truth lay hidden in what I left out—they loved me as much as I loved them and how the small moments—speaking English with Silva while playing ping-pong, the way Gabi’s eyes shone and danced when she knew the answer or Stano’s relief when I talked Luba P. out of giving him a bad grade—were the real reasons that I was there. But I didn’t have the words then. Everything came out sounding like irresponsibility—the women, the drinking and the aimless travel. That was true. There was some irresponsibility to my actions, but these are easily self-absolved to a 27 year old who feels that his heart is filled with love and the feeling that goes along with giving one’s self up to life and all that went along with it. At 37, it would be different, but that was far into the future and a million miles away from this moment in the Big Village that I am thinking of, where I am unwrapping a pack of duty-free cigarettes and immersed in *The Search for Lost Time*. It is just me, Proust and a two-room flat filled with sunshine.

My flat was on the edge of town in the last apartment building on the road to Kunov. There were two or three buildings beyond mine—the Jopi Bar just outside my door, the girl’s school and then the collective farm. After that, the land began to open up in a series of hills that spread south and east and into the north. The road itself skirted the hills and not soon after leaving Senica it cut through a hayfield and reached the outer buildings of the village of Kunov—part of Senica, but separate, retaining much of that village feeling where people knew each other from shared childhoods and in the center of town, like all villages, stood the church and the local pub directly opposite it. Kunov sat on the southern edge of a large reservoir and on quiet summer nights when the wind blew just right, I

dreamed of water lapping against the side of my bed and when I woke in the morning my room smelled of lake—musty, vaguely plant-like and primordial. The water lay in between two hills. One was covered with day gardens of the people from Senica and where Dave and I went with Luba P. and her family to help pick strawberries or to kill potato bugs that we collected in old pickling jars and when the jar was full we spilled them into a small fire watching them sputter and pop like movie popcorn and little Milan, her son, would wait on its edges and stomp the ones that managed to crawl out of the fire.

My flat was two rooms that on certain moonless nights seemed small and oppressive, but those did not come often and on most days the two rooms—the combination kitchen/living room/dining room and the bedroom—filled with sunshine that bounced off the floors and onto the walls, creating the atmosphere of hope and possibility. There were days of solitude like the one that I am thinking of, days of Proust and Tolstoy, but they were in the minority. Most were filled with mad unpredictability and each knock on the door brought someone crazier than the one before. My most frequent visitor was Dave, the other American teacher in the III Zakladna Skola, our friendship beginning with the simple, “Do you drink beer?” and we haven’t stopped to examine or dissect our relationship since. We shared many trips together—Prague, Budapest, Vienna, Poland—trips soaked in beer and the great museums of the world, the perfect travel companion, willing to spend the days apart exploring a city or a sea coast only to meet up in a pub—one near Charles Bridge in Prague (long since gone) or on a side street in Kerry where the Guinness came out of the tap thick like oil—to discuss what we had found during our time apart. But it is in this place that I choose to remember him most clearly. The one thing that separated Dave from the rest of my friends and the two women that I pledged my eternal love to was that he had seen me at my best—the small moments when I arose outside of myself and became bigger than the person that I actually was.

Dave wasn’t the only one who came by. The gang from Studio Senica—Good Time Petey, whose mother taught Geography in the III ZS, our friendship beginning with English lessons inherited from Sarah, the first few weeks conducted in his mother’s office after school and gradually moving to a window table at the Hotel Slovan where grammar points faded into an ashtray full of cigarette butts and cultural differences disappeared in the bottom of half-liter glasses of beer until we became just Peter and Jim. And from Peter came Paul—just like the two apostles, African-born Paul, stuck in the only elevator in Maputo Paul and the only one who needed drama in his life more than I did—a Becherovka soaked night in the Jopi bar—Paul and me lost in a secret recipe and the uncertainty of

the future—not only for ourselves, but for everyone we knew. And then there was Luba (not the teacher Luba, but yet another) tall, thin, with witch-like eyes, simultaneously blessed and cursed with a crippling memory where the past was stored color-coded and easily retrieved. Luba on the bed—a friendship cemented in sex and even now, years later, I cannot see the border town where friendship ended and love began, but we were all over that landscape, covering that unknown land with traces of our passing and there are moments now when I feel the emptiness in my life without her—the sweaty physical-ness of it all—that I can only whisper of as love.

This summer afternoon—I am alone—Peter and Paul camping in the Tatras, Luba in the country and the rest of Studio Senica spread about Eastern Europe. The town was empty as well and in the middle of the afternoon there were few people on the streets and it was possible to hear the summer sun pounding on the sides of the white apartment buildings—a low frequency *hummmmm*—mixing with the few scattered voices at the city pool. Many of the children that I taught were sent off to their grandparents in one of the many villages that surrounded Senica—sent away to escape the pollution from the factory—whose smoke hung low to the ground in the humid summer and to escape the insidious poplar trees planted after the war—fast growing—producing softball sized seeds—dandelion fuzz on steroids—that floated around the Big Village like allergen filled balloons.

So I returned to a nearly empty town after a month in the states—a month punctuated with all the frantic activity of a short visit and accentuated by the presence of four Slovaks on a trip that Dave and I had arranged along with the generosity of friends and family who donated money and time to bring three kids and a teacher to stay at my parents'. We filled the days with trips to the city or the Statue of Liberty, waiting in long lines to walk up to the crown. I still have the picture of us taken on Liberty Island—the city opening up behind us, the towers dominating the background—and my first thought on 9/11 as I watched the planes crash into them—me standing on a street in London—watching a TV through a storefront window—suddenly out of time and place—feeling the same disconnect of not being THERE—and my thoughts went immediately to a summer afternoon and a photograph—my arm around little Tanya, Katka next to her, then her mother Luba P.—the Slovak English teacher who I spent my days teaching with—and next to her Magda with the perpetual change of life expression—halfway between surprise and disgust and finally blonde Dave with the Trade Center rising out of the back of his head like a pair of insect antennae. The nights were ours—drinking beer on my parent's deck, green bottles of Rolling Rock, smoking the last of the Petras, thinking up stories that we'd tell Petey and

Paul or else nights spent at the Scarlet Pub, where the ghosts of the past stuck to the beer soaked floor and it was difficult for me not to pass through them—cool spaces smelling of hair spray and shots of red death on my way to the bar or bathroom—images of Jacqui and Andrea twisting in and out like the beam of light from a lighthouse that comes around once and then sweeps back towards the sea and comes around once more—standing for something more—the feeling of disconnect, aggravated by alcohol and the distance I inserted between myself and my friends because I was 27 and an expat returned home—full of Hemingway bullfighting bravado and there is nothing one could do about feelings even though people say, “stop” and it doesn’t work, leading to more frustration, more hard feelings until it is like a snake swallowing its own tail and time to leave again. But it was worth it—to see the girls in America—the Milltown Fourth of July parade, Powers down from the city, Bob draped in a flag and my cousin John and I shucking clams all afternoon until it was time for fireworks and we all walked down to Mill Pond and sat on the banks behind the Post Office where we watched single rockets fire into the sky—orange blossom explosions, the feigned *ohhhs* and *ahhhs*, swatting mosquitoes from our legs, the stagnant smell of the pond—plant-like, primordial, home—and out of the darkness came Wendy—unattainable, a source of personal drama and a reminder that pursuit is everything, a short conversation, a feeling that things were possible mixed with the feeling that everything would end beautifully and terribly. She left, disappearing into the darkness and crowd of people. We walked back to Harrison Avenue for more food and more beer and I was ready to go back to Senica. Discussions drifted long and circular—stars barely visible through the large maple, the moon tracked time overhead—Dave’s presence provided relief, confirmation that I wasn’t alone, wasn’t crazy to be over there, stories traded back and forth like cheap blankets and wampum. Dave mixed into Milltown, finally able to put place to my stories, making them concrete and giving shape. The only thing we didn’t talk about was love—the love that is difficult to catalogue and rarely spoken of in front of others—the love of one’s own life, a certainty of purpose and the luck of being in the right place at the right time. And there was the love of children—how does one talk about that kind of love at 27 without sounding like a fucking creep? The moments in the classroom that transcended “English” and became something else where lives came together across history and culture and we were suddenly just people hurdling through space, caught in the comet’s tail—Gabriela—Gabba Gabba Hey—smashing blue eyes—songs of hope and devotion and how it was easy to see myself sitting there, slowly working through a reading about the British Houses of Parliament—British English with a Jersey

accent—block of flats, the lift, a baby in a pram and God Save the Queen, the fascist regime, stumbling over words like stones in a creek that I was there to help her over and when she was done, she'd lift her eyes searching for approval and I was there to pat her on the back and tell her that she was great. Petra waiting after school at the bottom of the steps—waiting for me—and she'd smile and say, "Ides do mesta?" And I'd say, yes, I'm going to town. "Then I'll come with you"—walking through the park-sunlight dripping through the trees, splashing puddles of light on the sidewalk. That fall, Petra would witness one of my dreams coming true—one that you check off on the long list of things to do—Paris—a school trip organized by Lubo—Herr Direktor—and one of his many connections—this one in France and he packed a bus full of Slovaks—1 adult for every 2 kids—an encapsulated Slovak world traveling through Europe—accordions playing polka music, bottles of *slivovica* being passed between the men as Austria rolled by—Alps in the distance, summits blending with the sky—white to blue—crossing the border north of Salzburg and into Bavaria where we stopped at a monastery. I was responsible for Petra and Zuza, another student of mine, blessed with a near perfect voice for the melancholy songs of the Slovaks—*skoda je laska*, the pity of love. And there was Paris. At 16, I bought a guide book with the hope that my parents would let me go that summer—head full of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and the notion that the Left Bank still existed—cramped side streets, the smell of bakeries, calluses thick from days spent writing, a tall-brown haired woman to love—of course it is Lady Brett Ashley, wandering the streets thick with dusk until she would grab me and pull me into a café or alley to kiss. Ten years later—Ille de la Cite and it is me, Petra and Zuza in the shadow of Notre Dame or inside showered in the light of the Rose Window and it is perfect. We rushed through the city—tempting like waiters passing with full trays of food never to stop at my table—and years later I would get back with my own brown-haired woman walking the same streets—love and kiss in the alleys, but my mind's eye photograph was Petra and Zuza coming across the Pont Neuf giggling as I wait for them, wrapped against the November cold, next to the booksellers, the Seine rolling by. But these were things not talked about in Milltown, drinking beer on my parent's deck while the girls slept upstairs, dreaming half in Slovak and half in English just like I did. The month with the girls went fast. We stayed with my parents. Big Jim fired up the grill every evening. The afternoons were spent down the street at my aunt's pool—the girls favorite part of the trip or going to the Poconos and staying at Steve's parents—Bushkill Falls, the Niagara of Pennsylvania, or at Larry's shore house, my cousin John driving all of us to the city or Philadelphia to the zoo or Fr. Tom, my mother's boss, sponsoring a trip to

D.C. (hot, muggy, picnicking on the Mall). The girls' homesickness came out in the form of breakfast—wanting “normal” bread with ham and some cheese that reminded them of home. We took them shopping. They made everyone potato pancakes—all of us peeling potatoes on the deck until we had a huge mound and everyone came over to say good-bye and July was suddenly gone. Dave went back to Florida to visit his family and we went back to Senica.

When I got back to Senica, I had one more month to myself—all of August—no plans, no money—nowhere to go—a month before school would start and Senica was empty. I read and smoked and I was alone. I became quiet and didn't leave the flat for three days—submerging myself in the search for lost time—both Proust's and my own. I wasn't really sure that I even liked Proust—saw too much of myself in the annoying Swann, found the whole mother thing creepy and the endless parties and tea soaked afternoons brought to mind Jacques Brel and Trotsky—but I moved forward—8 hours a day—Everest-like—just because it was there—saw Wendy in *Albertine*, lost myself in the gardens of Cambrai and after several hours of non-stop reading, I smelled the French shore—sunshine, the sea drifting in my window and sand slowly filling my shoes. On the third day, I took an hour off and walked out into the hard light—sun bouncing off the white buildings hurting my eyes like snow blindness and crossed the street and then over the small pedestrian bridge over the River Myjava, past the small brick building where the Gypsies huffed gas and industrial cleaners and into the cathedral coolness of the park. I had no destination and tried to clean my head of France and insert myself back into my life, the present, but there was a laziness in the afternoon and I let fat thoughts bounce around my head like bloated flies. When I finally grabbed hold of one, I was halfway through the park behind the old communist museum to a local poet. I walked around to the front where there was a statue of him—caught in mid stride, cigarette in hand and hair forever blown by a bronzed wind. And now that the west was here, they would never build another statue to a poet again. My own personal landscape is dotted with small monuments like this one, some no larger than a stone cairn, monuments to people who have crossed my life. I have built many of them here, honoring small moments, some already forgotten and covered with moss. One day I will trace my way back. But there are other ones as well—spectacular pyramids and wondrous temples that dominate the horizon and can be seen for years. I have built one for Fodor—just for the first theater festival and Dave's cracked head and next to the Temple of Fodor is one to Ravan for showing up at my door with a fake skull in a bag just so we could go bury it and laugh at death—and to him I built a great Babylonian ziggurat-stepped—each landing a separate plateau

to a moment spent with him, climaxing in the play he wrote for me, ending with arrows shot into the crowd to simulate the pain of love. And the graceful bridge that I have built to Vlasta even though a door would have been more appropriate but less fitting for the many times that she appeared and then exited my life only to reappear again. On the bridge hangs a plaque that reads—*Bella*—because that is what she was, randomly appearing in my life (and that was the true beauty of this place—people entering and exiting and whose absence was then felt like a dull ache, the way an old injury feels like with the coming of rain—barometer like—and the way I miss her now, there must be a hurricane coming). I look up from the table at the Hotel Slovan and she is suddenly sitting across from me and it all starts with, “Are you the American?” And without waiting for an answer she launches into a soliloquy about her life—impossible to follow the whole thing in Slovak, but I can make out that she has been working as a nurse in Italy and nearly every other word she uses is *bella* and she has me in her hand and I am ready to follow—and what she is looking for are English lessons. We meet every Tuesday after my day at the III Zakladna Skola and we sit on her balcony drinking cool bottles of Zlaty Bazant watching the hills to the north that crested and rolled all the way into Moravia. And then she disappeared for the first time. I suspected that it had something to do with love and a month went by until one day I came home from school and found a huge message scrawled in chalk on my door. *Ciao Jimmi! I am home. I missed you! When can you come to me? Love, Vlasta.* She disappeared two more times while I knew/loved her, each time more mysterious and longer than the time before until she disappeared for good. But I meet her often on this bridge that I have built—two bottles of Bazant in hand, her hair pulled back and a *ciao, bella* falling out of her mouth like a shower of flower petals. The afternoon wears on and Marcel Proust is waiting for me back in the apartment.

My walk left me feeling empty and poured out and the only thing in my immediate future is a big book and a carton of duty-free cigarettes. The apartment was hot and even with the windows thrown open the air barely moved and only the coming of complete night would bring relief. I marked time by watching the light change on the pages, gradually turning to a milky gray and I went to bed when my eyes began to hurt. As I lay in the darkness—unable to commit to sleep—the sounds of the night entered the room—the drone of televisions, the hum of the streetlights in the courtyard—was AP somewhere out in the night? Bits of music from the Jopi Bar filtered in and slowly wrapped and cocooned me in the sounds of summer until I fell asleep. I sank into a strange dream that involved my dead grandfather—who I dreamed of often in this place. We walked

along the edge of a harbor and in the harbor were hundreds of boats all pulling at their moorings and swinging round with the out going tide—and all the boats were blue—blue fishing trawlers with their nets dipping into the calm water, blue Spanish galleons, blue U-boats—whose slim conning towers were barely visible in profile, blue Dutch flower barges and NY harbor tugs waiting for more blue boats to enter the harbor. We walked out to the end of the wharf—the sea and sky both perfectly calm and both Virgin Mary blue—difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. At the end of the long wharf that stretched out towards the horizon, we met Lena, one of my students—a quiet girl, but one who pulled and tugged on me—eroding like a wind blowing across a desert escarpment or like the imperceptible destruction of a retreating glacier and I was quite sure that she was one of the reasons of why I was here—of why this place was chosen for me and how nothing was random or coincidental, but well thought out and planned—predetermined by some unseen force. Suddenly my grandfather was gone and it was only Lena and myself on the edge of the pier. And then I was awake. A knocking at the door. Bright sunlight flooding the room. I threw on my shorts and instinctively reached for my baseball hat and in a moment that is usually reserved for the far off towns and villages of Garcia-Marquez where dreams and life meet—barely distinguishable like the sea and the sky, I opened the door to find Lena, her brother and sister and a small white dog that pulled and tugged on its leash, running in circles and wrapping itself around Lena's legs.

Lena was making good on a conversation we had before I left for the states. She would have a birthday in July while I was away and wanted to invite me to her party, but when she found out that I wouldn't be able to attend, she told me that she would come and find me when I got back and we would spend the day in her parent's garden. I had forgotten our conversation until the moment I saw her standing outside of my door. I had difficulty separating her from my dream and I could still hear the sounds of ropes pulling taut and the gentle tap of a hammer touching the side of buoy bell. I ducked into the apartment, put on my black Converse and scooped my things off the table—wallet, Petra cigarettes, lighter—and went back to Lena at the door.

The day was already turning hotter, heat radiating off the pavement and the humidity hung low to the ground like a tropical storm front. The four of us, plus one Chekhovian white lap dog, passed through the courtyard where women were beating carpets before the full heat of the day would settle in and our footsteps fell into the rhythm of the 'thwack, thwack' of the wicker beaters hitting the carpets. So left, right, left, right we passed through the buildings and into the street. Most people in Senica kept their gardens outside of the village of Kunov on the

side of a hill that overlooked the reservoir, but we were walking in the opposite direction towards the center of town.

It was difficult to explain my connection to Lena. She was one of the many children that I taught in the III Zakladna Skola and in the fall she would be entering the seventh grade. She reminded me of something that I read earlier that year from Klima's *Love and Garbage*. "It also occurs to me that we live because there are a number of encounters ahead of us for the sake of which living is worthwhile. Encounters with people who will emerge when we least expect them. Or else encounters with other creatures whose lives will touch on ours with a single shy glance." And there were many people who fit into the first part—ones that spread wide across the canvas like Dave, Petey, Paul, Luba and AP and other people who fit the word encounter—the blue eyed girl who I slow danced with at the first theater festival in Topalcany while Mitch played "The Two of Us" by the Beatles, a Danish guy at the hostel in Dingle, Ireland, talking through the entire night about things that I never discussed with those who were closest to me—chain-smoking and cutting the conversation off—one that could have went on for days—to grab my pack and run for the station to catch a bus to Cork to meet Dave and where we would later see the single most beautiful woman that I have ever seen or the conversations with the long-haul British truck drivers who stopped in Senica on their way to the Middle East and their stories about running over Romanian mountain bandits or the night in Jopi with an enforcer for the local mob who offered to take someone out for me, *zdarmo*, free of charge—just because he liked me and Paul taking off his boots and giving them to him as a sign of respect.

But Lena was of the second part, "one of the other creatures whose lives will touch ours with a single shy glance." I'd sometimes see Lena and her mother in the center of town and she would shout out, "Ciao Jim!" and her mother would nod and greet me with the formal, "Dobry Den" and like most parents that I met who were out with the kids that I taught, looked uncomfortable with the situation like Lena was being disrespectful by being too familiar. And I was too. I never knew how to greet anyone, even after I met them, so most times I played dumb and said hello to children and *dobry den* to the parents. But as I passed Lena and her mother I could hear her mother call her Lenka—one of the beauties of the Slovak language was the diminutive versions of the name and at any one time Lena could be Lenka or Leni, and Katarina became Katka, Katusha, Katya and James translated into Jakub—Kubo—and her mother called her Lenka and said something about me being her teacher and the need to be more polite. And Lena just laughed. Lena was in the grade behind the kids that I started with and

the girls we took to America. Her classroom was directly across from the office I shared with Dave, Luba P. and two other language teachers (Hanna once taught Russian and we argued over a picture that I had hanging over my desk of Dostoyevsky's grave and she said that it couldn't be in St. Petersburg and I said that was where it was. I stood there.) I saw Lena often during the day—in the hallway or in the cafeteria where I would sometimes sit with her and her classmates eating potato soup together. But my real contact with her was in the three times a week we met for English class. I was still helping Luba then with little responsibilities—reading text, pronouncing new vocabulary words and asking comprehension questions. Lena shared a desk with another girl named Lena and like all my Marcelas—I never met a Lena that I didn't like. Lena was quieter than most of the girls in her class and maybe that was one of the reasons that I was drawn to her. I could feel her eyes follow me around the class and I thought that if I turned quick enough, I could catch her, but never did. Perhaps there are some people that we will simply be drawn to—ones that require no explanation or thought—it just is—people like Dave, Paul, AP—so why not Lena? Maybe I saw myself in her—cautiousness, something hidden behind those eyes—something that bridged age and gender, culture and history, but made me want to believe in past lives where we were galley slaves chained together to an oar.

Most of the walk to her garden was done in silence—broken only by the yips and yaps of her dog. Her little sister instinctively took my hand as we crossed the streets and her brother Milan followed us, trying to restring a yo-yo as we walked. We went through the main square—usually filled with people hanging around waiting to see who would walk by, but it was quiet on this summer morning. We crossed the street—the one that ran all the way north towards Moravia and the Czech border and then south through the mountains that formed a ring around Senica and the surrounding countryside, sealing it off—Zahorie, the land behind the mountains and into Trnava with all its churches. We walked past AP's apartment building. The garden wasn't far beyond that. It sat across from the technical high school where I sometimes taught with Viola. Lena opened a gate to what seemed like an ordinary lot, one in which you would expect to find abandoned cars and rusting 55 gallon drums, but instead there was a green world, shaded over by tall *lipa* trees and the back third of the lot was planted with vegetables—tomatoes, peppers, potato plants sitting atop their individual mounds and a row of fruit trees marked the far boundary of the lot. In the middle, there was a small shed, doors thrown open and I could make out the figure of a woman cutting vegetables and when she noticed us, she wiped her hands on a towel she had over her shoulder and came out into the sunshine to meet us. Jana burst out

in front of us and her mother scooped her up into her arms. She put her to the ground—in what almost seemed like a single movement, rehearsed and played out with her children a thousand times—and Jana bolted around the shed to a swing set where she yelled out, “Jim, come and push me!” Her mother came forward, her arm outstretched in greeting and said, “Dobry Den.” She had Lena’s eyes and from around the shed came her father, dressed in blue work clothes.

The day unfolded slowly, time moving the tiniest of increments—like the age of fossils, as slow as evolution or like a summer day should. After the “Good Days” were finished, Lena’s mother had us all sit down at a handmade table under the tallest *lipa* tree and she served us the vegetables she had been preparing—peppers, tomatoes, an onion, radishes along with smoked bacon that she said had come from her mother’s village outside of Senica. She cut chunks of bread and placed them in a bowl in the middle of the table. Lena’s father’s pulled two beers out of a pail of cool water and placed one of them in front of me. And that was how the day passed—simple and gracious—like a cool bottle of beer. I pushed Janka on the swing and kicked a soccer ball with her brother. I watered tomatoes with Lena and we showed off for her parents naming all the plants and vegetables in English and Slovak and her parents laughed at the both of us. Around dinner time, her father started a fire in an ancient ring of stones in front of the shed. Her mother cut up more vegetables and we all cooked kielbasa over the flames. Janka sat on my lap and we all stared into the fire. And finally in the coming darkness, Lena’s father pulled out a bottle of *slivovica* and poured three glasses and as we raised them he said, “ja som Milan” and from then on there would be no more formalities between us, no *Dobry Den* in the streets, but the familiar *ahoj*—and I knew that I was right to come back to Senica early and not spend the summer in the states—which would have wound up being a complicated mess—chasing Wendy, walking around Milltown like a ghost and besides I didn’t have enough room in my heart for both there and here. No, this was my time and place. For one day, it was in a garden that sat in a lot across from the technical school, wrapped in green, a day spent with a girl that I loved—love not easily explained—and with her family who showed me hospitality and acceptance and in the gathering darkness that closed in from the *lipa* trees, staring into the flames I was certain about things—life, vision, dreams—more certain than I would ever be and when I look back now through the veil of an April rain, a pending divorce, therapy and a 9-5 day I can see that it was the last time that I was truly happy.

# *Falling Christmas Trees in the Big Village*

◆  
*A Mosaic*

He wakes slowly, covered in grayness. Mucous holds his eyes shut, his head concert hall empty, and he knows that she is gone. There are things like deception and hollowness that he prefers not thinking about, but today they are as unavoidable as winter. He rolls from bed, the springs squeak from release and he is sickeningly reminded of love. The apartment is neat, but with a cold and detached orderliness, no open closet doors, no discarded clothes, but something planned as if her suitcase had been packed and her mind made up. He knew that last night he used up his last chance. In the corner, the Christmas tree stands a silent witness to calculated departures and last chances. Its lights blink both self-revilement and longing. He knows that it must go today.

Hurriedly, he takes the garland and the ornaments, missing some of the shiny green balls in the middle of the tree, and places them in a shoe box marked “Christmas Decorations.” He drags the tree, stand and all across the apartment towards the window, dropping pine needles all along the living room carpet. Opening the window of his seventh story apartment, a sudden blast of January air gives him momentary strength to live within his problem. Snow clouds rush overhead, moving ever eastward and all is lost in a shudder. He moves the tree closer to the open window.

Across the courtyard, in another building, on another seventh floor he sees a man, a mirror image of himself, performing the same action. They are drawn closer by ritual. He stands poised with the tree, balancing it delicately on the windowsill, ready to let it fall to the ground below. Their eyes meet. How strange it all is to perform the same actions and yet be so unlike. Maybe it truly is his own image, the same two—dimensional hollow image. They give each other the thumbs up and let the trees fall. Barely a sound reaches the seventh floor in the

instant it takes for the trees to hit the ground and the only evidence is a brief flash of tinsel. They shut their respective windows, close the curtains and exit each others' lives. The man enters the belly of the apartment and wonders what he will do next.

While the falling tree passes a bedroom window on the third floor, the shadow from it causes Eva, age 42, to shudder. Eva, who is in the act, for that is what it has become, of making love with her next door neighbor. The plunging tree reminds her of a body falling from the roof: free from the brief angst of decision, then a slave to gravity, and finally a lover of death. Falling. Repentance. She calls to mind the dark confessional. Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. On the Feast of Kings she will go and light candles as an ice storm blows over her soul.

Janka is the only person on the ground or in the apartments who actively acknowledges the impact of the trees, the full sensation of crashing glass of forgotten ornaments. She has spent the entire morning walking through Sotina waiting for falling trees and this moment was special, two trees hitting the ground at once as if by some grand celestial plan. She eyes the trees like they are alien spaceships, delicately sticking her hands through the outer branches, the needles biting her wrists and removes one solitary unbroken green ball. Looking into the ball, her reflection is distorted, her nose too wide, her eyes too close together, and her hair the shape of a spewing volcanic cloud. She laughs at herself and places the lone Christmas ball gently in her pocket as if it were a live baby bird.

Checking the sky one last time for falling trees and seeing none, she starts to run at full speed. For the first time she knows gravity and with the spirit of Newton she heads home to throw a catalogue of objects out her window. She will start small with money, coins, gradually moving on to a tea cup, the one her sister Lena keeps colored pencils in, a stuffed dog owned by her brother, the desk chair, and finally a small black and white television. Her mother will come home to find her sitting on the edge of the opened window. She will drag her into the room and in a moment of extreme panic/disbelief hug her, crushing the green Christmas ball in her coat pocket. All of those things are yet to come and for the moment she is full of the wonder of discovery and running faster, faster than a falling tinsel Christmas tree.

Walking the other way through Sotina is the American teacher. He was a disappointment when he first arrived in the Big Village. They wanted Rambo or Reagan and instead all they got was him. He wasn't the sign they had waited for but through perseverance he has become part of the landscape, as familiar as the poplar trees around the football stadium. Surprisingly, he feels well this morning, the first of the holiday break he is not hungover, having spent yesterday reading

Miller in his apartment. Janka screams “Hallo” as she passes and it reminds him that he must go to visit Lena. This is the best time of his life, never again will he live up to this level. This hard sleet cold fact holds him buoyant. From here it will be one long gradual slide, never enough to overwhelm him, but again, never the same. And it is for this precise reason he will spend the day drinking red Skalica wine, wander through the night as if it were an unknown Spanish village, and finally end up making love to a woman he never thought attainable.

The floor of the closet is cool and damp like a wine cellar. Marcela Bambino lifts herself onto an old pair of shoes. There she feels drier, safer. She pulls one of her blouses from above her, the hanger popping and the wire hits the door, rattles the back wall finally falling somewhere in front of her. The blouse is a faint yellow spot in front of her, heavy with the scent of detergent and hard water. She stretches it an arms length and stuffs it into the crack under the door, shutting out the light, and feels herself go invisible. Her hand in front of her face is nothing but a feeling. Marcela Bambino wiggles her toes to make sure that she is whole and not slowly melting into the puddles on the floor. In the absence of light, she begins to float. The bottoms of her hanging dresses brush her face. Squeezing her eyes shut she joins the multitude of pinpoint stars in her head, a constellation of her own making. Stars cross, gravitate towards each other, collide and spin away. Holding herself for one second longer, she feels herself drawn back together, resting gently down on to the old shoes. She removes the blouse from under the door and the light cuts her in half.

The young woman swirls her tea, round and round, in a pink tea cup, hoping that her anger will be sucked away in the tiny whirlpool. The back of her mother’s head makes for a tempting target. This family’s joys, like most others, are transient. Moments are spent between anger and disregard. A quiet politeness is the norm except for times like this. Earlier in the day there had been a call from Germany. Her mother answered and wanted to know why Klaus was calling. The woman doesn’t know what infuriates her more, questions about her private life or Klaus for his insolence and German money. She leaves the table and goes into the hallway where the jackets are hanging. She is looking for a cigarette no matter how small it is. Finally, she finds a partially smoked Petra in her jean jacket from last night at the Jopi. Outside the day turns grayer, snuffing out light into the corners, the shadows grow long and reach out towards her like the fingers on a hand. Her mother opens the door and asks her why she must smoke so much.

Another cigarette is being lit, this one on the other side of town back by the hospital construction site. A Marlboro passes between the dirty fingers of three boys. They are all 11 and in the same class at the 3rd Primary School. Each of

them lives in a flat similar to Janka or the man and the falling Christmas tree. Their backgrounds are nearly identical, a father who works in the artificial silk factory and a mother who is a shop worker. They all have one older brother or sister. Stano has smoked six different kinds of cigarettes including Winston. Jano only two and this is his second. Tibor has been smoking for two years, since right before his ninth birthday, and thinks to himself that there isn't a smoke he hasn't tried. Jano takes a long drag and begins to get dizzy. He sits on a pile of back dirt and announces to his friends that he is going to vomit. Tibor takes the cigarette from his hand and calmly begins to blow smoke rings in Jano's face, surprising himself with his sudden cruelty. Tears start to well in Jano's eyes and he dry heaves into the dirt. Tibor slowly moves closer. Jano tells him to stop but it only pushes him forward. Tibor turns Jano over in one movement and sits on his chest, and moves close to the boy's face like a kiss and blows smoke into the boy's nostrils. The boy's struggling strengthens his resolve. Ashes fall on his shirt. Jano, choking on his own phlegm, manages to get a leg free and knees Tibor in the groin. The cigarette falls from his mouth, rolling away from the both of them. Jano wipes his eyes and then walks toward the fallen Tibor and kicks him with all of his 11 year old strength in the small of his back. Stano laughs, the abrupt violence bringing a moment of giddiness and he too is tempted to go over and kick Tibor Rex now that he is down. Jano stands above his friend and begins to cry, not the tears of hurt but of shock and astonishment. He reaches down and takes a cigarette lighter out of Tibor's pocket and begins to walk slowly towards the center of the town with Stano following him like a Japanese bride.

Sasha could be Stano's twin despite the seven year age difference. They have the same green eyes, prominent cheekbones and both have dimples when they smile. Sasha's hair has a russet tone, the color of oak leaves in the autumn. She is a first year student of philosophy in the university in Bratislava and she is currently on a train returning to school. "Descartes," she says aloud, listening to the name hang in the cabin. "Rene Descartes, Cogito Ergo Sum." The pine trees pass in a blur and the movement of green on green hurts her eyes. She turns away from the window. *I think therefore I am. I think therefore I am.* The train rocks slightly and the clacking of the wheels lulls Sasha into that area which is neither sleep nor consciousness. Her eyes are heavy. The sun warms the cabin and through half closed eyes Sasha watches dust particles, each like tiny planets, she thinks, float, spin and collide in a larger universe known only as the Breclav-Bratislava Local. The train rocks back and forth in short jerky movements, just like the ones in films when they show people on a train and it looks fake even though that is how it really is. Everything is secure in the cabin, the mirror fixed to the

wall, the luggage racks attached to the cabin ceiling, the fold down table, and even the ashtray. She alone is outside that, something moving counter to that of the train and its fixtures, adhering to something outside of the Breclav-Bratislava Local. How long can she exist in that universe? She leans her head on the window and the cool glass soothes her brain until the train goes over a crossing, shaking the mirror, threatening to pull out its screws, the top of the ashtray rattles and Sasha is suddenly seized with panic. Death. Descartes. If I do not think then therefore I am not. Sasha is face to face with the thought of non-being for the first time in her 19 years. She sits straight in her chair, consciously trying to think of herself, make herself aware that she is alive. *I am alive. Those pine trees are alive. Descartes is dead.* She is seized by the thought that perhaps she could inadvertently will herself to death or at the very least non-being. I am alive. The train slows into a village station. People line the tracks to board. Sasha looks at the church steeple still covered with snow and silently asks for forgiveness. I think I am sorry. I think I am sorry.

Walking past the church at the same time Sasha's plea for forgiveness passes overhead is an old man, healthier than most, a full head of salt and pepper hair, a youthfulness that some view as arrogance in his walk. He stops in front of the small village church and thinks about going in. He has not been to Mass since he was a young boy and went with his grandmother. He remembers standing next to her, barely able to see over the pew in front of him and the strange excitement of ritual, the foreign language, the language of God himself, the music and pomp. Now the church stands open-mouthed, drawing him in. The old man looks up and down the street for a sign of human activity. Seeing none, he slides along the tongue of God and enters into the belly. The half light of the church makes it difficult for him to see. A lone crucifix shines brightly on the altar, bathed in a single shaft of light. All else washes away from it into the corners of the church and under the bottoms of the heavy oak doors into the street. Voices like the drone of bees hover near the ceiling. His hand reaches out for something to grasp, the end of a pew, the communion rail, anything. The voices become louder, more indistinguishable, closer, stinging him. "Radiance of God," he screams and falls to his knees. He lays prostrate on the cold stone floor and stays there until the church keeper finds him dead later that afternoon covered with small bee-like stings.

Back in the town of falling Christmas trees, Palo walks past the Catholic church. This is his only connection with the old man, a church and the simple fact that he too will die one day, but now Palo has no thought of God, unless one chooses to view sex as such. He reaches into his leather jacket, the one his mother bought on shopping trip to Poland, searching for a cigarette. His pockets are

empty except for a slip of paper. Written on it is a single word, "DISCOURSE". He doesn't know what it means or how it got there. He carefully folds the paper and puts it back in his jacket. The sky is gray and he thinks that the rushing clouds are the same color as Panzer tanks. He passes the turn for Jana's house and goes to buy cigarettes for this will require cigarettes. It always does. He has to make an effort to remember her, to recall the look of her face when she lost herself to love in the field below the hill with one tree. Perhaps that was the only moment in which one could truly judge beauty, he thinks, in the instant before making love. He wonders what he looked like. Stupid probably. Surprised, drunk, and stupid. A vague sensation fills him. The kind of emotion which has no ends, but is a broad expanse like the savannas, uninterrupted with trees or animal forms. He is the type of person to place things there, an acacia tree, or something as big as an elephant or as small as a raven. That's what this trip to Jana's is about. He half realizes it himself. He doesn't really care, he needs the drama and the emotion.

Trash—papers, today's news and the remnants of messages in bottles—blow around the corners of buildings, piling next to the dumpsters and in the doorways. It swirls high into the air in mini-cyclones that grow as tall as the blocks of flats in Sotina. Zatica walks through the eight-story canyons looking for a whirlwind to ride. Gusts of wind blow down the long and narrow streets picking up dirt and debris and she thinks that this is what the far off desert must be like. A woman carrying groceries rushes by her, propelled by the wind. For no reason Zatica begins to run headlong into the wind, fighting the force that is holding her back. The wind blows harder. She breathes deep, tasting ten thousand places: river stones from the Morava, cigarettes and coffee from Vienna, wet paper, tears, pipe smoke, soup gently boiling over, bread, body sweat, lipstick and the lingering taste of blood oranges, sweet and ripe, wild sweet and cool. She ducks behind the last building in Sotina, the one facing the 4<sup>th</sup> primary and listens to the wind whipping around the corner. She spits twice, sucks air through her nose, the pure Senica air of the factory, the grass, and cheap perfume. Once more, she steps away the corner of the building into the headlong rush of wind that knocks her to the ground like a punch to her chest, sucking the air from her lungs and from where she is lying she can watch the terrible gray clouds roll over the sky that is quickly rushing towards night.

And finally there is Miriam, seemingly unconnected, banking one day it will all come together: life, God and womanhood, knowledge and decision: Abstract words like her abstract thread running through it all. She is holding it together and without her there is no Big Village, no collective memory, and no landscape

to paint it all on. This is the way I see things at the moment, staring at the cement blocks of the dormitory in Bratislava, smoking Petras with Rimbaud like intensity. She is my lifeline, my way home. She is the falling Christmas tree, the lone form on my broad expanse of emotion.

*Bratislava, Feast of the Three Kings, 1994*

## *Hlavna Stanica—Kuty, Slovakia*



### *7 Trains Gone*

We got drunk on local beer at the train station in Kuty and watched the international trains speed by—spitting sparks, faces blurring in the windows, not stopping until they crossed into Moravia and the Czech Republic. Their first stop was Brno with its sinister Spilberk Castle sitting atop the hill dominating the Old Town. Then it was onto Prague, the current darling of Europe, the Paris of the 90's. Maybe someday Dave and I would go to Prague and write a novel, compose an opera, go into business, play guitar in the streets, or drink. We knew Americans in Prague and we didn't like any of them. Our train was the Bratislava Local going south with stops in Borsky Svaty Jur, Moravsky Svaty Jan, Velke Levare (home of the mad house) Malacky, Plavecky Stvrtok ("Swimming Thursday"), Lozorno, Stupava, Dubravka, and finally 30 miles and 95 minutes later, Main Station Bratislava. We watched our train leave four times and got 2 more beers.

Kuty was a junction on the Trnava line and just a blur on the international one near the Moravian border. It wasn't far from Austria, but despite that, it had an end of the line feeling. Never really Czech or Austrian or even Slovak, it made us feel out of sorts, stuck in some unknown transit zone, alive only at the station with people changing trains, hurrying always to somewhere else. Dave and I had a table outside of the bar, a desperate place like most train station bars in Slovakia. We each took turns going inside to buy rounds, moving cautiously between one-armed gypsies, drunken soldiers, and the locals who had nowhere else to go. When it came time to order we prayed that our Slovak would be good enough to be taken as locals or at the very least, locals with a speech impediment.

I forget what beer we were on, number 4 or 5, but it came time for me to buy again. The day was in danger of slipping away like so many others. Few things went as planned in Slovakia and that was part of the attraction of the place. It was a complete contradiction to my ordered life in the States that was, as TS Eliot said, "measured out in coffee spoons." A "trip to Bratislava" as Dave and I

planned, came with the inherent meaning that we may never even come close to Blava, in fact, it may mean us going to Brno, sitting all day at Fero's, or never leaving our apartments. As long as we were back in school at Monday 8 am the world was ours.

I got up from the table, our train pulling out of the station for the fifth time, loaded with shoppers, university students going back for a Saturday night out, and city people returning home from the country, and went back in the bar for our supposed last beers. There were three more trains that afternoon and we swore that we would be on one of them. The bar was filled with the sweet smell of Slovak rum and cigarette smoke that hung close to the ceiling, slowly turning the walls brown. The television high in the corner droned on, Slovan Bratislava versus some team I couldn't make out. I moved slowly towards the bar pretending to be invisible but the woman pouring beer saw me. She started to pour two more beers and I thought I saw something in her eyes that looked like recognition. I handed her my money, took the beer and felt every eye turn away from the television and follow me out the door like I was a Slovan Bratislava striker breaking towards the net.

Outside in the hard autumn light the smell of train diesel came as a relief. I told Dave about the things I felt in the bar and we both agreed that the door was now open and someone was about to walk through. We sat quietly, drinking our beer, whose head was so thick that a one Krown coin could stay atop the head without sinking. Dave started on one of his favorite subjects. "How come the richest most powerful country in the world can't make a great beer? Doesn't say much about democracy, does it?" I laughed and took another cigarette off the table. "What's the point of having all that money and the best we come up with are commercials that are better than the beer?"

"Should I go back and get you a light beer?"

"And what's the point of that? We are a misguided nation, my friend. And another thing..." but before he could finish someone stepped into the sunlight, throwing a shadow across the table. I shifted my seat around to see better. Two young people—a man and a startling young woman stood at the edge of the table. The man let a cigarette dangle in his fingers, close to his body. The woman stared away, back at the tracks and her face hid nothing as if she had little control over it. She had the eyes of a professional mourner and she made me think of long afternoons, the crushing smell of chrysanthemums and the thought of throwing myself at her just to see how terribly it would all end. She looked over at the trains as if waiting for someone to arrive with a gift for her. The young man

spoke, his cigarette burning dangerously close to his fingers, “Do you speak English?”

It was the one sentence that always started everything. The mother tongue brought people out of dark barroom corners, off the street, and into bed. In those few years after the revolution it meant something. We signed autographs, were dragged into people’s homes in the middle of the night (with the wife stirred from bed right into the kitchen to prepare food and a beating for her husband) and loved for the mere fact that we used the definite article. Students of English appeared at both of our doors just to say, “Hello, my name is Vlasta.” And here it was all happening again.

“My name is Paul and this is my girlfriend, Alexandra but we call her Sasha...” She glanced away from the train, looked at Dave, then me and turned away. I wish someone was there to translate the look she gave us—eastern, medieval, and autumnal. She brushed the long dark hair out of her face. He was blond, as fair as she was dark, with hair cut close to his head, and a storyteller’s smile. We invited them to sit down. “May I ask you something?” And before we could answer, “What are two Americans doing in the train station bar in Kutý?”

Dave and I each gave an account of our lives, summarized and romanticized, failed loves and failed graduate school, Florida and New Jersey. Paul listened carefully, not impressed like most other Slovaks with our stories. Sasha looked only at Paul, making me slightly jealous. When Dave finished his account of meeting Jerry Falwell, Paul stamped out his cigarette, sat back in his chair and thought quietly for a moment, waiting for us to ask. “I have a story too,” he said. “But I think we need some more beer. This one is on me, I think you say.” He got up from the table and disappeared into the dark bar. Sasha’s eyes followed him into the darkness. Our train pulled out of the station one more time. She made me wish for screaming matches and slamming doors and watching her walk out of my life—a story that I could carry with me.

Paul returned into the light with three beers, deftly held in his hands. He placed them in the middle of the table and sat down. “Let’s see if you know this one.” He raised his beer: “To Lenin” and he lifted the glass, placing his chin into the heavy foam atop the glass until a small white beard formed on his chin. He took one long drink until the half-liter glass was almost empty. Sasha smiled at him and I knew right then that no one would ever smile at me in the same way.

“I was born in Africa,” he started, sounding like Dinesen, “We were living with our Communist brothers in Maputo, Mozambique. My father was a veterinarian in the animal hospital there, taking care of all the cows and pigs. Sometimes I would walk to work with him. There were always convoys of army trucks

in the streets on the way to the countryside to fight the rebels. You didn't know about that war, did you my friend? It makes your Vietnam look like a Spanish village. I would stop in front of the shops looking at the bottles of Coke, but we were so poor, man. I knew that if I asked my father he would get pissed just like the time we got stuck in the only elevator in Maputo. But that's another story for another beer. One day I was playing with my Negro friends who lived in the same building and there was a long row of garages not more than three meters high. We were climbing on the roofs and chasing each other. And from there you could look over the wall into the prison where there were all these sad rebels and smugglers. Sometimes the guards would come over and point their AK-47s at us. I don't think they would have shot us but how many times have you stared down the barrel of a Russian machine gun? But this day we weren't looking into the prison. I think we wanted to steal some fruit from this rich guy's house. I don't remember, but that's not important. The next thing I know is that my two friends are gone. What the fuck are these bullshits? And standing down in the street was a policeman. Here we go, baby. This is the story. He takes me to the police station and puts me in a cell with these drunken smelly Negroes. What? I swear I have truth. I was in a cell. Drink your beer it will sound better. I'm in the cell and one guy is pissing on himself, the other guy has all these white things on his arm, and here is white little Paul, seven years old in jail in Maputo. So my father comes to the police station, bigger than anybody else there, wearing his green jungle jacket. If only one day I could be like my father, bigger, stronger. He stood in front of the police desk and still he was bigger than anyone. They even called him "Bwana." When will anyone call me "Bwana?" He looked the fucking cop in the face and asked the police how many cigarettes for me. What do you think he said?"

"I don't know," I said. "Five cartons?"

"No. Two cigarettes. That's how much my life is worth. Two. That's the real world, baby. Oh, and the policeman, he had no teethes."

'Two cigarettes' echoed around the table. Sasha put her hand on his and I felt it shoot through my body and it hurt like crucifixion. I searched for all the stories that would make me worth two cigarettes—disastrous affairs, lost in the desert, and pilgrimages made on bloody knees down cobblestone streets all made in the name of love. But not one came—real or fictional or somewhere in between. Paul left two cigarettes on the table.

"Remember me," he laughed.

They both stood, once again blocking the sun and from the shadows Sasha mouthed "Ciao." I watched them board our train going south and pull out of the

station and into the fields ripe with autumn and the soft slant of sunlight that surrounded Kutu and all of us in between.

Dave was oblivious to the crushing smell of flowers, the medieval looks, and the sensation of lost chances.

“One more beer,” he said. “Then we should go home. We’ll try again next week.”

Yes, I said. We will go home and we’ll try again next week and the week after. We’ll try until the one-armed gypsies feel their missing limbs and we’ll look for her in the blurred faces of speeding trains that will fill all the beers of all my tomorrows.

*Em’s Birthday 10/92*

## *Lost inside the Happy Noise*

It has been a long time since I have told someone about Slovakia and why I feel the need to share this with you is beyond my understanding. Perhaps it is the need to show you that I was not always the khaki and blue shirted worker bee you see in the hallway or at one time there was actual humor behind the cynicism or that there was a time when I was the biggest hero. Maybe it is to show you how much you could have liked the old me—one that was fearless, selfish, and full of life. Maybe it is to get inside your pants. Or else it is to show you all the things that you miss, things that vanish like a whisper or a world that passes outside your little grey cube like a parade you can hear but cannot see.

I once went on a school visit with Luba Kristofovicova, the school inspector, to Borsky Mikulas, the town next to the village of my ancestors. This part of western Slovakia was known as Bura, a mysterious place, surrounded on three sides by a great pine forest where they said sand from the Sahara came down to rest in small dunes in the far corners of the woods. On the lone open side, there was a wooded hill where they said the Virgin Mary had once appeared and now pilgrims came from all over Slovakia to climb the hill on their knees as a sign of devotion. And in the center of town, across from the obligatory Catholic church and the pub was the birthplace of the poet Jan Holly, whose name translated into English as “Johnny Naked.” The strange sands of the Sahara, bloody knees as the outward signs of love and devotion mixed with the strange poet Johnny Naked whose home was triangulated with a church and pub could explain a lot about my family and myself if I had a lifetime to devote to study the relationships of god, beer and poetry.

If Bura was on the fringe of my understanding then the village school was a refuge of normalcy and not much different from where I taught at the III Zakladna Skola in Senica—the same sweet haunting smell of industrial cleaner wrapping itself around the corners and stairwells like some Proustian lockbox, the faint buzz coming from the classrooms of kids squirming in their seats, the drone of a teacher and the low level static leaking out of the intercom mixing with the soft hum of sunshine flooding in from the windows where it all collided together only to fall to the ground and slide out underneath the door and into the hallway.

Luba was a former English teacher and colleague. During my first year teaching in Senica we both taught together in a kind of a vaudevillian routine where she would explain a grammar point and then I would read from an ancient English book where Jane still attended Pioneer Camp and Peter wore a red scarf around his neck and looked forward to May Day. Jane had a cat whose name was Pussy. In one chapter about prepositions the cat gets stuck in a tree. And in a sublime moment—voice chewed raw from Petra cigarettes, hung-over after a night at the Hotel Slovan, and still covered in the scent of Katka, I stood in front of a class of 5<sup>th</sup> graders reading about Jane’s Pussy high in the tree and Peter looking at Jane’s Pussy in the tree. I’d like to say that I read through it and smiled and said, “Isn’t that odd?” but I didn’t. I laughed and the kids laughed at me laughing and Luba laughed at all of us. Nothing now is as funny as Jane’s Pussy, but how could it be?

The people of Bura are known as Burans and just saying the name brings a smile to most Slovaks’ faces as if you had said Polacks or West Virginia because a Slovak knew what was coming next: Why did the Buran dig two wells? One for cold water and the other for hot. How is a *Buranka* (Female) similar to a hockey goalie? They both change their pads after three periods. And so on. I sat through nights at Fero’s where Buran jokes went on all evening, beer after beer, cigarette after cigarette. I had heard of Bura long before I ever dreamed of coming to Slovakia because my grandmother was a *Buranka* and my grandfather, whose family was from middle-of-nowhere northern Slovakia never let her forget it. My grandmother grew up in Vienna, then the center of the empire and spent her summers in the Buran village of Laksarska Nova Ves at her grandmother’s. My grandfather’s family was from a poor region in Northern Slovakia and in true Euro-fashion needed a people to feel superior to and that for him and most of Slovakia was Bura and Burans. Despite who was from where, it made me part Buran and the Slovaks loved it.

Luba and I went into an 8<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. I am the first American these kids will ever meet. And I don’t know why these things went through my mind, but it was still in the middle of the Gulf War and the only things they have seen about America is on TV—images of George Sr. bombing the shit out of Iraqis all for oil to feed the corporate machine. Or maybe, in the near future, they will meet an American from the Peace Corps, holy rollers with that fake JFK halo hanging over their heads, force-feeding dogma and Reaganomics. Or there is the other America—and stand aside because this is for Jack—that big sweeping rolling country where right now my friends were drinking pitchers of beer at Pete’s

chasing Jersey girls with candy-apple red fingernails and cotton candy mouths and somewhere in the background the Yankee game drones on—*2 down, 2 on, 2 strikes to Mattingly*—and Amine standing behind the bar rubbing his hands into a snow-white towel and the whole evening would end in a mess over pizza or pancakes at the Somerset Diner—and then the night is over and everyone goes home to the blue drone of the television. That is how I'm going into the classroom, filled with Jack and the love of my parents or least that's how I want to, but instead I trip going through the door, and the class tries to suppress a cautious laugh, because at 14 what is funnier than someone falling—hell, what is funnier now than someone falling? And by tripping, I don't deliver them an American—powerful, dogmatic or free—just a jackass who still has problems walking.

When things calmed down, Luba introduced me—she said my name—Jim Lukach from America. My name is not common here in the states, but it is classic Slovak as sure as *Zlaty Bazant* beer, *brinzova halusky* and *jedni Petri and dva krat pivo* and I could see the recognition in their faces. Luba conducted the class like an interview and spoke to them only in English. After the short introduction, she turned it over to the kids to practice their English. I had done this before and I knew what would come—the simple questions, learned from the first few chapters of the English book, then finally the more difficult questions that they had to ask Luba to translate but it went something like this:

*What is your name?*

Jim Lukach.

A girl in the back with cracked blue eyes: *Is your family from Slovakia?*

And this is the moment where it all turns, connections made and I am about to become a rock star. That's right me, bigger than life and they will sing my name. Yes, my family is from Slovakia. I let them ask the inevitable, dragging it on, making it last, holding it above them until the same girl asks, "Where?" I tell them, Laksarska Nova Ves, they go silent, think for a moment until my girl says, "Laksara?"

*Ano, Ja som Americky Buran.* I am an American Buran. Her eyes flicker, her mouth slides into a smile like a body sliding into a cool lake and the rest of the class follows with a careless going-on-a-picnic laugh and there is a vague emotion hanging above the desks that is somewhere between love and adoration, family and sex and I would make a pilgrimage on my knees to feel it again. It tasted so good. For a moment, I am home, my people, my place in the world. I am one of them, even more so than Luba who is standing next to me. She may be Slovak but she is not a Buran.

After the first question, it is the All Jim Show. The typical questions follow:

*How do you like Slovakia?* I love it.

*Do you like Slovak beer?* Zlaty Bazant is number one.

Someone in the back asks me to sing an American folk song and the first thing that pops into my throat is “Don’t Get Around Much Anymore” by Duke Ellington and after a few verses, they applaud and clap and this is all going right to my head and I’m afraid it will get so big I will be unable to make it through the door.

My girl asks: *Do you like Slovak women?* I love Slovak women, but Burankas are the most beautiful. And they are all mine—souvenirs to be jammed into the bottom of a backpack, taken home and put on display.

It is sad when it is time to go, but as the class ends no one leaves the room. Instead, my girl makes her way to the front of the room and asks for my autograph. I sign it: *Jim Lukach USA/Bura* because maybe someday she’ll look back after hearing about corporate greed or our all-star serial killers and she’ll see that handwritten USA and it will be mine, my battle flag, my country, my world because for 50 minutes on a May morning in western Slovakia, I was bigger than George Senior, bigger than Iraq and bigger than myself. I signed papers, notebooks, arms, shoes and no one has asked me to sign anything since then.

Luba and I took the train back, leaving Borsky Mikulas, heading east towards Senica, crossing the invisible border that divides Bura from the rest of the world. The flat light of the mid-day sun lay on the fields washing out the colors of the first hay harvest and I knew that I would meet up later with Peter, Paul, Dave and the rest of Studio Senica to drink Zlaty Bazant and chase the most beautiful women in the world. Luba woke me out of a dream and said, “You Burans are a strange people.” We both laughed and watched the country pass us by, feeling sleepy in the warm sun. I daydreamed about my grandmother coming across a field in a horse drawn cart, black birds circled overhead and as the dream zoomed in to her, I noticed that she had cracked blue eyes—just like my girl.

But now I’m beginning to go on. Sorry for the long note. I didn’t mean to take up your time, but it was the way the light fell across my desk and I was lost inside the happy noise. For a moment, I saw myself as I was and not just the person sitting next to you in traffic or the person who scans your documents because I have nothing better to do. You would have liked him. He was good. That’s all I wanted to tell you, but now I have things to do, press my pants, compose e-mail, deliver on action items and shrink into the parade now passing in front of your cube.

## Summer



### *The Sweetness and the Light—A Mosaic*

*Paul wakes up with a black and blue eye. Some time during the night he dreamt of sand being slowly poured onto his face. A beautiful woman stood over him releasing fistfuls of sand in a slow steady stream. She sang softly, "Loves me, loves me not." The sand ran into his eyes and down his cheeks forming ramparts on the side of his face. Her apricot colored dress stirred slightly in the desert breeze just touching the tips of his hair. Now, he looks in the mirror, rubs his bruised eye and wonders what he will tell Jana.*

The lone sliver of sunlight that came in through the blinds was enough to cut through his sleep like a razorblade. Unaware of what woke him, he sprung upright in bed, panicked and wet with sweat. Blood bounced through his head and his heart filled his chest cavity. His throat was constricted with last night's vomit and he felt like he was drowning. Slowly, the shape of his bedroom came into place: the dresser filled with athletic medals and a gun, the pile of clothes at the end of the bed. Something stirred under the blankets next to him and for a moment he thought that maybe it was a monstrous python. Maybe he wasn't really awake but living a dream inside of a dream. With care—as if he were delivering a baby on a bus—he lifted the covers to find a nude woman in his bed that very obviously wasn't Zlatica. He let the blanket fall back on the woman. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph," he said aloud. "This is going to be some God-damn day."

While this summer day held uncertainty to some, others began it with pedantic certainty, with a schedule that carried on through summer and winter, varying slightly with the seasons. Vlado woke at five, quietly left the bed without waking his wife, and fumbled for the light switch just as he had done for 14 years. He spent the next five minutes searching for gray hairs and plucking them from his head with his

wife's tweezers. This morning he found only three and went into the shower humming a polka that he heard long ago. There was only cold water—the Big Village was in the middle of the summer pipe flushing season and the piercing cold water along with the fewer gray hairs made him feel alive. After showering and dressing, Vlado left for his office at the artificial silk factory where he was a manager. On his way there, like every day, he stopped at the corner market to buy a pack of Sparta cigarettes and a single bottle of Trnavan beer that he drank on the way to work. The factory was a five-minute walk from the market through the square and across the main and only intersection, downhill and behind the bus station to the main gate. The walk was just long enough to smoke a cigarette and finish the beer. But this morning was different. Two random events would alter everything. First, Vlado forgot his lighter at home and secondly, the bus to Trenčin was 4.5 minutes behind schedule. Vlado turned around halfway through the square while the bus driver hurriedly collected passenger's fares. Vlado returned to the market for matches. The bus driver looked at his watch. Back through the square Vlado quickened his pace, carefully measuring his strides to get him to the office on time without sweating through his blue shirt. The bus driver, a man with two children, a small cottage inherited from his parents and a highly decorated career as "Comrade Bus Driver of the First Order" under the old regime, put the bus into first gear and pulled out of the station. Time and schedule, both pedantic and uncertain collided at the main intersection near what was once the Hotel Slovan. Vlado was struck and killed by the Trenčin bound bus—the lone blot on a bus driver's otherwise exemplary record. In the moment of impact, Vlado's beer bottle flew cartoonishly up in the air, spun three times and came crashing to the ground, near Vlado's now cracked open and gray hair free head.

By chance, though not a big enough chance to save Vlado's life, the ambulance squad was half a block away, tucked in behind the clinic. Paul ran out of bed and into the hallway before he was fully awake. Pan Doctor grabbed his arm and pulled him out into the already warm summer morning. They were both on the scene before Tomcat had a chance to pull the ambulance out of the garage. A small crowd of mostly Trenčin bound bus passengers and workers from the nearby market circled the body—afraid to touch it or check for pulse for fear that death is contagious. Paul and Pan Doctor pushed through the circle. It wasn't easy to look at death but Paul was getting used to it. Last week in one of the smaller villages a man tried to commit suicide by placing a shotgun under his chin. Just at the moment when he went to pull the trigger, the gun slipped, blowing the front of his face away. "Unfortunately," Paul thought, "he lived." He

prayed for steadier hands when his time came. He had not been to many death scenes, but the ones he had been at contained certain ironies that were not lost on him. Near Vlado's crushed skull lay a broken beer bottle and just out of reach of his twisted hand was a cigarette that would burn longer than Vlado's life.

Tomcat pulled round in the ambulance and Pan Doctor walked through the crowd to meet him. "Where the hell have you been? There's no need to hurry now," he said to Tomcat who was fumbling with the rear door of the vehicle.

"I was about to give it to Kralova harder than that poor bastard getting hit by the Trenčin Express, Pan Doctor. The poet's wife is a whore you know."

"I see. But let's not forget that this is your duty."

"It will not happen again." Tomcat sat on the bumper of the ambulance and pulled a pack of cigarettes from his shirt pocket. Somewhere at the edge of his vision he saw a lone figure dressed in the blue uniform of the transportation department sitting on the curb gently rocking back and forth. Tomcat pulled two smokes from the pack and lit them both. He walked towards the man, his lust draining out of him and approached the man as one driver to another, both bound by a fraternal bond—a "there for the grace of god" mentality and said, "Here comrade," handing him the cigarette, "I think you'll be needing this."

The day was already growing hot and she pushed her sliding glasses back up her nose just as the men in white were zipping Vlado into a bag. She was the man's neighbor, living below him for all of her 19 years. She felt disconnected from his death as if she saw someone get hit by a bus every morning on her way to work. She worked in a kiosk near the bus station selling newspapers, sporting news, cigarettes and chewing gum. She once thought that there would be more to her life than being crammed into a small shed handing change over a counter for ten hours a day. Mira backed her way out of the crowd, disassociating herself from death. Sunlight fell through the trees and splashed onto the ground in front of her. The church bell tolled once for the half hour and a bird flew across the face of the sun, covering her momentarily in a blanket of timelessness. His face came to her in Christ-hanging-on-the-cross clarity and she recognized him as the one who would come—the one she would throw everything into, her heart and every bit of passion that raced through her body. The face slid away with the passing of the bird across the sun and the echo of the bell ceased ringing in her ear. She pushed the glasses up to the bridge of her nose and walked on, down the hill, past the old Hotel Slovan, towards the bus station.

Nurse Iveta Kralova tasted Tomcat in her mouth and hurriedly reached for her pack of Dalila. Tomcat had run out of the examination room when he heard Pan Doctor call his name from the courtyard below. Iveta watched him go from the room—following his wake as it faded into the space that separated the doorway from the darkened hallway. She rose slowly, the examination table paper sticking to the back of her thighs, crackling like fire moving through a dry cornfield. Her white stockings lay in a bundle on the floor in front of a medicine cabinet. Poisons and painkillers stared her in the face, smiling, licking their lips. Her fingers ran over the lock reading the temptation like a Braille book. And then stopped. She dressed and ran down the back stairs and into the park behind the clinic. The coffee and cream-colored River Myjava divided the park and Iveta paused at the bridge and watched the water swirl and carve into the banks of red clay. Every year on his birthday, Iveta's husband tried to walk on water, attempting to cross the Myjava with dry feet. The event was the highlight of every birthday celebration and more than once the whole party wound up in the river. Except his last birthday with her. Just the two of them came to the river, just before sunrise after a long night of red Skalica wine to a spot Iveta could now see from the bridge. He stepped into the swirling water and claimed to Iveta that he took two steps before plunging into the water. Iveta lay drunk on the bank and laughed and laughed until she saw how serious he was. After that it all changed. He took to poetry and spirituality and annoyed the former regime so much that they asked him "politely" to leave the country. Now he was the darling of the west, a mystical poet who was on his way to a Nobel Prize. Iveta finished her cigarette, walked down to the bank and put her feet into the water, watching the brown current curl around her calves, and she began to laugh and laugh until she almost believed all of it.

Katka let the hoe slide out of her hand, smooth like bone, slow motion, time endless, she calls his name but nothing but air comes out. Had it really been him, moving through the tree break? And then came the smell of his cigarettes, the cherry taste of Skalica red wine in her mouth and the feeling that she could only describe as "November." And it washed over her silent and complete like holy oil or the mask of funeral incense. Birds lighted from the trees. Clouds moved across the face of the sun. Poppies in the fields just beyond the trees whispered her name. She dropped to her knees into the damp soil among the potatoes and began to laugh. "You son of bitch. Who the fuck do you think you are to come back here and do this to me? Who? Who are you?" Years from now she would remember the whole experience differently—gentle, summery, and with greeting card affinity. But now the pain is real, the hurt will stay for weeks and noth-

ing—not booze, not sex with strangers or the change of seasons will make the thought of him go away. Katka lay prostrate on the ground among the small mounds of potato plants and listens to them whisper her name. Katka. Katka. Katka.

Interlude

*I stand on the corner and wait for the man to turn green. I could live in the ordered universe: a life of schedules, appointment book copulations, alarm clock workdays, and tea ceremonies. I could live the life of a priest, steel worker, or sonnet writer, knowing where to stand and the things I should say and think. I need that alarm clock to go off and tell me to be in the shower by 6:50, out by 7. Coffee's on. Two cigarettes, the sports and weather all in time to catch the bus at 7:40. NYC bound.*

*You are the alarm clock that never rings. I wait for the man to turn green. The thought of you rises in me, unprovoked like a nonsense line from a free verse poem or a crazy meandering sax riff. I look for you in the rolled down socks of schoolgirls.*

*I look in the reflections of bus windows to see if you are sitting next to me. Maybe I will see your hand reaching for my face. I once saw two lovers in Budapest hiding from the rain. I walked up to them and looked into the girl's eyes under the masturbatory induced hysteria that it might be you. I whispered your name like Rosebud. I stumbled in the rain, the drops pelting my glasses as I zigzagged towards the Opera.*

*I need the man to tell me to go. A woman stands close to me and I can smell the oranges in her shopping bag and the thought of you leaves me as unexpectedly as it came. My mother's face is red with sun poisoning and my sister chases a lizard across the motel room floor.*

*Suddenly a woman dashes into the street like a parachutist from a plane. I look up and the traffic light is only blinking. The man will not turn green today. I grab my box of Pyrex and run across the street dodging a bus. I see your face in the headlights.*

In the bright light an old man scarred by time and hope unrolls a sheaf of yellowing paper on the top of a flat rock. He holds down the end with four smaller stones he picked up along the way. High above him on the hill he hears the taunts and curses of Castle Branč. The castle is an insult to him, standing unnaturally through course of time. He lifts his head once to the castle and then stares back down to his sheets of paper. On his papers are 27 years of siege planning—mapped out movements of medieval infantry approaches, ramp placements, elaborate siege towers equipped with battering rams and small catapults to launch dead livestock into the castle courtyard. He is proudest of his tunnels meant to undermine the walls and buildings of the fortress. Some are built close to the surface to deceive the defenders. He is willing to sacrifice a few of his less

talented tunnelers to achieve his real goal of digging far and deep and finally ascend in the main banquet hall. He draws his arm back, pulling the imaginary bowstring taut and lets loose and an arrow over the walls. In the silence he can hear the banners slapping in the breeze. Methodically he rolls up the papers, slips two rubber bands over them and walks down the long hill to the bus stop.

She finally thinks that it has been long enough. She takes her pen, puts it in her mouth like a cigarette and takes a long drag and exhales all the things that need to be said. The pen drags on the paper and she feels like she is dragging a plough through the vast field of her emotions:

*How are you? You didn't come in April to do your practical work, did you? Cause I didn't see or hear about you. I've decided to write you a little bit. Hope you are fine. How are your studies?*

*I was thinking about that letter I've sent you. I wonder if you received it and if not where is it, but if yes, why didn't you reply? Maybe it's stupid now to ask you but I'd like to know about you. What are you doing? I should have been interested when you were here, maybe, but I was afraid not only of you but also of myself. It was always (and still is) hard for me to show my feelings. The more I tried the more I hated myself for not knowing what I want or what I feel. Since you left there was not a day that I didn't think about you. All the things from the past are still coming to me and some I don't feel very well about. I wrote many letters to you but there was no address to send them to. I wonder how you feel about those days and how it would be now if you were here. I know that there are too many questions that don't have answers but the one fact is that I have missed you. It took me a long time to admit it, but there it is.*

*I'm sorry if this brought up too many memories for you but I needed to put it somewhere. So I finally took the pen and paper. Now I'm glad that I finally made up my mind and did it, but I don't know if you are. So if you want to tell me something, anything, please write. And you can take this letter as an apology for all the things that I have done. Know that I think of you and that I often see the ghosts of you and me walking down Long Street towards the station and every time I run to catch up with them they stay just out of reach.*

*Once yours,*

*G.*

She signed her name and placed the pen next to the letter and wondered what she was supposed to feel.

A dragonfly buzzed the surface of the pond and the reeds that filled the opposite shore reminded him of a fence. The heat lingered long into the afternoon and

the forest was quiet except for the sound of the picnic funneling through the trees until it came here, to the edge of a pond in the middle of a forest outside the village of—where it rested and died on the shore like a migrating bird. He loved the woman standing next to him, gazing out across the pond. What will happen next is drama, he thought, understated like a Hemingway story. Is that what it was all leading up to—the two of them standing on the shore of a stagnant pond, a single sentence waiting to be said, loaded in his mouth, falling like hail (hard, tight and shattering?) and what of her? Would she strike him across the mouth, drawing blood? Or would she remain silent, impaling him like Vlad Tepes with pale green eyes instead of the trunk of a birch tree? And when it moved beyond them, how would it resonate in the future? What would it be like with the next one and the one after that and then one more? From here forward their promises to others would be laced with this moment, their goodbyes and goodnights, their hellos and their prayers. The dragonfly skirted the shore close to them, hovering only centimeters above the water. Its wings stirred the surface sending ripples and tiny waves towards the shore. He reaches for her hand, pulls back at the last moment and her name tumbles out of his mouth like a contagious disease.

The water from the reservoir rolled rhythmically onto the shore in front of him, drawing him into to a secure place between sleep and consciousness. The sounds were still real: children playing in the water, people walking in the sand behind him and the slight breeze moving through the trees, but his mind began to drift and he quickly found himself inside of a dream:

*Lena leaned across the table and spoke in a voice barely audible above the softness of the waves lapping against the pier, "It that all the stories you know? Isn't there maybe one more, one that doesn't end in departure or divorce or death? At least one that doesn't end with a word that starts with the letter D?"*

*The man sat back in his chair, pulling on his ear. Boats sat silently at their moorings. All the boats were blue, barely distinguishable from the sea: blue Norwegian fishing trawlers, water dripping from their nets like shimmering timepieces, blue yachts, and small blue sail boats. Out at the edge of the bay, Henry Hudson's Half Moon lay at anchor. Its sails trim, ready to be hoisted for the first sign of a wind that did not come. In fact, there had been no winds for years now and not even the older people in the harbor town remembered the last time they blew. So the crews were released to the town and they worked in the toyshops, the fields, and the bars.*

*"Do you want another Sprite," he asked her. Lena fished for the slice of lime among the ice cubes and nodded her head. The man called over the waiter, a seaman from the Half Moon and ordered two more.*

*Henry Hudson rowed ashore everyday and walked through the town, past the stalls selling brightly colored parrots, past sleeping oily tattoo artists who had long painted every seamen's body in the bay, through the back alleys of whitewashed houses that caused him to squint like snow blindness. His crewmen ignored him and he carefully placed his silver headed cane step by step in front of him. When he came to the edge of the town he would sit beneath an olive tree before making the long climb up the hill outside of the harbor town. One could see him writing in his ship's log. He stayed there long enough only to write, "No wind today." Then he would place the broad rim hat back on his head and climb to the top of the hill to smell for the wind that did not come.*

*Lena took a long drink of her soda and said it tasted like dandelions. She scrunched up her nose and felt like spring. "Maybe today we can take our bikes to the other side of the island and go fishing. Would you like that?"*

*"Very much so," the man said, "But I think there is one more story."*

*Lena leaned across the table and put her face close to his. "Please make it a good one."*

*"This is a story about two people, not unlike you and me. Two people on a sunny island with houses the color of snow."*

*"I don't want to stop you, but do they leave or die?"*

*"No. Never. They stay together forever and ever."*

*"I like it already. Go on."*

*And Hudson stood on top of the hill waiting for the wind that didn't come. Waiting over the entire town like a fresco of the long-suffering Christ. When he saw that wind was not forthcoming, he placed the hat back on his head, took the silver cane in his hand and slowly walked down the hill, where he would row out to his blue ship amongst a flotilla of blue boats. The man woke when a beach ball landed near his blanket. He rolled over and staring in the sun he saw the reflections of boats in the harbor and a small girl walking along the shoreline, picking up sea-shells and calling his name in a sing-song fashion.*

It all started with the 2000 Krowns he loaned her. She told him she had to go to Germany to take care of some business. He didn't know what sort of business a 22-year-old university student would have in a foreign country. He supposed it was a man, but never asked and she never offered to tell me. She didn't ask him for the money, that wasn't like her, but she didn't refuse it either. He didn't know if he would see the money again. He didn't care. He didn't know if he would see her again. It was not beyond Dasha to take the money and disappear, leave everything behind and become someone's mistress in Munich. But, she

showed up the following week with the money in her hand. Here it is. Thanks for loaning it to me. He asked her if everything was taken care of. A bit messy, but it is resolved, she said. She moved closer to him. You didn't think I was coming back, did you? He told her that he didn't know one way or the other. She put her hand behind his neck and him towards her. Is there any interest on the loan? No. He kissed her hard on the mouth. None at all. She unbuckled his belt and slid his pants down his legs. I don't like to be in debt to anyone. Never. He kissed her on the neck. Debt is a dangerous thing. She kicked off her shoes. It's so empty, she said and led them into the kitchen where they fucked under the table and then they fucked again. Nothing was resolved; on the contrary, everything was just beginning.

She closes the door to her room, shutting out the light from the hallway and the sound of her parents finishing dinner and the clinking of plates being put in the sink. The comfortable drone of her parents in mid-conversation puts her at ease and she barely registers his absence. The days are growing shorter and the darkness of her room comes as a surprise and the only light leaking in is in the form of a pillar from the streetlight in the courtyard below. AP moves through the dark room by memory and stops half a meter from her desk, reaching out she turns on her desk light. Light pours out like sugar. It runs over her books, onto her chair and finally onto the floor where it lights a stream across the carpet and meanders into the corners where it turns back on itself and curls up like a cat going to sleep. She puts her hands under the light and it pours over them. The light tingles like tiny needles—mixing the perfect amount of pleasure and pain. She bends over and places her face in the stream and for a moment it grabs her breath, pulling it from her and she is lost in the light. The force holds her down and suddenly she is drowning. She gasps for air but the light fills her windpipe and rushes down into her lungs. Her body begins to glow and the light drips out her breasts and her fingertips like water from the rock at Lourdes. She struggles to find the edge of the desk but all she feels are the crystal needle points of light. Her arm flail and shafts of light shoot from her fingers until she is one single fountain of light. AP grabs on to the edge of the desk and pulls herself out of the stream, turning once on the desk and falls to the ground where she begins to cough and sputter. She spews light onto to the wall and when she is able to breathe again she turns over and begins to cry and the tears shimmer and glow leaving a trail of light down her face.

She moves closer to him, reaching for his hand, her head full of expectations and a slow consuming fear, fear of the first time, fear of his body and a fear of tomorrow morning. She had it all arranged. She told her parents that she would stay the night in Vlasta's cottage near Kunov. She left her packed bag near the front door hours before she was to leave—old jeans and an even older sweater exposed for them to see. She even asked her father for matches to start the fire. There is a suspicion in their house, barely detectable like carbon monoxide, but something they feel—colorless, odorless, something that he has left deep within the family ever since his first visit. He has seeped into their lives from under the floor and will change her and the way they are together. But now she sits on the couch, watching him pour red wine and her body begins to shimmer with desire.

She is afraid of this place and no longer likes the customers. Nightly, each of them is transformed into grotesque monsters, gargoyles without a purpose. Jana hands a silver haired devil a shot of Borovicka and the slight touch of hands brings thoughts of murder to the surface. He tries to grab her wrist and put it into his drooling mouth. She backs away and raises the serving tray over her head. We'll have none of that my little one, he says in a voice that spills out and in-between his yellow teeth like a dank mist filling a valley. None of that at all. She leaves him and retreats to the sanctuary behind the bar. The place is slowly filling up and Jana wants to light the bamboo that covers the ceiling on fire, destroying the demons, destroying herself. Surveying the crowd, she knows that there are few she can trust, maybe the table in the back, demons by virtue of their sex, but young and very possible. A drunk hunchback calls for more wine. She puts a knife in her apron and runs her thumb along the blade until a trickle of blood runs down her fingers. The pain vindicates her. Nothing can hurt her now, not the devil, nor the winged apocalypse, or man himself. She pours the wine slowly, blood red, warm, filling the glass. Inside she hurts white pain like the moments immediately after getting hit with a hammer. Though the worst is yet to come, the shutting off of the lights, the locking of the door, the lonely sound of the falling metal tumblers, and walking into the festering night. She leaves the wine behind the bar and goes to the three at the back table. She needs them to stay and brings them three beers without asking.

And in this dream I am kneeling in the first pew of a Gothic cathedral. A shaft of light comes down from a stained glass window behind the altar and I am bathed in brilliance. Specks of light dance all over me as if they are alive. Is this the signal I have been waiting for? I look around the church and all over the floor

are separate patches of tempered sunlight dropped by the windows high above. Each color separate and distinct until they blend into a swarm, like bees on the way to a picnic. I think I am here to make my confession, but I can't think of any sins. Angry glances from pious statues look down on me. The holy have come to point fingers.

There is a tour group in the nave of the church. I can hear the drone of the guide and I can't make out what he is saying, but I know he is British. He leads the group up to the altar. I suspect he is pointing out the interesting design features of the building, but I can't be sure. The group is a shadowy bunch of people. I am unable to distinguish any of their features except for the last two. It is Misa and Mira, but not how they are today. They look like when they were in the fifth grade. They run over to me and stand in front of the pew. The light is blocked. They beg me to come with them. Halos grow around their heads and the tour group begins to walk away. Hurry, they tell me. We can't lose the group. I can't stand up. Misa and Mira back away. Come with us. Something is holding me to the kneeler. Wait. Wait for me. Misa rolls her eyes and disappears with Mira. I put my hand behind my knee. It is hot and wet from blood. Misa. Mira. There are two spikes driven into my legs. I am pinned there. I look around for help and notice that all the statues are smiling, satisfied.

Fero sets four beers on the table. Each is a half-liter. Brewed in Topalcany. Golden and diffused like sunlight shining through a muslin curtain. The head is so thick and white with foam that a one Krown piece would easily stay afloat on top of it. The four of them stare at the beers. Petey runs his tongue across his lips, raises his eyebrows and smacks his hands together and begins to rub them like he is starting a fire. Palo laughs at Peter. "Here we go again, baby. And Dave reaches for his beer, the beads of moisture wrap around his fingers and he slowly draws it towards him. Jim is the last to take his beer. It is heavy in his hand, comforting, a feeling he has grown used to in three years and one he will miss in the years to come. They lift their glasses, touch them, look each other in the eyes and in that moment that will stay with them, the moment laced with possibility and the descent into joyful drunkenness where all decisions are good ones and all women good-looking. There will be a few bad nights, nights soaked in double vodkas, nights when they will question (God, purpose, country and themselves) and nights of boredom where they will empty pack after pack of Petra cigarettes. But those nights are few and this certainly will not be one of them. The moon is bright and they are young and coming through the gate are four women—blondes and brunettes, tall, short, but all soon to be beautiful. Palo is

the first to say “na zdravie” and the other three follow. Fero is on the porch bathed in the light pouring out of the door from inside the bar. His wife calls him and he turns and disappears into the light.

## *October*



### *Feast Days*

Perhaps it is the way that the light falls on the treetops illuminating and clarifying—blending colors, the subtle transitions from brown to red, yellow to orange or the way the light moves through the trees like a school of fish darting through the water that makes me think of you. The weather here has finally turned colder. There is frost nearly every day now and in the mornings I have to scrape the ice from my car. At night, we sit around the fireplace and drink red wine. I go to bed early and my wife curls in next to me and I dream of you. They say that the world has changed, then why can't I stop thinking of you?

I can picture the trees changing their colors in the park and the River Myjava running close to the top of its banks with water flushed from the nearby reservoir at Kunov, churning, coffee and cream colored pulling and eroding. It is easy to see you along the banks of the river or walking through the park, your figure outlined against the dark trees. The wind stirs the leaves along the path, blowing them into puddles where they form mosaics of color that an unnamed and unseen artist would title, "When We Were Happy." Panzer gray clouds roll in from north, over the Moravian hills and the steel sky is pregnant with rain.

Sometimes in my car on the way to work I drift off while waiting at red lights. I close my eyes tightly, squeezing them until tiny specks of light begin to spin and crash into each other—all in the hope that when I open them I will be sitting in my flat in Senica, looking at the kitchen table spread out like a Cézanne still-life: empty wine bottles, an ashtray full of half-smoked cigarettes, the early morning sun spilling into the room with a single shaft illuminating the table and a handwritten letter that smells of you. The car behind me flashes its high beams and beeps, pushing me closer to starting another day.

I once went on a day trip, visiting the castles that dotted the mountain tops on the east side of the Small Carpathians. Five of us packed into a Lada: Peter, his father, his brother Miro—who I was helping with his English, much like I had

done with Peter—a cigarette filled hour after school speaking about football, F1 and women—then Dave and myself. We left early one Saturday, a day like today, the kind of day that used to be spent raking leaves with my father—the smell of drifting smoke and burning leaves, waiting in the backyard for my mother’s call to come inside for soup and roast-beef-on-rye sandwiches. We drove south from Senica, past the pig farm, through Jablonica—the Apple Village—past Cerova and finally up the long hill to Rozbehy near the ruins at Korlatko. Peter’s grandmother lived in the village, near the church and we stopped at her house for some *slivovica* and homemade cakes. She poured Dave and I one glass of the homemade plum brandy and then she poured another one for “our other leg” and then one more and one more after that until Dave and I realized that it would be another one of those Slovak days—days that fall in between the alarm clock and a 9-5 schedule, days that you want to grab hold of and put in your pocket so you could take them out and look at years later, days without expectations and days filled with everything except certainty. We continued south past the castles at Ostry Kamen, Smolensky Zamok and Cerveny Kamen until we arrived in Pezinok at the Borchak festival—the festival of young wine. Wine sellers set up stalls in the streets, selling the young cider-like wine in 2 liter soda bottles. Peter’s father insisted that we try as many vineyards as possible so Peter handed over the keys to the car and the night slowly began to slip away two liters at a time. And like most Slovak nights we predictably wound up drunk and all somehow closer. Later, I found you back in Senica, walking through the park, just past the statue of Novemeskeho—dull copper brown in the moonlight—and finally, the both of us tangled together inside the monkey bars at the III primary school—sloppy, quick and funny and lost in the haze of young wine.

That same autumn when everything began to slip away, I took a trip to Budapest to escape the memory of you. On the train from Bratislava I met a woman from Denmark with golden hair that shined in the afternoon sun and a halo surrounded her reflection in the compartment window. For a moment I saw escape in the light. Southern Slovakia rolled into Hungary, the Danube slowly being pulled in our wake. We opened a bottle of wine. She told me about the small town on the Danish coast where she was from, where all the fishermen wore red trousers as a sign of their profession and of obscure feast days where women gathered seaweed from the shoreline and left it in baskets on the front steps of the men they hoped to marry. I lit her cigarettes and each time she reached out and grabbed my hand, steadying it. I told her about the children I taught and about Monet blue/yellow mornings walking through the park on the way to school

when the light was strong and purifying and how I would sing their names inside my head like a litany of saints: Marcela Bambino, Miroslava, Petra, Tanya, Katya. Four hours passed and as the train pulled into Keleti station, she moved across the compartment and we kissed and said good-bye. Once off the train, the straps from my backpack began to cut into my shoulders and the pain came as a comforting end to the trip. I turned and watched the train pull of the station and in a scene that is acted out a thousand times a day, I waved—a moment so ultimately Euro, coated in clichés and so magnificently beautiful. She could have replaced you. All she had to do was stay. She could have been “the one” just like you, but the world is full of “ones” and I knew then that it was predetermined that I would stumble through every last one of them. She continued south to Sofia and I spent four days in Budapest, days that lingered in loneliness and ghostly thoughts of the both of you. I walked along the Danube and watched the barges making their way down the river to the Black Sea. I ate delicate Hungarian pastries on a bench on Margaret Island. On the last day, I climbed Castle Hill and walked about the palace and churches to the back of the hill where there was a promenade with views stretching west into the Buda Hills. The trees blazed in red and orange in the early afternoon sun. Couples walked arm in arm. Grandparents pushed children in prams. I walked silently along pretending you were next to me feeling all the things we had and all the things we never would. And when it was over I walked slowly back to the train station, my hands buried deep in my pockets and shuffled through the small piles of fallen leaves.

And it always does come back to you: the days when it is difficult to get up and go to work, that extra glass of wine, and hearing you in every woman’s voice. With all that has happened, they say that it is now an uncertain world, but when all that you have known is uncertainty, the world is pedantically still the same—except now I think about stockpiling bottled water and buying antibiotics off the internet or what I would do if I received a letter from you, coated in an unknown white powder, yet still smelling of you, how far would I go?

October is wasting away, passing payday to payday and rushing towards All Souls and All Saints. I left from Keleti station on November 2 and boarded a train north to Bratislava. If the train ride south was a surprise then the one back north was as it should have been—filled with that sucked out feeling when the drama is suddenly gone and the wet scent of freshly cut hay, heavy like sex, crawling in through the compartment window above me, calling me, reaching out like desire, tempting me to get off the train and walk down the tractor-rutted road through the fields and into the empty Hungarian plains. This train stopped in many places, mostly factory towns whose horizons were marked off by smoke-

stacks, but there were some places—stations nameless and devoid of memory with grass growing near the tracks and butterflies heavy with pollen doing a drunken half-minded Zen dance among the wild flowers and I know what this is leading up to. Perhaps it is the lonely trees in the distance, or the lack of sleep, or the four beers in the train station, but I am already looking for you in the window, hopelessly searching for a reflection, that I would somehow find you sitting next to me. There are times for a cigarette and this was one of them. Also a time for reflection, to look at the world through half closed eyes, the green fields blur as they pass, running across the front of my mind. The diesel exhaust of the engine smelled like my guilt. I looked for you/her behind the newspapers of my fellow travelers and in the rolled down socks of schoolgirls. I looked in the branches of the empty trees and among the decaying towers of hilltop castles. I looked everywhere but inside myself.

Now there are days when I go to New York on business when I still have the sense that while walking down 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue it could all suddenly fall and pile on me, glass and steel, the store window mannequins, the over-turned kebab carts and I would walk out untouched and saved by you because I have a purpose here and that is to be haunted by you—your touch, your look, the way you move through the landscape. The sun bounces off the tops of buildings and I walk in and out of light until I reach the office.

My only terror is losing you. And this is what I remember, on this day late in October closing in on the Day of the Dead, your face, your hair, the pathway to your house, down the tractor road where the branches of cherry trees reach out overhead, their petals falling like snow. Feeling your hand in mine, the brief touch of shoulders or forearm against forearm and the thought that this woman is the one I love—walking through the shadows, hearing the singsong in your voice, and the feel of your tongue in my mouth—wild, sweet and cool. And finally, the walk down Long Street, which runs all the way to the train station and waiting for the trolley car wind rushing at us and struggling to remember the musty, dank smell of a night when everything, the wind, the street had the same earthy smell, full, alive, throbbing, not unlike the smell of mushrooms growing in the forest after an autumn rain.

# *Timeline*



## *I have lived a life once before*

### **1991**

January—I touched down in Vienna with a backpack, an army duffle bag and a virgin passport. I arrived with a mix of feelings that threatened to spill over moment to moment—apprehension, fear, and the unstoppable crazy feeling that I was free. It is a sensation that I can now only describe as “travel”—not vacation or the feeling of getting away for a weekend, but the feeling of moving through the world where one could be overwhelmed at any moment. I am nearly hit by the bus going to Bratislava.

After much confusion in Bratislava, I am sent to Senica, Slovakia, a small industrial city near the Czech and Austrian borders. It was hardly the Europe that I had dreamed of—the twisting, spiraling cathedrals, cobblestone streets and postcard cafes, but a place that rises up to defeat expectations and forces me to change my preconceived thoughts.

February—My first trip to Prague and the city is majestic in its grayness. It is not yet the Paris of the 90’s and it is still devoid of the Peace Corps and the horrific South American flute bands. I am haunted by Klima and his garbage men.

March—At an event for English teachers in Bratislava, I meet Powers, Carrie and Jo. The night spirals out of control—drunk in the train station, board train going north to Kutý, pass out and wind up in the Czech Republic.

—I turn 25 and spend the evening drinking wine with Katka and Sarah in the red brick *internaut*. Sarah leaves first and then I watch Katka walk slowly down the hallway and get into the elevator. She turns and blows me a kiss as she gets on.

—Budapest—Easter Weekend. We stay at the house of a man that we met at the train station. He charges us \$5 a night. He claims that he was invited to the coro-

nation of Elizabeth and while he was there he played ping-pong with Olivier. I have no reason to doubt him.

May—Dave arrives.

June—Dave and I move into a one room flat in Sotina, the “housing estate” on the edge of Senica. It was on the first floor and we never saw the neighbors unless we had a party, which brought them to our door telling us to shut up. The place was small, even for one person and could have been oppressive for two, but we spent much of our time at the Hotel Slovan and the beer gardens throughout the city. We cooked our dinners on a hot plate and kept the tiny fridge stocked with beer and *slivovica*. There was no bed, only a pull-out couch that we shared, each sleeping at different ends with our feet in each other’s faces.

—At the end of the school year, a teachers’ party near the village of Dojc—Katka and I walk through the woods to the edge of a small pond where the conversation dies on the shoreline like a migratory bird.

July—School ends and Dave and I begin teaching a two-week English course for teachers.

I have trouble breathing and am unable to walk across town without sitting down four or five times. I am diagnosed by Katka’s father, a doctor, with a spastic trachea. Despite what happened on the edge of the pond, Katka brings me to her house to recover.

—Dave, Powers and myself (now recovered) go on a two-week trip through Poland—Krakow, Warsaw, and Gdansk. The overnight train from Krakow to Warsaw is crowded and we stand the entire way. In the middle of the night, Powers begins to sing Beastie Boys and the people crammed in the hallway of the rail-car clap along. Warsaw is a drag and the train to Gdansk is a crowded as well, but we all manage to squeeze into a compartment. Dave and I leave Powers on a pier in Gdynia, next to the Joseph Conrad statue and continue on to Berlin.

—Dave and I accept a two-week teaching gig at Sec in the Czech Republic. It was once the largest Communist youth camp in the world. The summer begins to unravel. I meet an English woman named Lindsay and for two weeks life roars with an intensity that I have never felt before. She sings me Smiths’ songs and tries to explain cricket to me. Our time ends with the greatest train run of all time—Dave and I jumping aboard a moving train as it pulls out of the station and it takes us south to Slovakia.

August—Dave and I accept another two week teaching assignment in Slovakia—spending most of the time sleeping, recovering, re-spinning our time in Sec and killing flies in our room. The head of the camp wakes us every morning at 7, entering the room with a bottle of cognac. For the summer we calculate that we have been *legally* drunk and unable to operate heavy machinery for 56 days in a row.

September—School begins again and the classes that I started with last school year now enter the sixth grade. I read text, pronounce the new vocabulary works and aid the kids as they work in the classroom. They ask for American folk songs and I teach them the words to Duke Ellington's *Sophisticated Lady*.

October—On an arbitrary date that I picked last January, I return to the U.S.

—One week later: Decide to Return to Slovakia.

## 1992

January—I returned to Senica, Slovakia with my childhood friend Mitch who will come and teach for seven months. We spend the first evening at the Hotel Slovan, people drifting in and out. Mitch and I spend the next seven months in the flat next to the Jopi Bar at the edge of town. He plays guitar, I write letters and we have separate beds.

February—Mitch and I take a weekend trip to Krakow with Bruce and Tom. Bruce is British and Tom a retired American teacher, both teach in the business high school. We fall asleep in an unheated train car and get disconnected from the main train. We spend the night on a side track. Once in Krakow, Mitch and I find a restaurant in the old Jewish ghetto and eat the best pierogis that we ever had.

March—I turn 26.

The Jopi Bar opens next to our apartment building.

April—Paul's Birthday—On a warm night, we climb a hill outside of Senica to celebrate Paul's birthday. We each carry two bottles of wine and Mitch carries a guitar. We walk through the tall grass to the top of the hill from where we can see both the lights of Senica and the moon reflecting on the surface of the reservoir on the other side. Bottles of wine get passed around, jokes follow and it isn't long before we all start singing and dancing. Someone takes their clothes off and soon we are all naked dancing under the stars. Paul disappears with Jana and all we are left with is the sound of Mitch strumming quietly somewhere in the dark. The

next morning I suffer my first bout of alcohol poisoning and go with Luba to visit her grandmother's village. When her grandmother sees me, she is convinced that someone gave me the evil eye.

Easter in Prague—Mozart Mass, warm wine, Jim and Dan and the drunkest that I have ever been—sitting on the banks of the Vltava, under the Charles Bridge.

May—Theater Festival, Topalcany. Fodor invites Mitch, Dave and I to a theater festival in Topalcany—home of Topalcansky beer. The four days seem as long as a thousand and are filled with Fodor's mad friends, beer, women and avant-garde theater. We sit through Czech absurdist comedies and a version of Hamlet that ends with Hamlet being crucified as Led Zeppelin's *Stairway to Heaven* fills the theater. The drama and absurdism spills off the stage and into the bars and hotels—tomahawk chuck war dances by the gang from Senica outside of the award's ceremony, an impromptu reading of Kerouac by Fodor and myself out in the streets in front of a butcher shop (pig head in the window), we raise 28 Krowns, just short of a dollar—the most honest money that I ever earned, everything building up to the final night held in a bar that served hard liquor only and I stood back and watched everything like a camera: Mitch played old Beatles songs on a out of tune piano while people held his head back and poured shots down his mouth, Fodor and Marek re-enacted a kung-fu epic in the corner with Fodor almost going through the window, Dave at the bar with a Czech guy—shots lined in front of them like a firing squad. A blue-eyed girl turns me into a participant and we slow dance to Mitch's *Hey Jude*, the sixth time he is playing it. She pulls close into me, causing a rainbow of colors to crash and collide inside my head. Dave disappears from the bar and I find him outside crouched over in a puddle, head cracked open and face covered with blood. Fodor and I take him to the hospital where they sew him back up with something that looks like fishing line. Mitch and I stay awake with him all night in the hotel and in the morning he wakes up and suggests that he may have to cut down on the drinking.

June—Dave returns to the U.S for the summer with a scar on his head.

Fodor takes Mitch and me to another theater festival. This time he surprises us by saying we are one of the groups performing. We perform a reading of *On the Road* in the courtyard of a bar accompanied by Mitch on the guitar. I read Sal Paradise's passages in English while Fodor reads Dean Moriarty in Slovak. I perform a Shakespeare soliloquy in the middle of everything just so I can say: "Let us sit upon the

ground/and tell sad stories about the death of kings.” Slovak television records everything and shows highlights on the nightly news. The blue-eyed girl comes up to me after the performance and kisses me on the lips. When I return to school on the following Monday, the kids ask me what I was doing on TV.

June—My parents come to visit. I take them into the classroom where they meet all the kids and the people that I teach with. Along with Mitch, we go to Prague and Budapest. From there, I go with my parents to St. Petersburg to visit family friends. It is the time of the White Nights and we stay awake late in the dusky haze of a night that doesn’t come to watch all the bridges that span the Neva open and let ships go in and out. The week in Russia ends with a traditional Russian dinner—smoked fish, borscht, pork and endless bottles of vodka and champagne.

July—Trip to Budapest with Mitch and Petey. We stay in the Strawberry Youth Hostel. It is unbelievably hot. We meet two girls from Finland and one from California. Petey disappears with one of the Finnish girls and we don’t see him again until days later—moments before our train to eastern Slovakia is about to leave. We take a train to Kosice in eastern Slovakia and as we pull into the station Petey crashes his head into the luggage rack and Mitch and I laugh for hours—Petey rubbing his head, his hair falling into his eyes. We hook up with people we had met at the Topalcany festival and find them busking in the main square. Mitch joins in. We take a day trip to Stropkov to meet with Natalie—a girl I taught in the summer camp at Sec. Her parents kidnap me and I stay with them for three days. I take the longest bus trip in the world back to Senica—crossing all of Slovakia. The summer is hot and I spend the travel breaks—when the bus stops—smoking cigarettes and drinking beer. It takes 14 hours to go 300 miles.

July—Mitch and I go to summer camp. We sleep in tents. It rains most of the time and there is mud. We sleep with towels over our faces to keep the flies away. In the afternoon we sit by the pool and the boys fight over who is going to run and get us beer. My favorite kid is a girl named Anna with haunting green eyes and blond hair that falls into her face.

Hotel Slovan closes.

August—Mitch leaves for the U.S. and the weather becomes colder. I spend the last week in August visiting Powers in Bratislava. He prepares to move to Vienna.

Dave returns.

September—School begins again and I French kiss a French woman.

October—Dave and I go to Vienna to visit Powers—ancient history tied to this city, walking the same streets as my family, through the imposing buildings on the Ring—go to see the Klimts' hanging in Belvedere Palace. I send a postcard of *The Kiss* to the French woman.

November—A champagne inspired idea—in a moment of total clarity Dave and I stumble upon the idea to bring some kids and a teacher to America. We strike out to raise the money from friends and family. We make plans for July in Milltown, NJ and open another bottle of champagne.

Return Home for a visit. I tell no one of my plans except my parents. My father is in the hospital getting arteries rerouted in his leg. I show up at my cousin's unannounced and we drink beer late into the night. The next day—after going to the hospital—I attend Kate and Dan's wedding and see into the future. They will become my in-laws. I will eat pizza every Friday night at their house and be godfather to their son. I will throw it all away when I cheat on Kate's sister. My father's recovery takes longer than expected and I stay in the states through the holidays and into January.

## 1993

January—Return to the new free and independent Slovak Republic.

February—We call three of my seventh graders and their parents into Lubo's office and tell them of our plans to go to the U.S. The looks on all of their faces burns into my memory so that I now carry it around like a wallet photograph.

March—I turn 27.

During a night in the Jopi Bar, my friendship with Luba takes a turn and we cross a midnight border into a mysterious country where the definition of friendship begins to breakdown and turn into something else—not quite friends and not quite love. She is something out of Esterhazy's *She Loves Me...* There is this woman with remarkable blue eyes and a stunning memory...

April—A.P.

She walks into my life on a sunny afternoon and asks me to help with her English. I know from the very instant that I see her standing in my kitchen—hair the color of a crow's wing—that it will all end terribly and I will enjoy every

minute of it—life elevated to high drama—to an opera. We spin and fall into love. There are nights when I stay in, hoping that she will come. I peek from behind the curtain, hoping to see her figure walking in and out of the circles of light dropped by the street lamps. On the nights when she does come, we make love with the windows open, the spring night cascades in and in the half light of the bedroom I watch the breeze blow across her face and she will never know the forest fire she has fanned inside of me.

July—Trip to America.

August—Lena at the door. Things change and then they change again.

September—The last year starts on a violently beautiful day—bright sunshine, a touch of coolness in the air—autumn just on the other side of the mountains. It is a day of expectations and the overwhelming feeling that it is the end of something. The classes that I began with in my first year now enter the eighth grade and my work papers read: Teacher.

October—Budapest.

Throwing rocks at A.P.'s window—the end of something.

November—Paris—Check one off the dream list. I have made it to Paris, not exactly under the circumstances that I once dreamed about, but I am here.

December—Christmas. It rained all day on Christmas Eve and Dave and I walked home from Petey's in a pouring rain after the traditional fish dinner (carp bought out of huge tanks in front of the small grocery stores). The temperature dropped overnight, turning the rain to snow and in the morning it lay like a blanket covering the hills, taking the sharp edges off of everything, suppressing sound. My boots crunching through the snow are the only thing audible in the entire city. We spend the day with Luba P. and Katka and family—eating drinking—the simple holiday pleasure of being with people you love.

## **1994**

January—It seemed to snow every day that new year and I was asked to be a chaperone on the annual seventh grade ski trip. We went deep into the mountains near the Moravian border to a chalet owned by the artificial silk factory in Senica. The snow was deep and I spent the days on the mountain with Lena and

Lena—I never met a Lena that I didn't like—and the night spent drinking vodka in the kitchen with Laco and Jana.

March—turn 28. We rent the Volley Klub for the night and dance until the sun begins to come up. I walk home in the gray earliness of the day and am struck by the fact that this is almost all over.

Breakdown—

May—I dance the polka with Miriam.

June—When Katka went out on maternity leave I took over her duties as class teacher for 8.C. We went on a class trip to a cottage in the hills between Myjava and Senica—a former school building, standing alone between two hills. We went swimming. We walked in the hills—Gabriela walking next to me pulling the petals off a flower, sing-songing *he loves me, he love me not*. In the evening we played cards and made a fire. Marcela Bambino sat on the edge of the fire where the light ended and the shadows began and I thought of what would have my life been without her and would she ever know and where will we all go from here? She stands at the center of the moment of my first January when I saw the joy in a small girl's heart. She crushed me, killed off my past and I knew that I could never be that happy again. And now it was all ending. The fire burned down to only the glowing coals and in the morning after breakfast we returned to Senica.

July 1<sup>st</sup>—Dave left the day before and I spend the day without him packing and saying goodbye to people in my flat. I give away all that I cannot carry. Students come by and ask to be taught all the “special” words that I did not tell them. I give them a full New Jersey rundown. We laugh and then cry. I fly back to Jersey to meet Dave and to wait for the next thing that never does seem to come.

Now I am watching the rain blow across the roofs of an industrial building. I have a meeting at nine. I need to talk to Eileen about the divorce. I need to call the electric company so they don't turn off the electricity in my apartment. I will have another cup of coffee whose color will remind me of the River Myjava and I will begin to think that I have lived a life once before.

# *When I think of you...*



## *Acknowledgements*

First and foremost, thank you to the people of Senica, Slovakia, for their kindness, hospitality and the willingness to take me into their homes and lives. A special thanks to all the women who were woken up in the middle of the night by their drunken husbands dragging Americans home for a night cap. A big *na zdra-vie* to all the waiters and bartenders at the Hotel Slovan, the Jopi Bar, the Winter Stadium, U Jakub, Lipa, Malina, and Bazant at the train station who kept them coming until we said stop, but most of all to Fero at U Pavlina whose half-liter Topalcanies were the best beers I've ever seen poured. And this book is also for all the shopkeepers, bus drivers, conductors and everyone else who patiently dealt with me and my halting Slovak, but it isn't for the cop that had Dave and I spread eagle against the outside wall of the apartment building. This book definitely isn't for him.

Thank you to the teachers and staff at the III Zakladna Skola whose acceptance was mind-boggling and whose names are too numerous to mention here, but I can not leave out the smokers—Jana, Laco, Vlasta, Anna whose views of love and life jammed in between classes and quick smokes still make me laugh. And then there is Pani Ucitelka Vavrikova...A special thanks to Gitka who gathered the letters from home and to Lubo Parizek, the principal for making my experience at the III ZS so wonderful. He is the man. But none of it was possible without Luba Kristofovicova and Luba Pecnova, who I taught with day after day and for showing me what it meant to be a good teacher and how to be an even better person.

I was blessed with many friends outside of school, mad people whose friendships made my life in the Big Village whole and complete. One day I will write them songs of love and devotion—Andrei, the mysterious Vlasta, Stan, Leco, Cimr, Brano Lajda the navigator of the Rum Whirlwind, Jana, Hlada and all the people that passed through my life in a single day leaving their mark. A.P, some-

times I see you in the water at night. But my heart and love goes out to Studio Senica—the amazing Luba J., mad monks Fodor and Marek, Lucky Music Milan, Gegus, but most of all to Peter and Paul (Carlos and Carlos). None of this would be possible without their friendship and love. How have you, my friends?

Thanks to all the people here in the States, friends and family. I know you don't get the whole thing and probably even less of me, but thanks for loving me anyway. Thanks to everyone in Milltown and you know who you are. If you were in my basement for Jell-O wrestling, this means you. I will love you always. Special thanks to Jim, John, Bob and Tom. This book is also for Hannah, Bridget and Sean who hopefully will know one day that their uncle wasn't always a crabby old man. Thanks to Lori and Brian. And to Diane for standing by me through everything and for being there from the first Milltown stories. Thanks to Eileen, I owe you more than you will ever know and unfortunately more than I will ever be able to say. Thank you to my parents, Jim and Ev for making me the way I am—even if you don't want the credit. I love you very much. Thanks to Jill for patience, understanding and her invaluable friendship. Thanks to Shelley Brown, friend, colleague and the best proofreader that I have ever met—thanks for helping me hold on to the last bit of sanity that I have. And finally, Anton, he is a lovely bloke.

My time in Slovakia would not have been possible if it wasn't for the dream of two women in Montgomery, Alabama who set up Education for Democracy. Compared to EFD, the Peace Corps was for pussies. So this goes out to all the people who gave up a part of their lives to be in the middle of it all—Sarah, Silvia, Bruce, Tom Fischer, Steve, Vanessa, Carmen, Pat and Sterling. And those that I love as much as my own family and who probably understand me better—Jo Volek (Yes, Jo, I was there when they nailed him to the tree), Emily Trinkus, Carl Thelin and Mitch Lynch—drunk again. This is for Dave Powers who pushed me to the far side of crazy and for showing me that when things get bad enough all you need to do is pitch a tent in the backyard. And to Dave Emery, for all the adventures and who is one of the few people who has seen me at my absolute finest and the moments when I was bigger than myself. And for seeing me at my worst. Your friendship is a treasure.

With undying gratitude and devotion, this book is for all the kids I taught and who will never know that they taught me more about life than I could have ever taught them about English. I would love to write every one of their names here, but that is impossible. Please know that all of you are in my heart. I would like to thank the original fifth grade classes that I began with and ended up as 8.A., 8.B., 8.C. and 8.D. Forgive me if I still remember you as small children, but that is the

way you have been preserved in the hard amber stones of memory—Lukas Pokorny, Stano Pittel, Jozo Jamriska, Gabo Balaz, Mickey and Johnny the Killer. Thanks to Tana Marečkova, Gabriela Tulakova, all my Lenas (I've never met one that I didn't love), Miriam Šturova, Mirka Lajdova, Mirka Balažova, Misha and Mirka, Marcela Pavilkova and her family, Silva and family, Zlatica, Hana Cholvalova, Petra Mikalašova (we'll always have Paris) and of course Marcela Bambino. An extra special thanks to Katka Pecnova whose love and inspiration were a driving force for behind this book.

And as always, Lena.

Stuck in America-2004

0-595-33136-X