The Trip to Prague

First there was a sinking feeling, a sense of confusion. He thought that he had stumbled but he hadn't. Surprised, he went on walking toward his car, his vision very clear. In the early morning drizzle, the Paris suburb street, the houses and the trees lining it appeared as sharp as if a dusty pane placed between him and the world was pushed aside.

Blood started pounding at his temples, his heartbeat accelerated. As the same time that his vision acquired its dramatic clarity, each object precise and present, just now triumphantly borne into the world, he lost his hearing, and walked in a cottony, muffled atmosphere, like that of heavy snowfalls.

He saw the words, "I am dying" before he thought them. Then, though conscious of the meaning of the words, "I am dying", briefly pondered on the fact that we write words in our head as we say or think or dream or hear them, our brain operating the symbiosis of image and meaning with the written symbol. How interesting, he thought, I must always have known this. But are the words typewritten? Handwritten?

Something surged, welled, from the abdomen up, burst into his chest. He extended a hand toward a man coming from the other direction, who stopped to look when he saw the fiftyish rotund bespectacled man gasping for air.

Martin forced a smile. "I. . ." He wanted to tell him that he was dying, that someone should be with him, that his father too had died not long ago.

He fell.

Just outside Prague, on that trip years and years ago, the steering wheel started pulling to the right. Martin realized he had a flat and changed the tire, cursing, while Vida held a flashlight with an almost dead battery. The only small favor to be thankful for was that nothing stirred on the back seat. The child was asleep. Vida shivered in the damp June night, and the torch went out.

"If you can't hold that torch,"Martin said angrily, "For God's sake, go sit in the car, I'll manage." She didn't ask him how, just turned it on again and stood there, directing the flickering beam, accepting Martin's edginess, natural enough under the circumstances.

After that, they didn't talk much on their way to the city, except once when he said, "I wonder if I'll recognize him."

"You were only six," she said.

"But there are the pictures."

Even in the light mist which covered it, or maybe because of it, Prague was impressive. They followed the straight, wide avenue, hardly lit, which his father had described in his letter. After the bridge, they turned in the second street on the left, as directed, and proceeded to get lost.

Martin kept peering at the street signs. Once or twice, he got out to get a closer look. There wasn't another soul in sight.

"Do you know where we are?" she asked.

"No. Give me the letter again. See, this says, Kruply place, near Narodny, and this is Kruply, but I don't understand the other word. Is that place, or street? *Merde*, we're really stuck. We'll drive around till we find someone."

They crossed a rectangular paved square with a spired church on one side.

"This is beautiful," said Vida. "What is it?"

"Oh, give me a break," he said, then glanced up as they passed a sign. "It's Wenceslas square."

"*The* Wenceslas square? Isn't that where that boy set fire to himself, during the Prague Spring?"

"I guess so," he said absent-mindedly, intent on his quest for a fellow human being.

The wan light from the street lamps silhouetted a man walking his dog. Martin briefly

honked, then, as the man stopped and turned, pulled his window down and explained the situation. The Czech drew near. Martin and him engaged in an earnest exchange in the course of which a map was produced, the father's letter was discussed, and intense gesticulation engaged in.

"What's he saying?" Vida asked.

"Oh, give me a break," he said again. "It's hard enough trying to understand."

Then he opened the door and got out. "He's taking me to a phone," he said over his shoulder,"I'll call my uncle."

His father didn't have a phone though he'd applied for one years ago.

When Martin came back, he said, a tremor in his voice, "I spoke to my uncle. We're very near. He told me to stay right where we are. He's coming out to fetch us".

Minutes passed, like thick drops of oil dangling from a lengthening thread before plopping down. Vida checked the backseat where the child was sprawled in abandon under the travel blanket, and listened to the ticking of her watch, magnified in the silence. It was well past two in the morning. Martin left the door on his side open and stood outside, leaning against the car, and smoked a cigarette.

"Do you want me to turn on the radio? "she asked.

"No.... Wait!" he said, cocking his ear.

For what, she was going to ask when, in the distance, there was the sound of someone whistling.

Martin tensed, listening, then made a funny sound, half-sigh, half-moan, and said, "Oh my God!"

The whistling came nearer. A tune with a lilt, both joyous and wistful.

"Who's that?" she asked.

"Shhh," he hissed angrily, then started whistling in response, hesitating at first, then louder. The other whistler stopped, called out in a clear voice,"Martin?"

"Papa", he shouted, and started running.

They ran and abolished the distance along with thirty years of separation. Vida watched as father and son embraced, again and again clasping and unclasping their arms around each other's backs, she listened as they sobbed and exclaimed.

They walked back to the car, holding each other, and Martin introduced her.

The father and son's faces were transparent, as though giving off light, so palpable was their emotion and joy.

Colonel Dusan Hajek had been the Czech military attache in Iran in the years before World War II. His son Martin, born in Prague, had taken to Tehran like a fish to water. By age six, he spoke fluent Farsi and spent more time with the patient servants than with his diplomat parents who whirled from one party to another. At one of these, Madame Hajek met the new French military attache and soon after announced to her husband that she was leaving him.

This happened just after Hajek was notified that his mission in Tehran had come to an end. He went back to Prague while his wife, divorce and remarriage pending, left for Paris to make arrangements for her new life. Martin was temporarily left in the custody of Iranian friends.

These people, childless themselves, liked having the boy. He stayed on, matters being simpler that way. Before anyone knew it, the years had passed and he finished high school.

Colonel Hajek, caught in the winds of destruction blowing on the world, was captured early in the war. Then, in the rumblings which accompanied Europe's settling down in its new power structure, he lost touch with his son.

Very complicated and very simple factors run side by side, making the tracks our lives move on. Wars come, disturbances, selfish considerations. People once close build new lives apart from each other, dismissing with a shrug memories held dear. Then the dust settles and all is forgotten, unless, unless. . .

Martin attended the University in the south of France where his mother and stepfather lived at the time, acquiring the French nationality along with a *méridional* accent and a degree in Slavic languages which he was genetically programmed for.

There were two constants in his life, alcohol and a hatred of communism. Vida, the psychologist he married, thought, logically enough, that both were a direct result of father deprivation but he pooh-poohed the suggestion that to him smacked of the leftist mindsets he so despised.

"Intellectuals!" he snorted, "Interpretations! *Je m'assieds dessus*. I sit on that!"

It was his usual phrase for dismissing the vast number of subjects that irked him. He accompanied it with a sharp gesture of the right hand as he symbolically chopped off the head of his hapless interlocutors.

His obsession with communism took him to great lengths, like subscribing to the less palatable theories of revisionist historians or castigating his friends for their imperviousness to Jew-fomented conspiracies.

As with all true believers, nothing could be further from his mind than objective or historical truth. He didn't see it a challenging alternative to his creed, but merely, and grudgingly, acknowledged its existence--as one does the presence of an enemy the better to fight it--and he roundly declared that he sat on it.

Anything faintly redolent of liberalism, radicalism, pop culture, leftist sympathies, was considered suspicious--or at the very least shaggy. Intellectuals and artists, on the whole, were instantly dismissed with his "*Je m'assieds dessus*," leaving him to relate to only orthodox, sedate, impeccably extreme-right endorsed endeavours. Thus, he went full circle, completely and sincerely unaware of the contradiction, and, reaching the point where extreme right meets extreme left, embraced the totalitarism he fought.

As fate had it, he taught Russian at the Institute of Oriental Languages in Paris.

"I am ashamed," he would tell his friends after several drinks. "That I should teach the language of these Bolsheviks! How degrading! How humiliating!"

"Also the tongue of Chekov and Turgueniev," someone mildly remarked.

"That doesn't have anything to do with it," he would say stubbornly, downing yet another drink.

One day, a student told him, "I know a Hajek in Prague. I can bring you his address."

Martin wrote. That Hajek turned out to be his uncle, whom he had never seen. Then came the letter from his father, after thirty years of separation. Martin and Vida traveled to Prague.

Their month in Prague didn't always go well. Martin's father and the homely woman he had married, Yelena, did their best, but space was cramped and food scarce. Vida, Martin and their child camped out in the living room, on bunk beds usually occupied by Martin's half-siblings, two silent girls in their late twenties, and a thin graceful boy of twelve whom the colonel chucklingly called "an error", all of whom retreated at night in their parents' room, leaving the other room to the visitors.

The diet consisted mainly of potato soup in which Yelena added a piece of cabbage, and lard, rancid more often than not.

In the evenings, when there were power failures, they sat together round a petrol lamp. Martin and his father drank vodka in small glasses and smoked the Gauloises cigarettes Martin had brought from France. They talked about their lives, the past, and the system, while the others listened.

The first night, dawn was breaking when they finally went to bed.

"Tell me about that tune you whistled", Vida said.

From the upper bunk, Martin's voice floated down, hoarse with cigarettes, cheap vodka, and the weariness of driving all the way from Paris.

"When I went to bed, as a child, he often sat with me before going out and told me a story, one bit each night. When it was finished, he started over. Always the same story. Probably the only one he knew. Then he whistled that tune till I fell asleep. Tonight I asked him why he always whistled and never sang. I'd often wondered about that. He told me that he didn't know how to sing. I also asked him the name of that tune, but he doesn't remember. For me, it was associated with that story. I've never heard it since, I didn't even remember it until I heard it tonight. Then it all came back to me. I'd never whistled it before though. I didn't know how to whistle when he left."

"What was the story called?"

"*The Three Lemons*."

Martin's mother, widowed from her second husband, lived in Paris, a plump, self-centered woman who had retained her Czech accent after forty years in France. She didn't get along well with Vida and relations were often strained. With Martin's father, though, in Prague, Vida got along famously. The old gentleman spoke several languages and still had the elegance of a diplomat, the breeding of someone from a good family in a more civilized age.

For seven years after that first trip, every summer, Martin, Vida and their daughter went to dismal, communist Prague. Vida resented having to spend her vacations there, year after year, but she couldn't begrudge Martin his visits with his father. Also, professionally as well as intellectually, she found this firsthand experience of life in Eastern Europe riveting. Everything appeared grim and gray, with no glimmer of hope ever lighting the way, neither for individuals, nor for countries; the future stretched as bleak as the present. The only relief came from endless talking, the endless interpretations of each move and each decision of the authorities, and the endless criticism, and the constant fear. Vida was grateful that she lived in France.

They were in Paris when, early one morning, the phone rang. It was Yelena, calling from Prague to tell them that Colonel Hajek had died in his sleep. This time, they caught a plane out.

At the Colonel's funeral, his fellow officers gave the military salute as the coffin, draped in a Czech flag, passed underneath the unsheathed swords. Martin wept uncontrollably throughout the ceremony and the burial.

After that, he drank more than ever. One morning, he woke up with his left arm paralyzed. He wouldn't see a doctor and shouted Vida down when she remonstrated with him.

"It's nothing, I tell you, I slept heavily, with my head on my arm, it's gone numb. That's all. I'll be all right, don't bug me!"

After a month, she insisted. "Maybe the shock of losing your father. . ." she ventured. He was furious. "You and your goddamn psychology! All that crap! I sit on it, that's what I do, I sit on it! Commies, the bunch of you!"

The worse insult he could think of.

The arm came back, gradually, though some stiffness remained even after a year.

Fontenay, where he lived, was a pleasant residential suburb to the south of Paris, near the Sceaux of famed *château* and gardens. One cold January morning, Martin stepped out, dressed in the grey flannel slacks and dark blue blazer he favored, as usual wearing no overcoat, and started walking toward his car.

He thought he missed a step but wasn't sure. Blood rushed to his head and his heart started pumping as fast as it could, to direct the precipitated flow. He was startled at his precise, acute vision of things around him.

It reminded him of the first time he wore prescription glasses, as a teenager. Riding on a bus with his new glasses on, he was astonished at the way the world looked, and realized that it had been like that all along, without him being aware of it. Leaves on trees, especially, impressed him, each drawn with precise lines as a plate in a book of botany.

Then he heard the black tearing behind his eyes. It echoed in his head and he stopped, surprised, to listen. The ground swiftly rushed up to meet him.

[THE END]