# PRAGUE SUMMER

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# ABSTRACT

The thesis is a short novel, *Prague Summer*, with a critical afterward.

The novel is an account of Alexandra Adams' journey to Prague the summer after the "Velvet Revolution." Juxtaposed with the narrator's first-person recollections of that time are her meditations about the body, where she explores the degree to which she can rely on her body to speak the truth. Ultimately, the text is both an account of the narrator's idiosyncratic artistic journey and a record of the processes involved in self-transformation.

The required critical afterward is in two parts. The first provides a summary of Richard Rorty's account of language and selfhood. The second considers Proust, Kundera, and Johnson as liberal ironist writers and examines the relationship between the contingency of language and the contingency of self in their texts.

## ABSTRAIT

La thèse est un petit roman, ***Prague Summer***, suivi par un essai critique.

Le roman est l'histoire du voyage à Prague d'Alexandra Adams, l'été après la révolution de novembre 1989. Avec ses souvenirs de ce temps-là, la narratrice présente ses méditations au subject du corps, dans lesquelles elle considère à quel degré elle peut compter sur le corps comme une source de vérité. Essentiellement, le texte est une histoire du voyage particulier et artistique de la narratrice, et un récit des processus impliqués dans l'acte de se transformer.

L'essai critique qui est requis se fait en deux parties. La première présente une sommaire de la théorie de la langue et du soi de Richard Rorty. La deuxème considère Proust, Kundera, et Johnson comme des écrivains libérals ironiques, et elle examine la relation entre ce que Rorty appelle ***the contingency of language*** et ***the contingency of self*** dans leurs textes.

# PART 1

## Mother

# 1

My mother used to tell me that I didn't have enough respect for the truth. She said that I inherited this quality from my father.

"You have to be more careful, Alexandra," she said. "If you don't respect the truth, you can't even be a good liar. You'll end up a bullshitter, like your father. Is that what you want ?"

I had a no idea what she was talking about.

My father left when I was two years old to marry Debbie Diamond, a real estate executive who wore translucent blouses. After that, my mother had some suitors, but she made them sleep on the fold-out couch in the room where Flo-Bear, our golden retriever usually spent the night. I felt sorry for these men, and made an effort to act as normal as possible with them, disguising my knowledge of their perversions with lighthearted chat about normal things like school, the weather, and my speedskating career. Sports was always a useful topic.

My mother always asked me what I thought of these men and I always gave her my honest evaluation. "You deserve better," I'd say and she would agree. As I got older, after my mother's spastic bowel was diagnosed, we developed a more elaborate debriefing ritual involving decaffeinated coffee and my mother's ultra-slim, ultra-light cigarettes. "You have no *idea* how stressful that was," she'd start. My role was to nod and shut up, like the wise old China-men in "Lapus Lazuli." This way, I would learn about the sexual aspect of the week-end. If sex was involved, she usually required a shoulder rub to get it out. Once she admitted that the missionary position made her claustrophobia but that other positions gave her a sore hip or activated her spastic bowel. "I'm too old for this," she said. "My body can't take it."

"It's important," I would say, trying to get the tone right, "to be true to yourself." This is what she often said to me.

"I know, sweetheart, I always am, and that's why I'm alone."

Later she told me, without even an edge of bitterness, that she had made me her first priority. She hadn't wanted to expose me to lust, hadn't wanted me to be disappointed again if it didn't work out. Neither of us acknowledged the fact that I'd already been witness to lust, that through the crack in the door of the spare-room, I'd seen my mother naked on the fold-out with her head flung back while a man busied himself at her lap. I was alarmed by the noises she was making but it was perfectly clear, even at the time, that she was enjoying herself. In fact, she was enjoying herself so thoroughly that she didn't hear me. He did though and there was a trace of shame in his eyes as he regarded me through the shadows. I was repulsed when I understood that he had been rubbing his face between my mother's thighs. Later, I felt giddy as I imagined their bodies together, and I listened for noises through a drinking glass placed on my bedroom wall. Other times I imagined pulling him off of her and shouting at him to leave us alone. My mother never mentioned the incident.

Where she had failed to shield me from lust, she managed not to raise my hopes. I never saw these men as possible fathers. I already had a father and though he had many faults, I admired him from afar. He was very rich and very shrewd. As soon as I could read, I learned the meaning of kickback schemes and influence-peddling which, according to the papers, was how my father earned his living. But this didn't alter the fact that he was my father and I loved him. He tried to be faithful to me, called me on birthdays and at Christmas, sent me money which I used to buy stereos, video games, Odlo track suits with zippered pants and body-suits for my speedskating. Once I used the money to buy a pair of custom designed fiberglass speedskates from a specialty sports store in Trondheim, Norway. Though my father didn't understand the sport, he admired the photograph I sent him of the skates. He told me they looked like serious weapons.

I saw my father and Debbie Diamond maybe once every two years, at his cottage in Perry Sound. He had six girls from previous marriages. Though he said he was happy with his harem, I suspected him of lying, for he is a very masculine man with a penchant for grouse hunting, football, and helicopters. My half-sisters were all older, most of them married and in various stages of pregnancy. The chaos at the cottage made me feel a bit like a spectator at a political rally. My half-sisters liked to set up the

monopoly board in the kitchen where they could discuss their pregnancies, drink Diet Coke, and eat cheezies. They always let me be the banker and never seemed to notice when I cheated.

Sometimes my father and I would play *Scrabble*, and like my half-sisters, he didn't care enough about winning to worry about whether I was feeling the letters or turning tiles upside-down and playing them as blanks. I wished my mother could be as relaxed about things. Even though he had a plastic hip joint, from a car accident before he married my mother, I never heard him complain about it. At the cottage, stress-attacks, spastic bowels, rashes, constipation, sugar allergies, wry neck, fatigue disorder, did not exist. He made me feel calm : the way he just sat there in his purplish *Craven A* mist, watching football and eating chocolate covered almonds between drags.

At school, when I was younger, the word "father" made me feel lousy, the way I'd feel when I heard the word "boyfriend" or "party" ; incredibly presumptuous and alone, as though I had no right to what those words signified. Eventually, I learned that there was power in nonchalance, and I acquired the habit of referring to my father by his first name. It made me feel independent. I also shrugged off the questions. People always asked me about my father in a tone which made me wary and defensive. My father's notoriety — which had caused my friend's mothers to frown disapprovingly — turned to my advantage in high school when my friends started to read the newspapers.

Though my father and I never really talked, he would always ask me on those visits at the cottage how many pillows my mother had on her bed. This was his way of raising the topic of my mother without asking me anything direct, such as "how is she?" When he asked this, Debbie Diamond would snort and reach for her menthols, or lean a little closer and pretend to be tweezing aphids off the rubber plant with her incarnadine nails. I would lower my voice — my mother told me a low voice was a sign of good breeding — and use these moments to tell him about her many suitors and her successes at work. Blurred by smoke, my father's face was hard to read.

Debbie, on the other hand, would squirm and cough her way through these chats. She had enormous breasts and invoking my mother helped dispel some of the anxiety I felt in their presence. If this didn't work, I would try to concentrate on her stretch-shorts, or the corn-pads she wore on her toes. Looking at her through my

mother's eyes, I would sometimes feel superior. I was convinced, on some level, that Debbie's breasts were the glue that bound her and my father together. But there was also something compelling about Debbie Diamond that I could never quite put my finger on. She was normal and somehow manageable. Like my friends' mothers, she worked at an average kind of job and had grey, permed hair, and I could imagine her drinking coffee from a thermos with the other mothers at the speedskating rink. Also, I liked the way she was with my half-sisters. "You women act as if you invented child birth,"she would croak in her smoke-damaged voice. "Lay off for an hour, eh?" I would return from my visits to my father's cottage wishing, in a confused way, that my mother was a little less glamorous. My mother thought my visits to my father's cottage were corrupting me. "That woman has the soul of a stewardess," she would say. "Is that what you want?"

My mother's bed resembled an eighteenth-century wedding cake and I think this was a source of amusement to my father. It was broad and hard and decorated with an ivory-colored eyelet-lace quilt, pink and white pill shaped pillows, ruffles and ribbons and Victorian rag dolls. Even after I moved away, I maintained my habit of sleeping with her in her bed when I visited. Usually I would just sweep all the junk on to the floor with one forearm and climb in, while my mother preferred to unload the items one by one and lay them on the trunk at the foot of the bed. After turning down the covers, she would change into her flannel nightgown and housecoat and begin her evening stroll through the old house, checking light-switches and door-latches, and making sure all the appliances were turned off. I never knew where she found the patience for the ritual but I loved being near the beauty it generated. The white flannel nightgowns, the crocheted dolls, the frilled shams and eyelet lace, the soap and cream and midnight security checks, were all a great source of comfort to me. In her bed, I slept away all my fatigue, had full, placid dreams and woke refreshed.

My mother is still very beautiful : tall and pale with hair like mattress stuffing, so thick and dark and soft that hairdressers cried when they cut it. I felt inferior just watching her brush it. I inherited my father's hair, which while not thin, tended to be limp and dry. Also, my hairline was uncertain. It zig-zagged high on my head and led boyfriends to call me such things as "egg-head" or "Queen Elizabeth the First." Admittedly, I was interested to learn that high foreheads were considered sexy in the 1500's.

Sometimes I think my mother's appeal lay in her unavailability. She was always very independent. "I'd rather be alone than lonely," she said, implying of course that she was very lonely when she was married to my father. She had a gift for making and maintaining friends but retreated into a panic attack when things got too emotional. It's not that she couldn't get close; it's just that in public life you have to be very stingy with yourself or you'll get consumed.

She parcelled herself out to a lot of different people. Our next-door neighbor, Mrs. Zuber, a Czech woman, relied on my mother for help with her government documents : income tax and old-age security and benefits forms. She also invited her to dinner on Sundays along with other lonely or orphaned souls, like Aunty Snow or Mr. Kristjansson. Mrs. Macintosh, whose husband had Alzheimers, spent a great deal of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in our kitchen, charting Mr. Macintosh's deterioration. My mother also counselled the Premier's daughter on the phone and supplied the neighbors' twin girls with expensive clothes from an exclusive children's boutique — velvet dresses, ballet shoes, and pretty little hair-bands decorated with silver ivy. She was known as the Fairy Godmother of Queenston Street, which was ironic because in The House of Commons, where she worked as the only woman Senator and where she had to walk half a mile just to use the washroom, she was referred to as Attila the Hun.

My mother's appointment was controversial given my father's reputation in Ottawa, but she's smart and understands politics, and she has proven herself to be a more inspired politician than my father. She is also tough and straight-talking, two qualities which are often mistaken for bitchiness. Actually, I think that the other Senators are afraid of her, especially the ones whose advances she's spurned. Many of them lust after her, are impressed and titillated by the snappy one-liners she uses, the bright party dresses she wears and the country-singer half-smile she flashes when she sniffs hypocrisy, deceit, or stupidity. Last Christmas, she received an anonymous gift from one of the Senators : a set of crotchless panties and matching curtained brassiere in scratchy fire-engine red lace. It came with a poem :

I want you, I want you
In underwear red
I want to, I want to
Sleep in your bed.

"The more time I spend with those old men," she said holding the outfit up for me to see, "the more I like dogs." Of course she would not lower herself to try it on. She put them in the Gift Drawer along with other unsuitable gifts that she collects and, later, recycles.

When I visited my mother and slept in her bed, she read to me, sometimes from hardcover biographies of Abigail Adams, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Golda Mier, sometimes just excerpts from the magazines she bought in bulk the way some people buy potatoes or onions. I'd lie on my stomach with my face buried in a mound of scented pillows and listen to her criticize Hollywood movie starts for their soullessness.

It was usually during these sessions that she digressed into stories about life with Michael. The political biographies, especially, inspired her to recount, in the ponderous voice some people use to recite poetry, the days she and my father spent together on the campaign trail when my father was running for premier. I learned everything about their political relationship this way — the way they met, the organization they ran to help settle political refugees in Canada, the Greek cruises they took after they were married, the scrutiny she was under by the press because she was so much younger than my father, the resistance the province initially had to the concept of Medicare. But it all seemed like a boring lesson in Canadian politics to me. I wanted to hear something else. I wasn't sure at the time what it was and so I couldn't ask and because I couldn't ask, I never found out why my mother — a student radical who protested education cuts when my grandfather was the Minister of Education, who was visited by the RCMP because she had a subscription to the *Peking Review*, who slept, throughout university, with a copy of Mao's *Little Red Book* under her pillow, who hated sororities, who cut off all her hair and wore bell bottoms and cork-soled zipper boots, who cared about political refugees -- I never found out how it was that she fell in love with my father, whom I knew without anyone having to tell me, was a man of questionable integrity.

My mother always said that she meant to burn the political photos, but I think she was more attached to them than she ever admitted. The attic was so full of them that the door had to be tied shut. When I was sick and home from school, I would pull out the official albums and examine pictures. I knew them by heart : men in suits, seated at banquet tables, climbing stairs to hospitals, schools, hotels, waving from cars, or

parade floats, entering and exiting receptions. And always, I would feel strangely impassive looking at the photos of my parents together, as though I were looking at a couple whose union had been some huge and hilarious mistake out of which I was born. She was so beautiful.

"I didn't grow into my looks until university," my mother would tell me,"and that's exactly what will happen to you." For my own peace of mind, I believed her, and spent my childhood waiting for the moment when I would start to look elegant. My high forehead and skinny arms gave me a tragic air. I longed for a pointy chin, like a character from a book I'd read — a pointy chin and large grey eyes. I scotch-taped my cheeks at night to create dimples, drew freckles on my face with an eye-liner, and stuck elastic bands around my teeth the way all the kids who got to wear braces did. In a bid for glasses, I squinted in class and mis-read the eye-chart. I wanted to be a normal girl, with a low hairline, rounded arms, and small feet—a short, pert girl with an infectious smile—the kind of girl that every girl wants to be, a composite of all the average girls in the world. But I also wanted to be beautiful and interesting.

My mother still maintains that things came together for me when I quit skating. "Alex grew into her forehead, and BANG, the boys were phoning and the race toward the altar was underway." She says it ironically of course, with a hint of her country-singer half smile, for my mother always maintained that it takes five minutes to get married, and you have to have contingency plans. I guess I did get better looking, after I filled out a bit, and started wearing bangs. But the only boys who called me seemed to be the boys with red hair. It was uncanny. I would look across a class at a red-haired boy and that was all it seemed to take. But I never liked them. They always seemed to have colds, or pinkish colored eye-lids and when I imagined them naked I would think of words like "embryonic" or "pustulated." I couldn't help it.

I think I always wanted to be a teacher but my mother said that teaching ghettoized women. "It's like nursing and secretarial work. Why be a teacher when you can be prof? Why be a nurse when you can be a doctor? That's the problem with women. Always marginalizing themselves." When I was seventeen, I went away for university, to Ottawa which, as it turned out, was to become my mother's second home. I started out in the hard sciences — chemistry, physics, calculus—and after a year, switched to biology, explaining to my mother that a good doctor should know her cell structure, and her political science, and her English literature. It was the prospect of cutting off my options that terrified me. "A good liberal arts degree isn't the best foundation for medicine" she said. "But it won't hurt you in law." In my third year I declared a major in English, a detail I hid from my mother until I'd graduated. I capped that off with teacher's college, and then that same year, took a student teaching post in Hagarsville because I have always found the idea of living in a small town romantic. At the end of May, one of their English teachers quit suddenly and I was offered a full time teaching post. I hadn't graduated yet, but I took it.

One Christmas, after I started teaching, my mother read me an article about Gloria Steinem. It seemed to move her deeply. Steinem had just come out with a new book, her first book, the book she had been preparing herself for fifty years to write. The interviewer remarked on the change in Steinem's appearance. "Where are the race-horse legs? The trademark streaked hair? The Gloria Steinem who sits before me is wearing a sweater with spots." My mother read this with a sniff. "Coming into herself, doesn't mean she has to let herself go," she said, trying to find her place again on the page. She continued to read, on and on, about feuds, affairs, abortions, cancer scares, therapy, awakenings, and I listened, but not really to the words; I was listening to the tone of recognition in my mother's voice. She was reading herself in the life of Gloria Steinem.

"I know the feeling," she kept saying, pausing to look back at the photo of Steinem in her spotty sweater and the blurry black and white of the ten-year old

Steinem beside the trailer home where she fed her deranged mother bologna sandwiches.When she finished the article I heard her sniff again, a little wetly, and I propped myself up on my elbows to see if she was crying. "A lot of indulgent drivel," she said, unconvincingly. "You teach what you want to learn? You write what you need to know? What is that supposed to mean?"

I recall putting my face into the pillows and wondering if *I* was teaching what I wanted to learn. It was a bad time to be questioning my choice of careers because my first year had battered my nerves raw and extinguished the idealism that led me into the class-room in the first place. On my good days, I saw myself as a born teacher. I felt I had the ability to make students talk, ignore their uncertainty, disregard their embarrassment, submit so utterly to the stories they told themselves that I thought I was listening them into belief. That was, after all, what my best teachers had done for me. I marked their exams a little higher than I should have, glowed over their thesis statements, insisted they submit their stories to contests and magazines. I compared their work to writers they had never even heard of. I exclaimed my way through the day, believing that delight and wonder was more instructive than correction, more valuable than persuasion. And I loved the sound of my voice ringing out in a quiet room. I loved the certainty I heard in my pronouncements: the fact that I was older, smarter, more experienced than any of them gave my words an authority my ears had never heard before. But on my bad days, I was a mess, and lying there on the bed with my mother, I wondered if I was deluding myself. Did I teach what I wanted to learn? Was it my mission to inspire? The image of a class-room of diffident faces told me no.

My mother was sullen about my teaching career. She had groomed me for bigger things: medicine, politics and, failing that, law. Something professional anyway, so that I could have maximum mobility and a bit of clout. It was quite a let-down for her to have me teaching high school in Hagarsville, Ontario. She saw herself and to a lesser extent, me, as racehorses. She had invested a lot in my running. "Oh well," she shrugged, "women come into their own, late." She was waiting for me to get bored and move onto something more suitable, something that would make me happy.

That Christmas I made long distance calls to law faculties across the country, asking them to send me calendars. My mother encouraged this desire of mine to re-make myself. "Just reach up and pluck the star you want," she said with a hug. She assured me that it was all within my grasp. Back in the old house that Christmas, my

life in Hagarsville seemed small, my career, a temporary state of affairs. The parties she took me to that Christmas underscored these feelings, parties full of her political friends who, when I was young and winning speedskating races, would pinch my cheek and tell me that there were great things in store for me. When they learned that I was a teacher, their interest fell away. It seemed critical to convey that though I was a teacher, I was something else inside. I stood up straight and assured them, with an earnestness that was probably more transparent than I like to think, that I had greater aspirations in life than public school teaching. I had a grand scheme in mind though it wasn't anything specific; more an image of some sleek future self dressed in an expensive Italian suit, emerging from a taxi or entering a boardroom for an important meeting.

# 5

Ben called me up from Paris one warm May morning at the end of my second year of teaching. I remember lying on my back under my brand new Portuguese sheets. I recall the grapey scent of lilacs, the rustling of wind in the leaves, the orange heat on my closed eye-lids. That morning I took pleasure in the moment between sleep and adrenalin, between dreams and coffee when everything is blank and fresh and the possibilities are infinite. I spent a few minutes like this, glad in the way that makes your throat well and that you might think has to do with being happy to be alive.

My heart sank when I opened my eyes and saw the pile of grade twelve final reports on my desk. I had promised to hand them back that morning and I still had a stack to mark. I got up and opened the duotang at the top of the pile. The American Dream in The Great Gatsby, by Dan Harding. I flipped through the assignment. He had hand-written it in green ink and I couldn't even read the first line. I recalled meeting him in the American Literature aisle of the library a week after the assignment was due. He was standing with his thumbs hooked in his jean pockets, swaying a little on his cowboy boots. "Five percent off per day," I said callously, then, feeling bad, I helped him choose a book."What interests you?" I asked.

He looked at me blankly. "I dunno."

"Well, what do you like to read about?"

"I read "Moto-Cross." I have a three-wheeler."

"What else?"

"Lamborghinis I guess. I dunno."

The only Hemingway left on the shelf was a ratty hardback edition of *The Old Man and The Sea.* "Try this," I said pulling out one of the ten copies of *The Great*

*Gatsby*. We walked together to the sign- out desk. There was fear in his eyes. He didn't know how to fill out the lending card. Later, I looked at my class-list and saw that I had given him a string of zeros and Absents. He was going to fail the course. This is what I was remembering when the phone rang and Ben's voice cut through the long-distance crackle.

"Paris needs an Alexandra."

He always began his phone conversations like this —with lines that sounded as though he'd spent a long time thinking them up. They cut right through the time and reasons that separated us and we picked up where we left off — at the airport a year before when he flew off to Paris to teach English at a Lycée. "How's your right ball?" I asked. Ben always complained that it ached. The doctor had diagnosed *lover's nuts*.

"It could use an Alexandra, too."

This out of the way, he cleared his throat, inhaled on a cigarette, and asked me to join him in Prague to teach English for the summer. Then the line got bad.

"I know some people who want to hire English teachers. All the details are in my letter. It should have arrived last week. It's not there yet? I can't believe it. I mailed it over a month ago."

"I'll come," I said impulsively, feeling an exhilarating rush of blood to my scalp. I had no major plans for the summer. My father wouldn't care if I skipped the cottage. I had saved a little money. I could sub-let the apartment, easily. Maybe I would stay there and never come home. I could learn Czech and become a kind of Canadian Ambassador or something, like Shirley Temple Black. My mother would kill me. Knowing me too well to believe me, Ben told me to think about it.

I regarded my face in the mirror that morning with fresh eyes : the eyes of an adventurer, the eyes of an impulsive decision maker. In my face I saw Slavic possibilities. Someone had once told me I looked Estonian. The Baltic Republics were quite a way from Czechoslovakia but I could see what she meant. It was the grim Russian light in my eyes. My nose was red around the nostrils, like the Siberians in the photographs in *A Day in The Life of Russia*. I took an antihistamine, and tugging at

the zipper of my conservative black skirt, decided that I would cut it into squares and leave it, along with other bits of my life, for the subletter to use as a duster.

Ben and I met in teachers college. I was very impressed by his hands. He used them to emphasize his points, like a French Art teacher, expressively and without self-consciousness. They fluttered at the end of his arms like white flags. I used to sit in class and day dream about how beautiful our children would be; how loose, and dark, and intelligent. I was thrilled when he looked at me. When he said, after our first kiss: "I've wanted to do that since I first saw you."

Ben was the first smoker I ever dated. He was also the first man who wasn't a jock, a law student, or a card-carrying member of the Progressive Conservative Youth Federation. He had travelled to South America and South East Asia. When he was twenty-three he fell in love with a married woman in Alice Springs, Australia. He told me the story early on and with a tragic look on his face. He also smoked hash, using a procedure he called hot knifing : two kitchen knives stood at eternal attention in the spaces between the coils of one burner on the stove.

Ben was unlike any man I'd ever met. He liked Japanese films and food which required stinky ingredients such as fish sauce or shrimp paste. He felt free to hug his friends; he wore Turkish pants, and shirts that crinkled like gift wrapping; he used words such as "wonderful," and "menstruation," without a trace of embarrassment; and he even bought my tampons for me, if the situation arose. Ben didn't sit around thinking about what he should do with his life; worrying about his GPA, MCAT, LSAT and GRE'S. His mind was too busy processing the world around him. It was filled to overflowing with newspaper headlines, poetry, rock concerts, castles, cartoon characters, and Star-Trek episodes. I liked the things in Ben's mind, but when my own mind met his, I lost my footing and slipped into a macho wordlessness to find my bearings. At Sadie's, the graduate bar, I would root myself in a corner chair, swig my beer, and watch him hop around by himself on the dance floor. There was something unfathomable about Ben. I thought it was wondrous that such an exotic creature was interested in me.

I was still thinking about Ben when I pulled into the parking lot at Laura Secord Secondary. My home-room was one of twelve make-shift classrooms built in an arc around the parking lot to accommodate the growth in the student population, and I liked the privacy, the one-room school-house feel to it, even the view of the parking lot, with its promise of escape at three o'clock. My portable door was open and I could hear Dalton's sing-songy voice. He backed into me as I entered the class-room and, startled, jumped forward. "I'm finished," he slushed, swinging around. " A good thing, too. It's seventy-shix degreesh already." He gathered up his tools, stomped on a pucker in the carpet, and backed out through the doorway smiling. I locked the door and sat down to mark.

I like to think that I made the decision to go instantaneously, that I knew, on the spot, that it was what I should do. I tried hard to live up to the person my mother saw — reckless, like my father, and given to big, spontaneous decisions. But the truth is, I never made a decision that didn't also register as a loss. The decisive moment had passed and been replaced by a damp-eyed nostalgia for my life at Laura Secord Secondary : the chalky seasons with their dates and deadlines, their hassles and recoverable mistakes that seemed endless but rushed me along in their inexorable rhythms and spat me out at the end of the semester feeling tired but useful. I looked weakly around the classroom, calculating my losses. My eyes moved across the black-board, past the clock with the backwards travelling hands to the poster wall and the magazine picture of Havel and Alexander Dubcek. I sat back in my chair and regarded this last image, remembering, quite suddenly, the phone call from my mother that past November which had led me to tack it up alongside images of heavy metal bands, movie stars, and *Travel Canada* posters.

## 7

November was a grey, stubbly month in Hagarsville, dark by 6 o'clock, and I was falling into a trance over a pile of marking when she called. I was shocked when I realized that she had been drinking. She wasn't drunk, but she was definitely a little high. She ordered me to turn on the television set. I asked her what she was talking about.

"In Czechoslovakia," she said impatiently, having difficulty with the slovak part. It came out "shlow-vukya." "There's been a revolution."

I flipped the channel to the news station. The announcer was stumbling a little; the way they do when they have to report events as they happen. My mother said that the man had a speech impediment.

"*Today in Prague, a memorial service for Jan Opletal —*"

"He was murdered by the Nazis," said my mother. " Fifty years ago. A student."

"*became the site of a mass demonstration —* "

The screen filled with an aerial view of a mob of people who looked like students. They were just standing around, looking restless and blowing on their hands to keep warm. Then the camera zoomed in on a young woman waving a sign: "*Svoboda.*"

"That means freedom," my mother interpreted.

The newscaster continued : "*Angry students waved flowers and signs —*"

This time the camera moved in on a smiling woman, very young and beautiful, waving an English sign at the camera: *"Freedom for Lidovice Noviny "—*

"A newspaper," said my mother.

The screen filled with the image of an older man. He wore a grey parka with a hood. The camera moved up to the banner he held above his head : "*End 1-Party Rule.*" He was shouting. People jostled around him, chanting.

"*The crowd formed a procession and began to move down the city's main street in the direction of Opletal's grave, when it suddenly stopped and turned towards Wenceslas Square. Police formed a barricade and students retaliated with insults. After almost an hour, the police moved in on the students, wielding truncheons and batons.*"

On the screen, a riot policeman struck a young man on the back with a club. An elderly woman cried and waved her arms. A young girl looked grimly into the camera and then disappeared in a sea of bodies. It reminded me of the footage I'd seen from the riots outside the Kremlin after Stalin's death.

"*Over five hundred people have been injured. We will continue our report on the startling developments in Czechoslovakia after this.*"

A commercial for Meuseli started and I turned down the volume. She told me about the day in 1968, when the Soviet army had occupied the streets of Prague, and how she had sat up all night with her friends in the university student lounge and been too devastated to cry. But she cried on the phone that night and it unnerved me, because it wasn't really her style. "Havel's a Saint," she said reverently. I had no idea who Havel was and this seemed to anger her. I felt ashamed as she explained that he was a poet-playwright-dissident who had dedicated his life to speaking the truth, who had been jailed and persecuted and threatened but who hadn't been silenced. In silence I contemplated the image of the man now on the screen, a pouchy, walrus-featured man with sad eyes.

In the days that followed, the newspapers were full of articles about Vaclav Havel's *Velvet Revolution.* I liked the name : it made it sound very gentle, almost sexy, and reminded me of Ben's obsession with the rock-group by the same name. A week after my mother's telephone call, the communist leader, Milos Jakes, and his politburo resigned. Vaclav Havel was shown on TV that night, on a balcony, hugging a sweet-faced man and drinking champagne. The image appeared a week later in a magazine. I

cut it out and tacked it to the poster wall in my home-room portable. No-one asked me who it was, but when we studied *Animal Farm*, I brought his name up. "What does this have to do with the book, Miss. Or us?" They thought that English teachers stayed awake at night inventing connections between unrelated events.

## 8

The home-room bell sounded and the students breezed into class wearing Sony-Walkmans and florescent-colored beach clothes. The heat in the portable was ferocious, but I had a lesson plan to get through, an exam review, and it suddenly seemed absolutely critical to complete it. I took away their Walkmans and, in my most severe Ms. Adams voice, warned them that I was fully prepared to issue detentions for bad behavior. "I mean it," I said menacingly. A globule of sweat rolled down my nose and landed with a plunk on the three-hole puncher.

It's hard to describe the feelings that would come over me when I recognized that everyone in the class-room was against me. There was a sense of rushing headlong into traffic, a dizzying hopelessness, and a temptation to point my index-finger and spit accusations. But the collective body of the class-room is too amorphous to address singly. All those eyes wishing you would vaporize or die. The way they slide away under you towards a spot on the floor, a shoe-lace, a pucker in the carpet. Do you sacrifice one for the slaughter? Too risky. They were all implicated. From one corner, a snicker. From the back row, a hostile comment that rippled through the group to the front and into my ears. The arc of a paper ball. Thirty students up on the hind legs of their chairs, exchanging heartless smiles, as I droned on.

"I'm warning you. All of you are going to—"

No. I would not sacrifice an hour of my life to sit with them after school in this furnace. I continued reading. "In the third section of the exam you will try to determine the meaning of words from their context—"

"Can we go?"

"No."

"C'mon —it's already ten-thirty."

"*Bitch.*"

"The clock is wrong." I said it quietly, looking around the room. It had come out of nowhere. ***Bitch.*** The whisper, tossed out with the ease of a careless gesture, exploded in my head. It settled over the students and silenced them. My ears were ringing with it. They were waiting—some scared, some challenging. I sat down in my chair and pretended to look for something in my briefcase. They began to talk again, quietly at first, testing me. It was a relief to give up, to let their voices rise up over me and drown me out. The minutes dragged. I pretended to mark. I sharpened a pencil. They were lining up at the door now, staring diffidently in my direction. I hated them. Finally, the first lunch-bell rang they poured out and headed off to the air-conditioned shopping mall at the center of town. I remained where I was, my thighs stuck to the plastic chair, my armpits stinging.

It had gone too far. Out of control. I felt defeated and a little numb. There were no strategies left. In my first year at Laura Secord, I had given away my phone number, told them to call me Alex, showed them Monty Python films and documentaries about Charles Manson. I had built an entire unit around analyzing rock-songs, assembled anthologies of their stories and poems. I had tried to be their friend, their confidante, their mentor, their sage. My second year was different. I threw out my clothes and bought a conservative wardrobe of high-button blouses and slim dark skirts and started raising my right eyebrow a lot. I tried to unveil for myself, the illusive universe of bitchiness : to be strident and authoritative. Though my class-room became more orderly, the joy died. They thought I was a bitch.

I thought about the time that Deter Wormly had found me crying in the class-room in my first semester. I told him I was losing it. The students were so awful. Jennifer Caputti had brought her curling iron to class and burned Billy St. Germaine's arm with it. In that same class, another student had tried to light her *Catcher in the Rye* on fire. Deter had looked deep into my eyes and said : "don't take it personally, kiddo. They don't hate you. They're cats in heat. All they care about is who they're going to fuck tonight." I remember how cynical I thought he was. Now, I knew he was right. And knowing this solidified my decision to go to Prague. I didn't think in terms of quitting yet. That came a little later. But sitting there, with sweat dripping down my face onto

the desk, I felt that I had failed on all levels, that I had botched the job in some irreparable way and the weight of my accumulated failures — failures that there never seemed enough time to revise as cleanly as I craved — had turned me into a person I didn't like. I was boring myself. I shared the students' contempt for me. Prague, at least, offered me the chance to start fresh. To leave behind me the hollow drone of my voice as it struggled to register on the impermeable minds of those little shits. I locked up and and headed across the parking lot to the main-building. Already I felt a thousand pounds lighter.

# 9

The Laura Secord staff-room was the only air-conditioned room in the entire school. We had been warned never to mention this fact to the students for fear that angry parents would find other things to complain about. The idea of the Hagarsville parents complaining about a lack of air-conditioning made me laugh. The principal was a city man who commuted.

The hallways of the main building were deserted. I clicked across the linoleum in my Miss Adams shoes towards the lunch-room, where I bought a nice cup of coffee and a grilled cheese sandwich. Nola, who worked the counter, ran the top of her hand across her forehead. "Don't know what I'm going to do with all the fries! The kids aren't eating!"

I searched for something jocular to say but I could only come up with :"I'll take them home for dinner."

"Promises, promises." She swiped the air — a gwan-get outa-here-gesture. "Take a look at them at four o'clock and see how you feel."

I took my tray into the staff-room and sat down on the chesterfield in front of the television set. Brian Brown, the shops teacher, sat smoking at the other end of the room. He looked up at me from his cryptic cross-word. "Little early for lunch, ain't it? Want a game?" He had to shout over the rattle from the air conditioner. I nodded and we drew up our letters.

We were half-way through when the second lunch-bell rang. Teachers poured into the staff-room. Deter Wormly bounded over to us. "Stop feeling the letters, Brian!"

Brian didn't look up. "Fuck off Wormly. *Go find yourself a name.*"

Deter squatted and fluttered his eyelashes at me. "Hi, wrench-eyes," he said.

"Go away, Deter. I'm winning," I said.

"She's making up words."

I looked at Deter. "I got a seven-letter," I explained. "Fifty bonus points."

Deter checked the score.

"203 to 120! You need me Brian." He fiddled with the tiles on Brian's rack for a minute. Then the two of them hooted.

"Hey, Alexandra!"

I looked over at the group near the TV set.

"Is that your mother?"

"I can't believe it."

"God, she's beautiful!"

"She should model for that magazine. What's it called?"

"The one for women who weren't born yesterday — I forget the name —"

"Alex has her eyes."

"Wrench eyes," said Deter. "What's her phone number?" He leaned over and whispered : "hot babe, Alex. Your ma's a hot babe."

"Shut-up!" I hissed. "I can't hear her!"

The group fell silent and my mother's voice filled the room. Someone had turned down the air-conditioner."Listen, Jeffery," my mother was saying. "Abortion is a health issue."

She was seated in a studio chair in front of a gaudy yellow sign : NOONDAY LIVE. A rubber plant gave the set an outdoorsy look. Her hands were resting lightly on the arm rests and there was a little microphone clipped under the buttons on her suit. The camera moved back to the NOONDAY LIVE host. He was wearing a tweed jacket, a striped shirt, and a bright plaid tie. He raised his hands and touched his fingertips together, thoughtfully."Yes, Senator Adams, I understand your point, but we—"

"No, Jeffery, I don't think you do. Women have always used abortion as a means of fertility control and they will continue to do so. This vote was a vote of conscience. I voted to remove abortion from the Criminal Code of Canada, because I believe that women should have access to legal and safe abortions. If," and she paused here for a moment. The effect was devastating. "If, they make the difficult decision to *have* an abortion." Her name appeared in capital letters on the screen across her chest :

**MS. KATHERINE ADAMS**
**SENATOR**

The camera swung back for a long view. The host smiled and touched the rim of his glasses.

"Your vote to remove abortion from the criminal code, Senator Adams, seems to have raised the eyebrows of your fellow conservatives—"

"Not all conservatives are fellows, Jeffery." Her tone was neutral, hard to read.

"Right on," cheered Diane Jeudy-Hugo.

"Good one Katherine," I said.

Brian looked at me over the top of his reading glasses. "You call your mother Katherine?"

"No," I said.

"Deciding whether to have a baby or an abortion is always a serious choice. I believe it must remain a choice. That is what my vote reflects. And I assume the vote of every Senator on this difficult issue reflects their own thinking on the matter. This vote was a free vote."

"Thank-you, Senator Adams for speaking with us at NOONDAY LIVE."

"Thank-you, Jeffery. My pleasure. "

The camera lingered. She was wearing a tidy little black suit with a Chinese collar and a line of gold shell-shaped buttons down the front. Her expression was pleasant but very firm, with just a hint of impatience. She knew the camera was on her but she didn't smile. She re-crossed her legs and waited. Finally, the NOONDAY music came on and the camera reluctantly inched away.

Diane Jeudy-Hugo, the Art teacher with three names, stood watching the screen. Her eyes were glassy."That's exactly how I feel," she said, to no one in particular.

"Hot babe," said Deter for the fortieth time.

Diane sat down on the chesterfield and crossed her legs as my mother had just a few moments before. "Deter, you 're an idiot. Katherine Adams has class."

Sterling Graves leaned into the cross-fire: "more like tough-nut."

" You *guys*," said Marion Moss,"can't handle a woman who doesn't giggle and jiggle and - tahk- luk-thith -" She made her last three words breathy and helpless.

Diane Jeudy-Hugo watched all of this with a look of disgust. "Children!" She tore open her diet dressing and dumped it on a head of lettuce. Brian and I resumed our game but I didn't much feel like playir_.

"So your mother is a pro-abortionist," he said.

"Choice doesn't mean pro-abortion," I retorted, in my mother's voice.

He glanced up at me with a smile and made QUEEN on the triple word score.

Watching my mother on the TV set in the staff-room was a shock. It reminded me that she had an entire life that had absolutely nothing to do with me. Of course I knew this and I respected her position and all of that, but secretly, I was jealous — of her secretary, of her assistant, Jason, of her special Lebanese cab-driver in Ottawa, even of the horny old men in the Senate. I despised the way in which everyone ogled her and catered to her and seemed surprised to learn that she had a daughter. I was also jealous of the tidy little suit she wore, with the line of gold shell buttons : I had never seen it before. But while I was jealous, I was also proud of the fact that she was so strong. My knowledge of her fragility made her public success seem incredible.

I had an urge to tell the teachers in the staff-room some of my mother's secrets — to offer then a glimpse of a world they didn't know about. Would they have even cared that she was taking her pulse in the dressing room? I imagined her returning alone in a taxi to the Senate Chamber, taking her place amongst the old men and then returning, alone again, to her hotel suite at the Chateau. I could see her hanging her suit jacket in the closet, checking her nylons for ladders, and resting on the bed with her hot water bottle, a newspaper, and a cup of tea. They probably wouldn't believe me. They saw her unsmiling bitchiness, the gold, the hair, the icy poise : the stuff of a charmed life. There was something other-worldly about my mother's poise. She didn't get bogged down in the details. She knew how to put panic attacks on hold, save them for privacy of the dressing room, like Glen Close in *Dangerous Liaisons*.

# 10

The phone was ringing when I got home from school that night.

I put the receiver on the floor and unloaded myself. I spread the mail out before me and fingered through the bills and junk mail for Ben's letter. Then I balanced the phone on my shoulder and opened it while she talked.

"What did you think? That silly man who interviewed me, Jeffery -what's-his-name-the *questions* he asked—I couldn't take it. He has no idea how the Senate works."

I told her that nobody understands how the Senate works and that she was terrific. "And so did all the teachers who saw you—I think they see you as a role model—especially Diane Jeudy-Hugo. They think you should model for that magazine for women who weren't born yesterday."

"You mean "Lears." How did that suit look? I thought it might be a little frivolous to wear the dress. Should I have worn the red? No, that would have been awful."

I told her she had looked great.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Nothing."

"Yes, something's wrong," she insisted. Vagueness always signalled a potential crisis.

"I'm thinking of going to Prague," I said.

Silence.

"They need people to teach English and I'm thinking of going for the summer. What do you think?" I regretted my tone immediately. I shouldn't have given her a crack to squeeze through. Asking an opinion meant that you weren't entirely sure.

There was a loud click. She asked me to hold while she got the other line.

I used this time to finish Ben's letter.

"It's not a money making venture but it's rumored we can live like kings on one hundred Canadian dollars a month. Prague needs an Alexandra. Love Ben.

P.S. Make sure that you emphasize the name of the organization when you break the news to mom. *Education For Democracy*." He had underlined the last three words so emphatically that the pen had slivered the paper.

I heard another click. "Hello? Hello? Hello!"

"I'm here," I said.

"We can talk about this when I'm in Ottawa," my mother said. Why don't you drive up for dinner and spend the night at the hotel. Don't make any plans until we talk."

I told her I had too much work to do.

Silence.

"I'd like to, but I'm behind in my marking," I added.

She turned on her public voice, the imperious tone that she used to deal with hired help.

"I need to know so I can make other arrangements for dinner."

"I said I *can't*, mom."

"Fine. If you say can't, you can't, can you? "

It was a twelve hour return trip but I'd feel worse if I said no.

"I'll be there," I said.

"Good. I'll be in the penthouse suite. Come straight up."

In the private war I waged against my mother in my apartment that evening, I decided, once and for all, that I would go to Prague. Away from my mother and her confusing demands, I would become a person who would say no — just *no* — without the need to apologize and retract, without the sadness that always clogged up that word for me. I would learn to let things go, let them fall away from me into history. I wouldn't tell her about Ben. She didn't like him. "He's dirty," she said after their only meeting. "And very vulnerable. Not your type."

"What's my type?" I asked.

"He's a practice man. First you kiss Mr. Hot. Then you kiss Mr. Cold. Then you kiss Mr. Right." She got this line from a New Yorker cartoon which she had ripped out and stuck to her fridge with a magnet.

Ben and my mother met at an Indian restaurant called *The RB*. It was winter, about a month after Ben and I had started seeing each other, and I was a little shy about telling him that my mother didn't like curry. My mother had flown in for a meeting and was staying at the Chateau. Ben couldn't understand why she didn't stay with me, in my apartment. His family worked differently."My mother has a delicate stomach," I whispered as we entered the restaurant."I don't know if she'll like this place."

"This is the best Indian food in town. She'll love it."

My mother greeted us at the cash. She was still wearing her heavy coat and the fur shone with a queenly luster. Her tone was remote: "Alex, Ben, we finally meet." Then, in a whisper designed to be heard: "*You know this food makes me vomit! The name is misleading. "The RB! I thought it stood for The Roast Beef.*"

"Nope," said Ben. "*The Royal Bengali.* Pleased to meet you."

"There's a nice little French restaurant just down the street. Why don't we go there?" she suggested, brightly. "My stomach can't handle this."

I pretended not to hear her, but Ben had, and he went all serious and quiet, as though an off switch had been pressed or a plug yanked. I felt the entire evening's good cheer fall into my lap. My mother sighed and we were seated.

"I was sick on this food once," she said leafing through the menu. She was in a pale, wan mood, wearing a lot of lace and glinting weakly with thread-thin gold things. She ordered a bowl of white rice and a glass of water. Ben and I, anxious about the mood she had cast and starved for a decent meal, consumed hills of curry, tandoori chicken, and nan and drank bottle after bottle of Indian beer. I babbled about school, leaning forward to block the cross-fire of bad feelings between my mother and Ben. But their duel had a life of its own, and Ben, who displayed an aptitude for intuiting my mother's pet-peeves, became all that my mother loathed. He picked rice from his teeth, licked his fingers, smoked vigorously, and drank too many beers. My mother made a gesture of civility but it sounded more like an accusation. "Do you plan to teach for the rest of your life?"

"Yes," said Ben evenly. "And do you plan to occupy the Senate for the rest of yours?"

The evening was lost. I excused myself, cried a little in the washroom cubicle and began to plan the break-up.

"We can order room-service and watch a movie," my mother said, when I returned. "I need a good cup of tea."

I let Ben go home alone and spent the night with my mother at the Chateau.

## 11

My mother always stayed at the Chateau.

I was still in doing my teaching degree when she was appointed to the Senate, when my life was still porous and sketchy and I could still vanish for a week into the sound proof pent-house suite with negligible effect. I would take long bubble baths and wrap myself in one of the white fluffy robes that the hotel provides for weary executives. I loved the beds at the Chateau. They were wide and hard and each evening, the maid would come to turn the sheets down, leaving behind a rose or an Ovation stick and a little card with the weather forecast. I spent many nights absorbing this wealth into my pores, amusing myself with the soft-porn channel, waiting for my mother to return from her meetings. I loved the way we talked those evenings and fell asleep under the little round spots of light from the reading lamps, like stars on a movie set.

I liked the contrast between hotel life and student poverty, but when I started teaching, the visits lost some of their sultry rhythms. Our conversations became increasingly nebulous until they resembled those I had with my father. Depressed, I would return to my apartment in Hagarsville, empty the chocolates and complimentary wine from my pockets, and plunge into my lesson planning and marking. I wondered if I had changed, or just grown less interesting to my mother now that I was another member in the club of sell-outs, a little crummy high-school teacher. But despite the darker side, these visits activated my senses, and sharpened my hunger for wealth, fame, good food, and nice clothes which, in the day to day routine of students and home-room bells, I had no time to think about.

It was a dismal drive and I arrived in Ottawa speckled with what looked like peppercorns but which were, in fact, bits of road grit and dust which had blown up through the vent of the car. My shorts were creased and my shirt appeared grey. I splashed tap water on my face in a cafe washroom near the hotel and changed into a freshly dry-cleaned shirt and skirt that I had carried from Hagarsville, now limp in the dry-cleaning plastic. I was always careful to dress well when I visited my mother.

My mother greeted me with a hug. She was wearing a sporty little sweatsuit and a pair of hospital white Rebox. "Just working off some of my stress," she explained, snapping off her head-band. We kissed, French style, a smack on each cheek, but like true anglos, we ended up kissing the air instead of each other's cheeks. She appraised my outfit, brushing my shoulders the way they do in dandruff commercials. "Long drive?"

"Nasty. I need a shower."

"Go," she said, handing me a robe. "I'll send that outfit to the cleaners with my laundry. They'll have it ready first thing tomorrow."

I entered the bathroom with a sigh. Everything was muted and cold and inspired in me, if only for that moment, the impulse to be a better person, cleaner, more responsible, more decisive. While I waited for the tub to fill, I weighed myself, plucked a hair from my chin with my mother's tweezers, and examined my pores in the high power make-up mirror. My mother's make-up bag brimmed with her anti-aging creams, her offence against wrinkles, scales, callouses, dry-patches, and cellulite. I removed the lid of a purifant , an impressive tube decorated with hydrogen molecules : it smelled lovely, fresh, and faintly citrus.

I emerged from the bathroom an hour later, my hygiene restored, and found my mother on the phone. She was smoking : holding the cigarette out in front of her as if she meant for me to take it away. When I reached for it, she shook her head and took an unconvincing puff. She had ordered room-service and a table, laden with food for six, had been wheeled into the room.

"Eat," she ordered. I peeked under one of the protective metal cake tins and salivated.

"Try on the red dress in the closet," she hissed, "and the red loafers. Sorry Arni. Dressing my baby is a full time job."

The closet was overflowing with serious, square-shouldered suits, but I identified the red dress in the midst and pulled it off its hanger. It was gorgeous, of course, closer to watermelon in color than red, and cool looking with loose dropped sleeves and a

scoop neck. I pulled it over my head and squeezed my feet into the red suede shoes. Later, she would complain that I had stretched them. Then she would give them to me. This was our ritual. Pleased with what I saw in the mirror — the Chateau lighting always makes you look fabulous — I sat my new self down and began to towel my hair dry. My mother had ripped out a page from a magazine and it formed a glossy place-mat under the nice bowl of complimentary chocolates. I moved the bowl and examined the photograph — a long-stemmed, mint parfait, topped with bits of shaved chocolate and set on a picnic table. The text read : "The only way to resist temptation is to yield." Oscar Wilde.

We passed the afternoon this way, dressing, and snacking and getting ready for dinner. This was the best of the Chateau. All my worries dissolved, and I was happy that afternoon to forgo my marking, happy for the good food, the Diet Cokes, the new magazines, the low murmur of my mother's voice on the telephone. The air conditioning hummed efficiently. I felt cared for and calm.

"I'm really exhausted honey," she said eventually. "But I need some proper food. We both do. I've made reservations at the dining room downstairs."

"Yes, fine," I said, closing my *Vogue*.

"Do you like these shoes? I only buy suede these days. Leather is so *boring*."

"They're great," I nodded appraisingly. "Super." She was wearing a slinky butter-colored dress that swung at the knees.

I took her arm and we floated down the corridor to dinner.

## 12

The dining room was more a dinner theater than a restaurant and the empty, unlit stage at the south end of the room made the place seem vast and lonely. A few business men sat in the connecting lounge reading the paper. My mother sniffed the cigar smoke and wrinkled her nose. "It's a morgue in here," she said. "Should we go somewhere else?"

I told her this was just fine, that it was nice. A waiter, whom my mother addressed like an old friend, swirled by and filled my mother's wine glass with uncarbonated water. He wrapped the bottle in linen and laid it in a bowl of ice. "And for the Miss?" asked Pierre. I ordered a Bloody Caesar.

"It *used* to have class — when your father and I came here," she added, loudly, so that Pierre could hear. She rolled her head back and then side to side, an exercise she had been told could prevent stress-migraines. Sitting suddenly, very erect and grimacing slightly to smooth the skin on her neck, she regarded me. "So, it's Prague this time?"

I decided to ignore her allusion to historically aborted plans. "Yes," I said with dignity, accepting the menu from another waiter. My heart was pounding.

"Why *Prague* ?"

I told her that I was deeply interested in the changes affecting Eastern Europe— that I wanted to meet and talk with people who had experienced oppression, who had served prison sentences for their beliefs, who read *samizdat* publications produced by underground presses—people who had hoped for, and finally seen, an end to Communist rule in their country. "This is history in process," I exclaimed.

"And this is a dramatic shift in consciousness," she retorted.

"Not really." I looked her in the eye. Coolly. "Ever since the revolution I've been thinking about a way to get over there." I edited out Ben and all uncertain details. "Education for Democracy is desperate for English teachers. They are very interested in me because of my teaching experience."

"Education For *Democracy*?" she repeated archly. Ben was wrong. She wasn't impressed. "Will they pay you in Canadian or American dollars?"

I had no idea.

She snorted. "Probably Czech crowns. It's volunteer, isn't it?"

"You can live like a king on a hundred Canadian a month."

"How do you know?"

"Well, I just know." Then brightly, "The contact people told me."

"Who's organizing it?"

"Expatriate Czechs."

"*Who*?"

This wasn't going well. I told her about the interview, omitting that it was by phone, wishing I had rehearsed my case more carefully. "They're a super group of people who want to help out their country the best way they know how —through education."

Pierre arrived with my second drink. I stirred it with a huge, leafy celery stick and watched the ice swirl. Strains of Count Basie filtered through the dining room.

"Thank you, Pierre," she said stiffly. "Your father called me this week. He wants to know whether you're going to the cottage this summer." She rubbed her bursitis.

"*Mom*," I said, in a tone that utterly sabotaged my case."I'm *going* to Czechoslovakia."

"You haven't seen him in two years," she said. "I think you should maintain your relationship with him. It's important. What am I supposed to tell him?"

"If he wants to see me, why doesn't he make arrangements to come to *me* ? Why should I always go to *him* ?"

"This is true," she conceded, her sense of justice winning out.

Another waiter wheeled in our dinner. "Would Madame like the sole on or off the bone?" He made a small performance out of filleting the fish. I sat wondering if I should take the lid off my salmon. "Wait," said my mother. When the sole was arranged on her plate, he peppered it with a device resembling a flashlight. Then he asked me if I'd like another drink. "Go ahead," my mother urged. "Yes, bring another."

My mother was very strange about alcohol. She said that my father's drinking had ruined their relationship and yet she always encouraged me to have another, to indulge. She had a way of viewing vices from afar, of appearing untouched by the basher instincts of the people around her, whose drinks she was replenishing or whose cigarettes she was lighting. She encouraged recklessness, without herself being reckless, was relentless when it came to monitoring your needs and replenishing your stores, and I often felt simultaneously grateful and ashamed, as if she was celebrating my appetites while at the same time judging me, testing me. I decided I would not touch the drink when it arrived.

"What about your career?" she asked, poking at her fish.

"What?"

"Your law career. Aren't you studying for the LSAT's"

I flinched. I had, after all, spent tax-payer's dollars using her calling card to contact law faculties. It was what I felt kept her dispatching me her hand-me-down designer

clothes, her almost new Holt Renfrew pumps. It was the trump card she pulled with my father with whom I never discussed my career plans. I had heard her tell my father on the phone that I would need big bucks when I entered law school.

"Or have you abandoned that plan too?"

I didn't know what to say to that one. I was a hostage to my assurances that I was greater than the sum of my present occupations.

I like to think that I looked her straight in the eye and said, unflinchingly, "I'm going." But it didn't happen that way. Her question, delivered with the velocity of a hard ball, had zoomed right past me and I didn't even swing. Her victory registered in a sudden good humor. We finished our meal, ordered dessert—creme caramels and strong house coffee—and moved on to other topics. She called Pierre over and asked for an ashtray. She smoked occasionally, but she didn't inhale.

# 13

The final weeks at Laura Secord Secondary passed in a blur of heat, exams, marking, and telephone calls to parents about unreturned class texts. When final marks were in, the staff celebrated at the Golden Dragon. It was a Chinese restaurant in the Hagarsville shopping mall, famous for its handcrafted paper mache dragons. Sweating over our combination dinners, we traded insults and shared our summer plans.

Deter claimed that he was going to Toronto to be a nude dancer in a Swedish lesbian bar. Marion Moss said she would spend the summer renovating her husband. Brian Brown refused to comment. A respectful hush fell over the table when the principal, the baby-faced ogre who commuted, cleared his throat. We had almost forgotten his presence, given the rarity of his public appearances. In a tone which it was rumored he had developed in his public speaking courses in Toronto, he announced that he, the vice-principal and both their wives, would take a *Butterfield and Robinson* cycling tour of New Brunswick. He paused, as he was prone to do on the intercom when he wanted to add emphasis, and we lavished him with admiring hmms, and waited respectfully for him to continue.

"And where will Alexandra be this summer?" shouted Deter, from the end of the long banquet table. He thought the principal was finished.

"Prague," I said.

"You'll be home in time for the staff meeting, September 3rd, I hope," said Brian Brown. "After which I will trounce you at *Scrabble*."

"Not if I can help it," I said with a smile that turned chaste when I realized the principal was glaring at me. He did not, as they say, look amused.

When the group's attention had wandered, the principal leaned forward and addressed me. "Do you have any plans I should know about?" A bean sprout dangled

from his lips. I tried to match his grave tone. I asked if it would pose a serious problem if, by force of circumstance, I could not make it back by September 3rd.

"This is not the place to discuss this very serious turn of events. But I will add, at this juncture Alexandra, that if you plan to resign from your position, there are certain conventions which you have already violated."

Pleased, he leaned back in his chair and ran his tongue over his lips, nudging the bean sprout so that it dangled precariously from his chin.

"I didn't realize that this would pose such a problem."

It was the bean sprout's fault. And the wine. I would never have pursued what was obviously a dangerous line of conversation without these prompts. He regarded me severely.

"Come and see me at nine o'clock tomorrow morning, Ms. Adams." The 's' in 'Ms.' buzzed ominously.

Deter squeezed my hand as we left the restaurant. The air was lovely and cool. "If I was your age, I'd be doing exactly the same thing."

"What? Quitting or going to Prague?"

"Both," he said. "Listen, kiddo. People are scrambling these days. It will take one phone call to replace you."

His words weren't exactly comforting.

## 14

The night before I left Hagarsville for Toronto to catch my plane, my mother called me from her cellular phone to say good-bye. The apartment was gleaming. I had slaved for two days preparing it for the subletter, a nursing student who said the word *super* so often, that I excised it from my own vocabulary. My duffel bag was straining at the zipper, with clothes and all the items that I had been told were in short supply in Czechoslovakia. Dental floss, tampons, deodorant, razors, color film, Trident, ESL books, magazines, paper, and an old electric typewriter and adapter.

My mother sounded sad and irritable. We had a tight little parting chat. She gave me the names of some people she knew : the Canadian Ambassador in Prague, the minister of something in Moravia, and a woman named Eva Zuber. I asked if she was related to our neighbor in Winnipeg. "They're sisters. Oh, Alexandra, you'll find some big fair-haired Czech and I'll never see you again."

"I'm not leaving the planet," I said. Suddenly, I felt quite forlorn, imagining her sitting on the edge of her bed with her dolls and pillows. "Are you ok?" I asked. "How's the spastic bowel? "

"I'll survive," she said, and with sudden fizz : "I may even be coming to that part of the world. There's a United Nations conference in Vienna at the end of the summer and they want to send some Canadians. "

"Really?"

"Go for it, Alex. But be careful. Please?"

*

"Go for it." These were the last words I heard when I was falling asleep. It was my own voice reading fat cartoon letters from a bubble and I was saying it in a variety

of voices, depending on whether there was an exclamation mark or a string of little dots. They were also the first words I thought of when I woke up and they were still on my mind as I stuffed the travel-sized Crest into the travel pocket of my knapsack. At noon, I would board the plane that would take me to Prague to meet Ben and to teach English.

"Be careful." The same words my mother had said seven years earlier, when I was heading to Germany to train for the Olympics. When I woke up that morning, to catch the plane with the team to Frankfurt, I decided that I didn't really want to go. But looking around my room, I had realized I had no choice. I remember thinking I never wanted to clean up my room again. I remember how the blankets smelled like Flo-Bear. I remember looking around my room at the African fly-swatter from my mother's diplomat friend; the old toy microscope; the magnetic *Scrabble*; the mud on the vinyl stripes of my Nike waffle trainers; the red, white, and blue polka-dot curtains. I had lived in that room for sixteen years, necked with Tommy D. in the closet, drank lemon gin at the foot of the bed, cleaned Flo-Bear's pee off the sheep-skin rug, read *Candy* with the dust-balls behind the bed-room door. I had stared at myself in my full length mirror and hungered for something that I could never really identify. I was so inflamed with my longing that my body experienced its hunger as physical pain. I had taken the Olympics as the object for my longing, but looking into the mirror that day, I felt without understanding why, that I could have walked away from it all : that I could have missed my plane and felt nothing.

My mother had given me a journal. This is what I wrote that morning.

Alexandra Adams, age 14, grade eight, only child, big feet, big hands, big everywhere, except in the chest department. My arms are too skinny. Do more push-ups. Thank-god Mary-Anne quit. She can smoke in hell. Thank-god I'm getting out of this place. K.A. is driving me up the wall. Will M.M remember me?

The rest of the journal was filled with training details—my basal metabolic pulse, my splits and race times; the number of laps, intervals, sprints; and one-line comments about sore body parts. I wrote "my thighs feel like lead weights" eleven times.

## 15

My mother saw recklessness where there was only longing — pure and insatiable. I can't say for sure what my father saw, but I can guess. Through his purplish *Craven A* mist, he saw yet another daughter who wanted what he didn't have to give. When I looked at the political photos in the attic-room, I saw a huge and hilarious mistake. When I looked into the mirror I saw my hairline zig-zagging uncertainly, high on my forehead.

Desire is usually expressed as desire for something. I desire X. I hunger for Y. When a state of consciousness is deprived of its object, it will begin to approach the neighborhood of pain. Prolonged, objectless longing is pain. Mary-Anne was the first speedskater I ever saw — she was whipping around a corner at family-skating — and I took her for the object of my longing. I objectified my physical pain, in the image of Mary-Anne whipping around a corner of a speedskating rink. My mother bought me a pair of speedskates and Mary-Anne and I became team-mates, then rivals, then enemies. Her image was constantly before my eyes : her careless smile, her shrugs, her haughty finishing style. When Mary-Anne crossed the finish line, she placed one skate before the other, straightened her back leg so that her hips tilted. It was a gesture that said "Look at Me!" and this is exactly what I did. I hated her, admired her, was frightened and awed by her, jealous of the confidence and carelessness in her gestures, the nonchalance in her tilted hips. My mother said that Mary-Anne was a show-off. But to me she was a symbol of natural excellence. She didn't give a fuck, and she smoked in the washrooms after her races. She laughed at the other girls when they complained of pre-race jitters. "Butterflies are for dweebs," she said.

I grew to hate the sport. I started to wake up in the middle of the night with a kick, the trick of the trade, used by skaters as they crossed the finishing line and which, if executed successfully, could mean the difference between first and second, gold and silver. Mary-Anne had not only mastered the slick, hip-tilt pose — she had an excellent finishing kick. My body, on the other hand, found it unnatural to throw my feet ahead at the finishing line. It preferred to go head first, like a third-base runner sliding home.

With outstretched arms, I flung my body across the line, feet trailing. Humiliating myself came as naturally to me as breathing.

It wasn't like that from the beginning. The beginning was pure magic. I skated with the simple joy of a mindless body, for the sheer love of the sport : the straight-aways, the pivots, the corners, the speed, the sense of accelerating out of a corner into two long strides whose power was absorbed in the pivot and released again in my accelerating body as I rounded another corner.

I was devastated when Mary-Anne quit. But I was too locked into the sport to follow suit. Instead, I would spy on Mary-Anne at the Uptown Bowling lanes, where she went with her friends to smoke. Once she saw me, and bellowed out so that all the bowlers stopped bowling and looked around : "Better get home to bed, Alex. Don't you have skating practice in the morning?" Mary-Anne had given my victories meaning. Deprived of my object, my victories fell flat.

"Be true to yourself," my mother said, when she came across me weeping into the sheepskin rug in my bedroom after winning a meet in Moose Jaw. Was it truer to skate or quit? I had no idea. So, I continued down the path of least resistance, which meant that I kept skating. If I had been as aggressive and unfazable as Mary-Anne Morrison, I might have said, "Stick it! I'm quitting!" But no, I kept at it, bought my expensive, Norwegian skates and accumulated so much hardware that my mother had a trophy case built in the basement. My longing to beat Mary-Anne transmuted into a desire to go to the Olympics. My training schedule was rigorous. Slowly, my friends drifted away, to volleyball tournaments, YMCA youth groups, part-time jobs, student council, or else they simply vanished under the soft coverlet of adolescent love. Rumors started to circulate that my mother would be appointed to the Senate. My father was charged with influence peddling. And in my second year of high school, I was named to the national speedskating team. Alone in my trophy room one New Year's eve, sharpening my fiberglass skates, I felt that I was sharpening myself with the whetstone, preparing myself to be received by something large and unfathomable.

# PART 2

## Body

# 1

I never made it to the Olympics. I realized, as I stepped onto the mile long moving sidewalk at the Frankfurt airport, that I was entering the world to have the world shrink to a 400 meter speedskating oval. Skates in hand, my team-mates beside me. I watched the world rush past me in the form of German travel posters : a lake; a Bavarian pub; a mountain climber with chapped cheeks; a brightly dressed little girl in a bonnet. Poster after poster flowed by, whispering of all that I would miss. And at the end of the moving sidewalk — the oval, where my worth would be measured by an electronic timer, prominently displayed for all to see. I felt doomed as the sidewalk rushed me to the oval, with its windy corners and finish lines which I would dive over — arms outstretched, feet trailing — at the end of each race.

When I got to Germany, my longing to go to the Olympics transformed into a longing to go home. My room, with the polka-dot curtains, became a sanctuary, the new object of my longing. Thinking of my mother and her rituals brought tears to my eyes. It would be months before I could steal moments behind the bedroom door, bury my face in my mother's scented pillows, inhale the odor of my sweet, sweet dog.

The training was too much. There was no respite. When I'd been there a month, I looked down at my body to see that my breasts had retreated and my legs had hardened to steel. The oval had cleared me of all that distinguished me from a boy, furnished me with thighs as large as California Redwoods and calves that flexed ruggedly through my skating tights. I moved with a new brutal delicacy.

My team mates were a fun loving group. They measured their quadriceps in the commons room and held contests at breakfast to see who could eat the greatest number of kaiser rolls. Free time was spent exploring the pastry shops around town, sampling crullers and tortes with almond butter icing. "Come-on, Alex!" they would shout, and I would leave the letter that I was writing to my mother and stride with the group down Waltraut Strasse to the sweet shop to buy wine-gums and eat cake.

Training sessions were intense. Twice a day, we'd jog to the oval and complete our program. From the video-station at the side of the track, the coach would scream : "Weight transfer, Alex! Weight transfer!" My technique needed a lot of work. I tried to keep my ankles stable, to transfer my weight, to keep my ass low and my head up — I tried to kick over the finish line, feet first — but always I looked the same in the play-back, like a muscular deer lowering its head to drink. I had it all down in my head — much like I had wave theory, vectors, and moles down in my head — but it was quite another thing to get my body to translate that information onto the ice surface.

It was the meet in Innsbruck that ended my speedskating career. The day before my 3000 meter race, I wandered with my team-mate, Linda, into a cake-shop for a snack, and we fell into a conversation with a glamorous woman in a red poncho who said she was a reporter. She was a lot like my mother and she wore the same perfume. The woman regarded us as though we were an incomprehensible species and asked us what our lives were like. "I vunder vhat you atletes *do* all day," she said, with a wave of her cigarello. "You can't possibly just skate!"

I began my response by pointing to my thighs: "Well, for one, your legs start to look like this. And the training is boring. Sometimes the other skaters treat you like a weirdo if you use a word longer than two syllables —." Linda interrupted me.

"That's not true. It's a good life. We're very fortunate to be carded athletes. And we're proud to be skating for Canada."

The reporter sipped her ice coffee and smiled patronizingly at us, a smile I had seen before somewhere and which I ducked by leaning away and out of the orbit of her perfume. I was ready to tell her my mother was a politician, my father, a former premier. I wanted to run away with this woman in the poncho and learn to smoke.

"Isn't that nice!" the woman finally said, reaching for her bill. "Canada is a Commonvealth country, no? " Linda said it was and I scowled. "Well, you skate hard for your country. I will look for you on the television screen in Sarajavo!"

In the 3,000 meter race, my body seized up.

# 2

"We can never know what we want because, living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come."

Next to me, a couple sat with their heads bent over what looked like a marriage planner. Through the window, a dark Atlantic sky.

"There is no means of testing which decision is better because there is no basis for comparison."

This reminded me of my mother's line, "Ben is a practice man." She wouldn't have liked this book. "Another novel about European libertines, committing adultery," is what she would have said. I marked the page with a stir stick and examined the dust jacket. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Was my relationship with Ben the rehearsal for what was happening in the seat beside me? The couple was locked in an embrace now and the man was stroking the woman's hair with a large hairy hand. I flicked the latches of the dinner tray and let it fall open. The drink trolley was upon us. "Do you have tomato juice?" asked the woman. Dorothee Auch, the German stewardess, pulled out a mini can and clicked it open. Her forehead was shiny and very beige. The man ordered a beer. I ordered a Bloody Caesar and smiled winningly at my neighbors. His hand was supporting her head like a neck-brace. "I'm getting off in Prague," I explained.

"Oh."

"Tomas did not realize at the time that metaphors are dangerous. Metaphors are not to be trifled with. A single metaphor can give birth to love."

I thought about this. I identified with Tomas—Tomas, who felt he could be himself only when he was alone. Tomas the swinging bachelor. Tomas, the jerk.

Tereza arrived on his doorstep and he saw her as a child in a pitch-daubed basket whom he had saved from a stormy river. He felt she had tricked him into loving her. Ben's methods had been more direct. He had written me a love poem which I handed back to him with my responses written in red ink in the margin. At the time, I thought my suggestions were excellent. He looked at my notes, ripped the poem into four squares and threw them up in the air. He told me that you don't mark up a love poem as if it were a fucking English assignment. I learned that I can be cruel without even trying and this understanding made me love Ben. Something about Ben invited compassion. It wasn't really a metaphor, I guess.

Ben and I were supposed to go to Paris together but I chickened out and took my teaching job in Hagarsville instead. I drove Ben to the airport, told him I loved him, and sent him off. "Come and visit me at Christmas," he said and I said that of course I would. But I didn't. Nor did I visit him during the spring break. Nor did I tell him I had a new boyfriend named Brad Broad. He would have been hurt and he would have made fun of Brad's name. I put off writing—somehow the effort seemed monumental—and soon his postcards stopped. I got a form letter when he'd been gone for seven months. For Ben, a form letter was a nice way of telling me to piss off and write. When Brad and I broke off, I sent Ben a nice photo of myself in a swim-suit. He responded with a post card of Michelangelo's *David*, onto which he had scotch-taped a photo of his own head. "Dirty Pool," it read. I had a naive faith that we'd resume things as soon as I stepped off the plane, that he would shower me with a hundred love poems and unsent letters, that he'd look at me in that way that told me I was violent and powerful.

I had brought a diary with me, a large hard-cover book with bonded, unlined paper, which I planned to fill, but it lay unopened in the canvas knapsack in the seat in front of me. The idea of writing in it with the couple making out in the seats beside me made me feel self-conscious. The couple got off the plane in Frankfurt and their seats were filled by two women in floral house-dresses. They looked like sisters and they were oblivious to my presence in the seat beside them. I rummaged in my knapsack for the diary and opened it to the first blank page. "June, 1989. To Alexandra. Try to know what you see and write what you know. Love Mom." I clicked my technical pencil and stared at the page.

Ben kept a journal which he filled with memorabilia from his travels. He even looked at his home city through the eyes of a traveller and would glue-stick into it concert programs, movie stubs, interesting place-mats from greasy spoons, photographs, letters, newspaper articles, and postcards, not to mention poems. He told me I could leaf through them whenever I wanted, a kind of Glasnost policy of his : "No secrets. Now what about you?" He was surprised when I said that I didn't keep a journal. He thought I had the eyes of a diarist.

What did I write about that day on the plane? I didn't write about the events leading up to my departure, about quitting my job, or about the tensions with my mother. I felt I had sealed them with a letter to the principal, finished them off with a smart *bye* on the phone to my mother. I didn't have the power to observe that these were the very forces pushing me into the arms of Ben who, in the course of a year, had regained his exotic status who, with his enthusiasm for new experiences, promised me a thousand ways to re-make myself. I had rejected him once, erased him from my body's memory in much the same way I had erased the rhythms of the rink. But in our year apart, my longing became something else, acquired a weight and unwieldiness that my thoughts and words couldn't carry. My longing had branched into a thousand possibilities over which my mother invisibly presided and from which Ben would save me.

I recall thinking that my life to that point was over. No more lesson plans, no more marking. I would soon be breathing Czech air and searching for a glimpse of Vaclav Havel in the bars around Prague. I should have ordered slivovitz, I thought, licking the salt from the rim of the plastic bar glass.

I couldn't afford to see my actions as reactions, would not have been able to begin again had I understood my impulse to re-make myself as a reaction against something or as the realization of random longing. I certainly didn't see my trip as a quest, though I had spent the past two years tracing quest motifs with my high school students. They thought I invented connections between life and literature and looking back, they were right, I did invent them, but where did that impulse come from?

Bunched in the aisle seat, too excited to sleep, I became the omniscient traveller, the all-seeing eye, the roving recorder of adventure. I felt myself growing bolder and more detached with each gulp of my soupy drink. With sudden inspiration, I pulled out one of the history books I had brought and began to make notes about the history of the

Austro-Hungarian Empire. Overwhelmed by the wealth of material, I skipped up to 1938, when Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia. "Would the German army have overthrown Hitler if the Allies had made it clear that they'd go to war over Czechoslovakia?" As the big IF of history passed through my brain, down my arm and onto the beautiful bonded pages of my new journal, I felt my spirits soar. I gripped the arm-rests and inhaled. Once, twice, three-times — I couldn't get enough oxygen into my lungs. My life was about to begin. Prague, Dvorak, secret police, dissident politicians, Karlo-Vivary! Ben! Oh Ben, the love of my life, I was returning home!

# 3

I sat, squashed and tired, on the bottom bunk in the Trpisovsky's children's room listening to Ben and Jindra in the hallway.

"Tomorrow you come to Institute. The driver brings you. At ten."

I heard Ben's patient "yes," and the door slid open and closed. He passed me a little yellow paper.

EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY
*a Vzdelavaci centrum KKS Usti nad Labem*
-vyuku vedou kanadsti Alexander Adamsova a Ben McLeish.

There was more but I only got as far as our names.

"They're misrepresenting you," he said. "Students will flock to see the man with the ova."

I hadn't noticed the typo.

"Jindra's pasted them all over Usti," said Ben. "He thinks the turn-out will be great. He also wants us to join them in the living room for a glass of wine."

I groaned. Since arriving in Usti that afternoon, I had been seized with sharp gas pains. I put my feet up and held them in place on the mattress above me.

"Give me a few minutes, " I begged, "to fart."

"You're disgusting," said Ben and disappeared through the sliding door. A few minutes later, strains of Dvorak's *Slavonic Dances,* filled the small apartment.

The gas was bad, it was true, but I also just needed a few minutes alone. Ben and I had been together constantly since he greeted my plane in Prague the day before and now we were together, in a small town near the East German border, sharing a bunk-bed and preparing for our classes at the Cultural Institute the next morning.

My arrival in Prague was a blur of conflicting emotions. I saw Ben immediately after passing through customs; his head rose above the crowd and the sight of it made me glad. He had grown a beard and his face seemed whiter than I remembered. But then I thought I was mistaken, because he was holding hands with a woman. Someone tapped my shoulder and I lost sight of him in the throng of travellers and when my eye lit on him for the second time, he had dropped the woman's hand and was advancing towards me. If I hadn't noticed the hand-holding, I might have felt differently, but as it was, it didn't seem right to give in to a slow motion rendition of re-uniting lovers. He was wearing faded jeans with threadbare knees and a lumpy V-neck sweater and his smile broadened with each step. He put his arms around me and kissed me on the lips, a wet kiss that tasted like smoke and saliva and dried instantly on my mouth into a sticky patch that took on a sour smell. "Hi-ya, Alex, " he smiled shyly.

There was an awkward second. I didn't know what to do, so I hugged him more emphatically than I intended and ran my fingers through his hair. Over my shoulder, the *Education for Democracy* people were staring. The tall woman approached us and Ben moved a step back so that we were about twelve inches apart — a safe, chummy distance and introduced us. Eva's height took me off guard. Beside her, Ben seemed small, almost delicate. In my confusion, I felt apologetic. I devised a mask of confidence and shook Eva's hand. She nodded, said she had to go to the washroom and strode away with the tight, fluid steps of a dancer. It was difficult not to register her curves. "She's concerned to meet Westerners," said Ben, a little too off-handedly.

"Concerned? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's right. You can say that. She's going to save you from the Kolej Kajatanka, that's the dorm for volunteers and she's invited you to her place."

"No she hasn't," I said, fighting the tightness in my chest. I was beginning to doubt the wisdom of this.

"Trust me. And her flat is right downtown. An incredible location, within walking distance to everything."

What could I say? I felt betrayed. My hands were clammy. I had travelled all this way to meet Ben's lover? Were they lovers? I wondered, in a weird flash of objectivity, whether it was my ego or my heart that was smarting, and making it difficult to breathe.

A pimply man with a clip-board approached us, told us that his name was Mitch, that he was from Alabama, and that he was in charge. I asked Mitch where Ben and I would be teaching. "This is a wait and see society," he said, with great solemnity. He flipped through some papers. "You two will have to come to the office tomorrow. We'll know more then."

We headed off to Eva's apartment on Siroka Street, by the old Jewish Cemetery. From the back seat of her Skoda, I watched the muscles in her shoulders flex as she shifted gears. Eva was in very good shape. "Mitch is a fool," she said in a sultry voice. It was easy to imagine her astride Ben, moaning and scratching him with her long purple fingernails. A series of scenes ran through my head — Eva and Ben thrashing on the floor in the kitchen, fucking in the shower, on the dining room table, against the wall — all those places that I never had the heart for, nor the fortitude, for my knees and back and tail-bone are prone to bruising, and I can never orgasm if I'm in pain. Eva looked like she could come anywhere. I rested my jaw in the palm of my hand, and stared out the window at the smoggy skyline. It could have been the skyline to any sprawling, polluted city. But it wasn't, I thought, unrolling the window and letting the rush of air whip my face. I was in *Prague*.

We parked on the sidewalk in front of a very old stone building and kicked through the pigeon shit to the entrance hall. It was very dark and smelled of boiled cabbage and onions. Eva punched a light switch and instructed Ben to stay. "Hurry," said Eva, as the lights clicked off and we were once again plunged into darkness. "Ben," she hollered. "Light!" The lights turned on again and I could hear Ben running to catch up, taking the stairs two at a time. "The lights are worth two floors," he said into my ear when he caught up. His breath on my neck, the darkness, the effort of the stairs, made me reckless and I swung around and kissed his forehead. Eva's latch-keys clanked and

the door creaked open. "Hurry, " she said, striding through the hallway. "I am late for work. I must go."

The flat was spacious with high ceilings and elaborate French doors leading to a living room shagged with a blue nylon carpet. We unloaded my suitcases beside Ben's sleeping bag. The room was sparsely furnished, with a glass table, a broad fold-out couch and a plant in a macrame hanger. It smelled sweet and stale, like Ben's saliva. Eva left without saying good-bye. "She's staying with a friend tonight," said Ben. He took off his V-neck and put his arms around me. His skin was waxy and grey and there was an angry pimple under his collar bone. He was very thin but in the year away, he had acquired two little cushions on his hips, the size of bread rolls. His disdain for the body irritated me. I felt mildly revulsed, but his scent was familiar and out of habit, I put my face on his skinny shoulder and hugged him. His arms tightened around me. "God, it's so good to see you." He sounded like he was going to cry. I apologized weakly and stepped back. "Let's wait a bit. I...I dunno. Let's just spend some time first, "kay?" I hated myself for my awkwardness. For my little girl protest. Eva would never speak that way, I was sure.

"Aren't you glad to see me?"

"What a thing to say!" I protested. I shook my head and smiled. "I'm....*thrilled* "

He looked at me doubtfully.

"What am I supposed to think, Ben. I come off the plane and you're holding hands with this woman. I mean — "

"I'm telling you," said Ben passionately, "we're just friends." He moved away from me and rummaged in his knapsack for a clean shirt. Guiltily, I turned to wash up.

"Let's go and get a pivo," he said.

"A what?"

"Czech beer. It's absolutely the best in the world."

On the street, the cobblestones were slick and I skidded over them on my sandals. "Careful," said Ben, waiting for me to catch up. He stopped beside the stone wall that encircled the Old Jewish cemetery. "Take a look." Through a hole, I could see dozens of thin weathered headstones, falling over each other like bad teeth. It was now early evening and the sun was angling through the linden trees in weak beams. It lit the faces of a group of young men in skull caps, solemnly positioning pebbles on the headstones.

"The cemetery is a major thing. I come here a lot to write. Something about the place... it's moving as hell. The cemetery and the Jewish Museum are all that's left after the slum clearances." He stopped and fished out his journal. "I'll take you to see the museum. They have this collection of drawings by the children of Terezin — you know, the fortress that the Nazis turned into a concentration camp. I'd like to see it again. Horrific. 15,000 children exterminated. 40,000 Jews in total. He passed me a pamphlet. "Read this," he said, excitedly.

"The history of The Old Jewish Town is simultaneously a testimony to the Democratic traditions of the wide strata of the Czech people to whom any manifestation of national chauvinism and racism are wholly foreign."

"Farcical, eh? I'll read you excerpts from Kafka's biography at the pub," he said, taking the pamphlet and stuffing it into his pocket. "There's a few brutal modern-day connections."

"I can't wait." He looked over at me quizzically and I immediately felt guilty. I'd failed my first foreign experience. "That's terrible. Very ironic," I said. "I'll go tomorrow. It's very — it looks really interesting. It's conveniently located, anyway."

We continued walking. I felt deflated. I was starving. He took my hand and squeezed. "I swear it. Eva is just a friend. Have you read *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* ?"

"I started it on the plane —"

"Well, you are my Tereza and Eva is my Sabina." He was very serious.

"I'd rather be Tomas," I said. Then: "You don't have to explain anything, Ben. Really."

"Good," he said.

We continued through the mazy streets, past stucco and marble buildings, a panel of leering stone faces and finally, a cheerful Kukama, where people sat eating cake. Then the cobblestones smoothed out, and we found ourselves in a broad open space that had the air of a movie set. "The Old Town Square," said Ben. He pointed to the statue at the center of the square and we sat down on the steps. "This part of Prague was occupied by the Germans and never bombed. Pretty wonderful, isn't it?"

"Yes," I said.

"This city astounds me, Alex. There are entire worlds around each corner. You're going to love it. It's exhilarating to be here. This statue—" he gestured towards the man on the horse —" is Jan Hus. He wrote *Good Soldier Sveik*. Have you heard of it?"

"No."

"I can't find it anywhere. But every Czech person raves about it. Eva says it's good fun. I've heard there's a Jan Hus *society* in London. C'mon, you must be dying for a pivo."

We strolled past a tall tower.

"The Powder Tower," said Ben. "Yesterday, people were lined down the block to get in. Exposition of Communist crimes — forty years of shit is being aired — this morning I saw a huge bust of Stalin being paraded up and down Wencelas Square. . . probably over now, but you'll be able to see the hunger strikers, the students, at the base of Wencelas—where they staged the revolution." I was running to keep up with him. "Oh, that street leads to Narodni, where Civic Forum keep their offices, and that one goes to the Charles Bridge and The Prague Castle. The Old Town. Absolutely incredible. Not to be missed. We can get an incredible view of the city from across the river. The Charles Bridge is really something."

"I need a good night's sleep," I said, stopping in front of a rack of postcards. Ben and I lunged for the same one. "Didn't sleep on the flight? You would have been a good communist. The bars all close down at eleven o'clock and the locals go home to sleep. You can tell who's foreign ... all these thirsty people walking around, looking in pivnicy windows — that's what they call the pubs — that's how I met Eva. Oops — I don't have to explain anything, do I?"

I struggled with my coins. "Just give him five crowns," said Ben. "But yeah, I was walking around, not sure what was happening, why the bar I was drinking at — U-Flecku, I have to take you there, it's classic — why it had emptied out so fast when I met up with a Dutch couple and you know the Dutch —"

I nodded, holding my postcard like a map in front of me.

"This man ran a leather bar in Amsterdam and he was pissed that everything was closing up. But we found a vinarna—that's what they call the wine bars — and Eva was serving. She was great. She explained it all."

"And then offered you a place to stay?"

'Well, not exactly. I was at this hostel near the bus station and it was fine. A cheerful place." He paused. "Here we are."

It was crowded and very smoky in the bar. The beer glowed in the haze. "There," Ben shouted over the din. "Hurry!" We sat down on hard chairs and Ben nodded at the three fat men whose table we'd joined. Then he pulled out a pack of *Petras* - "Havel's brand of cigarettes," he said, and held up two fingers to the waiter. A second later, the beer splashed down in front of us and the waiter leaned over and pencilled two lines on a slip of paper. "Our bill," explained Ben. "They tally it up at the end of the binge. Nazdravi!" He raised his stein. "That means cheers. Glad you could make it to Prague, Miss Adamsova."

"Ova?"

"All women have one. Like Martina Navritalova."

"Cheers," I said. The beer was delicious.

"Honest Injuns, Alex. Eva is just a friend. You might even like her. She's been invaluable. Like my own personal tour-guide —"

"Hmm." I was tired of Eva. I wished he'd shut up about her.

"You know, " he said, smiling, "I think you're jealous. Alex Adams is actually jealous. Like blow my mind."

"No."

"Are too!"

"No, really. I'm not."

"You shouldn't be. Eva's got a full-time lover."

He read my mind.

"I've been very careful. Have you?"

"Yes," I said.

"Have you been seeing anyone?"

I hesitated.

"Aha! What's his name?"

"Vladimir," I said.

"Liar," he responded, instantly.

"Roberto?"

"No. Come clean."

"Ok. Brad."

"Aha!" he chortled. "Can't stay away from those Tiny Tories, can you?"

This was an old joke. We bantered like this for a while and then Ben got a funny look on his face, a kind of mock-shame, and folded his arms across his chest. "Miss Adamsova, I do believe — yes, it's true, it's happening, right here, in the Bonaparte Pivnicy — a Baltic boner, a Slavonic hard-on, an erection the size of Russia!" He leaned forward to whisper something but I cut him off.

"For me or for Eva?"

"Yay!" said Ben joyously. "She's jealous! Ready to roll? Lots to see."

We ended up an hour later in the Slavia Cafe. Ben would have preferred to keep walking, there was so much more to show me, more pointy buildings, more statues, more churches, more nooks, more crannies, but after climbing the hills up and around the grounds of the Prague castle, I started to fade. Ben's enthusiasm was too much. All those places to commit to memory : their vowelless names dissolved into nothing before I could even repeat them. I was irritated by the way Ben pronounced everything with an accent, a kind of stage Russian, but I was also impressed by his flamboyant independence and unselfconscious curiosity. He had started to learn the language and was insistent that I remember that the *c*'s sounded like *tz*'s

"A very *in* place," said Ben, in a conciliatory tone. He would have preferred to walk another five miles to an out-of-the-way vinarna. "This is where Havel and his friends met." It was late, past eleven, but the cafe was still humming. It was a pleasant place with fading art deco panels and fringed lamp shades: exactly what I imagined an old-style Eastern European meeting house should be. I felt my enthusiasm return, smiled wearily at the waiter as he served our beer, had an urge to have a cigarette.

"No, Alex," said Ben, lighting my Petra cigarette. "You're going to hold me responsible for this. Your mother will find out and have me castrated."

"Maybe, but that's a long way off," I said recklessly, drawing the smoke into my lungs.

"It suits you," he said approvingly. "You're a natural. At least the habit won't cost you much. This pack was only *twenty-five cents*. Almost makes you wonder whose society is freer, eh? By the way does your mother know you're here with me?"

"Yes," I lied. "Of course."

"And?"

"And what?"

"Come-off it, Alex. I know how she feels about me."

"I don't give a shit what she thinks." But I could see that Ben was only half-listening. He had a short attention span when it came to personal things, ". . . all that is personal, soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt," he'd quoted before leaving for Paris, during one of the tortured meetings we had in my Hagarsville apartment when I decided not to join him. He liked to see himself as a large affectionate dog, a friendly Saint Bernard, whose loyalty ran deep and whose needs were straight-forward. His sneaker was tapping mine, seeking confirmation. Suddenly, I felt the need to redeem myself, to demonstrate that it was my desire for experience that had led me to Prague. I began to talk, with a kind of baffled intensity, about the revolution, the upcoming elections, the unmistakable air of newly-acquired liberty. But the discussion that I initiated was soon out of my jurisdiction as Ben, whose interest was diverted quickly by current affairs, started in about The Thirty-Sixers, the Slansky affair, the Party purges, Gottwald, Krushchev. Bored, I turned the discussion to more basic matters : *Education For Democracy*.

"They bustle but they're not very efficient," said Ben. "We could end up anywhere. I'd like to stay in Prague but so would everybody. A small town might be interesting." He put his foot back on mine. His pupils were so big that his eyes looked black. "Do you want to go together?"

"Do you?"

He looked exasperated. "Yes," he said simply and got up to go the bathroom.

What was I starting up again? I thought about the series of random events which had led me to him. My mother's phone call : "*There's been a revolution;*" a swim-suit post-card; an early morning phone call; a skeptically raised eye-brow at the Chateau dining room; a bean-sprout on the principal's lip. Could it have just as well been otherwise? I decided not. It was as though one decision had set in place a blue-print and the blue print had its own private logic. I ordered another beer and an outrageously expensive platter of cheese and cold meats. With grim determination, I inhaled my cigarette and waited for my optimism to return. My feet were killing me.

When Ben left for Paris, I had been relieved. All sorts of weighty emotions fell away and I rose into the arms of Brad Broad, the Hagarsville town dentist. Brad Broad was a big, marriage-minded guy, with a hearty laugh. He made Ben's intensity seem neurotic. "Analyze my cock," he would say. "Not my brain." His manliness was spirited and refreshing but he sensed my reluctance to settle down and left me for an orthodontist from Toronto. Brad and I met for a coffee after his engagement was announced in the *Hagarsville Daily* and I congratulated him. I thought it was the honorable thing to do. He told me I was cold and then, with the kind of aggressive candor I admired, he asked me why I had wasted his time if I had never had any intention of marrying him. "Look, Brad," I'd said, a little flattered, "I'm only twenty-one and I'm hardly ready to settle down." I asked him what he'd been doing when he was twenty-one. Brad was twenty-six. "Drinking *strip- and-go-naked* from frat-house punch bowls," he admitted.

All that beer had made Ben and me careless and we got lost looking for Eva's apartment on Siroka street. I had to pee so badly that I was forced into a shadowy street corner to relieve myself. I wiped myself with a page from Ben's journal and let him search while I sat on some steps and wondered if it had always been this way, wondered if it would continue this way forever, both of us lost, Ben looking, me waiting. A soft rain blew, chilling the air, and looking skyward I watched a load of pigeon shit, thready and white, fall through the mist into my lap.

4

We slept through our meeting at *Education For Democracy* and were awakened by a sharp rapping at the front door.

"Ben! You are there?"

It was Eva, taller than the day before, in a purple blouse with matching eye shadow that bloomed like butterfly wings to her temples. She was wearing a tiny black skirt and shiny pumps. I gazed up at her, feeling a creeping inferiority. "Ben's in the bathroom," I said, limply.

She ignored me."Ben? I am late for work. Let me in." She opened the bathroom door and shut it firmly behind her.

I went to the living room and looked at myself in the glass table top. My hairline looked more uncertain than ever. I adjusted my bangs so that they formed a little fringe over my forehead and dressed in a hurry : a white T-shirt to show off my small breasts and a pair of jeans. I found my sandals and tried to fix the broken strap, but the smell of urine, from the night before, filled my nostrils and I pitched them aside and stepped into my running shoes.

Eva drove us to the building which housed the *Education For Democracy* office on Revolucni street. It was drab and dirty and the elevator was broken. A man behind a window waved us towards the stairs. Mitch greeted us on the third floor."The Marlborough Man is dead," he drawled. "And you are late." He said something to Eva in Czech which made her roll her eyeballs and we followed him into a make-shift office and watched him struggle with his clip-board. "Uh —your names again?"

We told him.

"Right, Right. You're together, right? Well, it looks like Usti for you. He asked for the spelling.

"Of Usti?" asked Ben. "U-S-T-"

Mitch glared.

"Oh, our *names* —B-E-N-"

"Ok, ok, got it," said Mitch, writing our names in a little space beside USTI NAD LABEM. "We have a man....a good man... uh. . . was that Adam with an 's' or without?"

"With."

"Hah....got it ...that's the name of my home town. Adamsville, Alabama—quelle *co-in-see-dawnce*.—the head of the Kultural Institute in Usti Nad Labem is looking for a couple. You'll stay with his family. You'll be leaving right away. He's waiting, downstairs."

"Right away? We don't have our things!"

"G'wan and get 'em, then."

Eva was furious. She yelled at Mitch in Czech and Mitch raised his eyebrows and regarded Ben admiringly. "Eva doesn't like this arrangement," he said. And then: "Look, will you take it or not? It's getting difficult to place people, especially as a couple."

"We'll go," I said.

Eva had to take us back to Siroka Street to get our things. She stood, arms crossed, eyes smouldering wolfishly, as we packed. She helped us get our things down the stairs to the front street. Then she turned to Ben, spat in his face, leapt into her little Skoda and sped away.

"Just friends, eh?" I said to Ben as we walked in the direction of the office. The weight of our duffel bags and knapsacks made conversation impossible.

# 5

Jindra Trpisovsky greeted us with a warm, bulgey-eyed smile. He sported a huge walrus moustache and a toupee made of a wiry grey-brown material.

"Velcome!" he said.

"Hello!" we responded.

In a few minutes, we were speeding down a narrow highway. Jindra turned and waggled his bottom teeth with the massive finger of his free hand."Teeth," he roared. "We stop for my teeth." Chronic gum disease, we later learned, had forced Jindra on to a liquid diet and removed all the joy from his trumpet playing. We passed a sign that read LITOMORICE. The driver screeched to a stop in front of a squat white building and Jindra got out. Ben had his nose in the guidebook and was underlining something with his pen.

"Usti nad Labem is. . . are you ready? *thee* most important industrial center on the Elbe." He listed off a dozen industries. I felt glum as he recounted an article he remembered reading while he was still in Paris, an article about the pollution belt that extended across the borders of East Germany, Czechoslovakia and Poland. He seemed pleased, however, that there was a castle in Usti nad Labem. Ben loved castles. Jindra returned, swinging a little white bag. He showed us his new bridge. "Teeth," he shouted, grimacing to give us a good view of his diseased gums. He held the bridge next to his face and, indeed, the bridge looked healthier.

A quarter of an hour later, we crossed over the steel bridge spanning the Labe river. "USTI!" shouted Jindra, pointing to a small sign at the end of the bridge. "NAD LABEM — this means the river!" We bumped over the tram tracks that converged in a thick network of steel arteries on the town's main street, reading the signs on the

buildings and trying to guess what they meant : CHEDOK; INTERHOTEL BOHEMIA; AUTOBUSOVE NADRAZI.

"That's the communist newspaper building," hissed Ben, triumphantly. "*The Rude Pravo.*"

We turned onto a winding street and ascended a long hill to the outskirts of town. Grey desolate buildings loomed on either side. A band of smog hung suspended between the evening sky and the low, blocky buildings and gave the skyline a weird three-layer effect. Finally, we pulled into a desolate parking lot and began unloading our bags.

The apartment block where Jindra and his family lived on Dimitrivova Street was one of a hundred cement structures, a Soviet-inspired housing complex that stretched out across the crest of the hill. Jindra's wife, Dobka, greeted us. She was pretty in an exhausted way and wore a T-shirt with no bra. "Clara, Marta, not here," she said, as if speaking the words caused her pain. Not until we had spent several weeks sleeping in their bunk-bed did we learn that the children had been sent away, not to accommodate our arrival, though in fact it worked out this way, but to breath the good air at a Moravian Mountain Camp where photosynthesis still occurred. Dobka showed us their photographs : Marta, blonde and leggy with a long, yellow pony-tail, had been sick all winter with bronchitis caused by the poor air and heavy industry, and Clara, an older, sturdier version of her sister, who had similar health problems about which Dobka was vague. Later, our students told us that this was typical — Usti had a high incidence of lung disease, twice the national average, I think they said.

The apartment was comfortable, bright ,and spotless. Each closet was filled to the ceiling and the effect was to sound-proof the walls, create a density of material that gave the apartment the illusion of solidity and permanence. And yet the doors were accordion sliding doors, the walls thin, and the space limited. We ate dinner : a wealth of potato dumplings and beef goulash. Dobka kept adding to the meal as it went along : a plate of pickled beets, a small bowl of fried onions, a basket of salted rolls. She placed each item on the table with an anxious smile. Worried about his new teeth, Jindra sucked the juice and placed the beef in neat rows on his plate. I let Ben carry the conversation—a vague exchange about Canada and Education For Democracy—smiled

sociably, and said *diquee* a hundred times. Dobka refused to let us help her with the dishes. "No, no," she said, waving us away. And then :"francais?" she asked.

"Oui, un peu."

She laughed timidly and said, "Moi aussi. Moi, je parle juste un petit peu, aussi."

A few minutes later I came across Ben in the kitchen. He was drying dishes and Dobka looked pleased.

# 6

I put away my journal, marking my spot with the post card I had bought in Prague of the Old Town Square, and joined the group in the living room. Jindra was showing Ben his collection of jazz albums : Louis Armstrong, Roy Elridge, Charlie Mingus, Duke Ellington. He held up an issue of "Dizzy on the Riviera," a gift from their Parisian friend: "A bit too-" he began.

"Over the top?" supplied Ben.

Jindra ignored him, searching for the right phrase. "A bit too crazy," he said, and, with a satisfied smile, filed it under "G." "You like jazz?" he yelled at me. In the face of such avuncular good-cheer, my "yes" sounded paltry and I looked at Dobka with new understanding. Maybe Jindra had bleached her into silence and fatigue. She certainly looked tired, splayed there on the couch, one hand dangling over the arm-rest, the other holding wine by the rim of the glass, as though she meant to drop it into a sink of suds. I smiled when I noticed her slippers—they were like my mother's—high-heeled and decorated with tufts of fur. Jindra was waiting for some names. I could only think of Count Basie, whose strains I had heard a month before in the dining room at the Chateau.

"Ahh," he said happily. "The Count. Very good." He put on "One o'clock Jump," cranked the volume, and did a little jig. "No children," he panted, re-filling our crystal tumblers with wine. "Is sweet. The wine. The life. And the life when the children are children and not here is more sweet."

# 7

"When you see *plz* run for cover. Don't pass go. Don't collect $100 dollars. It means *slug*. My gross-out list now contains the following: fat, suet, lard, caterpillars, liver, tongue, eel, thin gruel, carp, and tripe-soup."

"What's wrong with thin gruel?" I asked.

"It's thin!"

We were sitting in a wine-bar, waiting for our friend Milan to join us, writing down food-words from the student vocabulary list. Ben suggested this would help us make informed choices at the restaurants and pubs where we ate our evening meals after teaching our classes at the Institute. I had only written one word "muzeckova," or brain-omelette.

We had been in Usti Nad Labem a month. As Ben's guide-book had promised, the town was the site of a dozen industries, factories, and chemical plants. Smoke poured out of the chimneys and turned the buildings black ; it clung to the wind and turned our throats greasy; it sifted down through the sky and settled in our laundry, our hair, our fingernails. I gave up jogging, took up smoking, started to enjoy the industrial grit of the place, the destruction causes by the Allied bombs at the end of the war. Ben had taken to singing a Pogues song, and its lyrics rose up like an anthem from our lips as we about our daily routine, teaching, eating, visiting with Milan : "dirty old town, it's a dirty old town."

Jindra had appointed Milan to act as our official translator and tour-guide because Milan's English was the best in Usti nad Labem. He had learned it from pirated and highly illegal cassettes and refined it through a long-time correspondence with his Dutch publicist. His tongue threw together phrases from The Stones, The Clash, Syd Vicious, George Orwell, Homer, and a Beginner English text, and the effect was almost lyrical. During the day, Milan worked as an administrator at the language

institute, but at night he was a drummer in a punk rock band. He had invited us to see his gig and he was late.

Our classes were going as well as could be expected. Ben and I taught together and made some embarrassing discoveries about each other. I abandoned the student food list and wrote my discoveries down:

I

1. I can't spell.
2. I have a tendency to bullshit.
3. There are many ways of speaking about the past.
   a. Simple past
   b. Past perfect
   c. Past continuous
   d. Present perfect continuous
   e. Past-perfect continuous
4. I don't know the percentage of French-speaking Canadians.
5. My mother is a Senator and I can't explain how Canadian Parliament works.
6. I am a show-off.
7. I can be a bitch.

11

1. Ben knows his grammar, though he couldn't explain a modal verb.
2. Ben can spell.
3. Ben doesn't need to bullshit because he knows all the answers to the questions the students ask.
4. Ben explained how the Senate works and I hated him for this.

I took a puff of my cigarette. It looked bad for me.

5. Ben is an ineffective class-room facilitator.

This made me feel better.

6. Ben uses his arms too much. The students think he's gay.

This didn't make me feel better. How did I know what the students thought of him? In fact, they seemed to like him, were impressed by his knowledge, his travels, his understanding of the situation in their country.

7. Ben talks too fast.

This was true but hardly an embarrassing discovery.

The truth was, Ben was a better English as a Second Language teacher than I was. But I didn't write this down.

8. Ben never brushes his teeth, never uses deodorant, and smokes too much.

I felt a little disgusted with myself so I began a new page and turned my mind to higher things.

Our classes were held at the Vzdelavaci centrum KKS, a brown stucco building in the heart of downtown Usti. Jindra had been the director of the institute until the November Revolution, when the only language classes available were Russian and German. He appeared to be at the helm of the changes, introducing English and French classes and arranging for us to meet with local teachers, people who quizzed us about capitalism and Canada and marvelled at Ben's knowledge of Czechoslovakia's history and political situation. We were the first native English speakers in forty years to walk down the drab hallways of the institute and this fact forced me to speak grammatically for the first time in my life. I found myself scraping idioms, gutting obscenities, hardening participles and gerunds into never before pronounced *ed*'s and *ing*'s and generally, using generic words and phrases whenever I could remember. Ben, on the other hand, said he had learned all this when he taught in Paris and it was second nature for him. Sometimes he spoke to me as though I were an ESL student.

The classes were run on a drop-in basis : Lubomir, Jiri, Milan, Ivana, Eva, Peter, and Manfred were our regulars. As a group, they were very pleasant. They didn't notice my spelling mistakes until Ben corrected them. They seemed to believe what I said about Canada until Ben corrected me. They relied on me for the enthusiasm and Ben for the content, and eventually, we gave in to our respective roles. They were

attentive, respectful, and insatiable, with one exception : Lubomir, who wanted to be elsewhere, who *was* elsewhere, somewhere far away where the English alphabet had no meaning. When I looked at him, his blue eyes grew bluer and he stopped blinking. Ben's gaze sent Lubomir lurching for the pail from which, as the self appointed board cleaner, he would pull a dripping rag and apply it to the notes we had made on the blackboard. Manfred, Lubomir's employee at the chemical factory, was impatient and looked like a frog. Jiri inserted "for example," whenever possible. Peter was a professional blue-grass banjo player, always an hour late and always dressed in the shortest cut-offs I'd ever seen. Ivana was a doctor with a flat freckled face and many questions about the past tense. The philosopher of the group was another Eva, this one, white haired and tidy: "thus it follows," she would say and frown down at her dictionary over the top of her reading glasses.

They were reverent about Havel. They told us stupid-policeman jokes and said that pollution worried them. They disliked Gypsies and wanted to visit Vienna. They told us about life in the regime — the fact that Czech weathermen were obliged to forecast perfect weather on the first of May, the constant shortages of toilet paper and Skoda parts; the butchers, gas pumpers, and door-men at International hotels, who grew fat off the deals they struck with corrupt high-ranking Communists and foreigners. Ivana told us she'd almost lost her job trying to improve kidney transplant technology. Eva told us that the sole woman on the Communist Party Central Committee was nicknamed *The Mattress*. It was also Eva who declared that the situation in the country, was, for forty years, "pure Kafka. The stupid prospered and the intelligent kept quiet."

I looked over at Ben. He felt me looking at him and he waved his hand without looking up from his book. *Living In Truth*. Always reading. And he remembered what he read, too. I sometimes felt anxious to absorb all of Ben's knowledge into myself and to claim it as my own. I had already appropriated some of his words and phrases : "what fun," "incredible," "absolutely." I had started to enunciate the 's' in 'yes' with the same up and down motion of my head that was Ben's. I found myself editing my reactions to the students, the people we met, the things we saw, wondering, without really thinking about where the impulse came from, what Ben would see and hear and notice, trying to make it interesting to him. I only let him read the passages where I'd had him in mind — the verbatim quotes from the students; election details; the excerpts from books and museum pamphlets and the detached observations where I'd used his eye. I'd guide him through the pages, censoring, editing, concealing. This was a sore

point. He said he wanted to know everything about me. He felt that compartmentalizing was unhealthy. I felt that I'd die if he read my journal.

Of course, our students assumed that we were a pretty serious couple. That we would live and teach together in a foreign country was proof enough. Eva teased us. "I would like to bake you a wedding cake!" But by all accounts, we *were* a serious couple — we did everything together, and with a few exceptions, had managed to get along. Ben seemed amazed by this, but in fact, I wasn't amazed at all. I had re-learned Ben's rhythms, taken up beer drinking, smoking, and sleeping late. I had stopped jogging, shopping, shaving and blow-drying. I had deciphered Ben's sentence structures, re-acquainted myself with his quirks, learned, once again, the difficult turns his mind took, and in a way, this was all much easier for me than standing my ground. For Ben knew this ground better than me, was a seasoned traveller, and I, well, I was a seasoned traveller in my own way, too. Ben travelled through the country and I travelled through Ben. The problem with Ben and I was sex.

I opened up my journal. Ben was engrossed in his book : he was copying down passages from Havel's "Letter To Dr. Husak."

SEX

Ben has learned some new techniques. He has become obsessed with busying himself *down there*. I feel like waving good-bye to him when he starts his descent. "So long — have a nice time — don't forget to write!

Something's out of synch. Foreplay is supposed to excite me, not put me to sleep.

I considered the possibilities. Where had Ben learned his munching?

1. Eva
2. Paris

I had no idea how many lovers he had in Paris. It seemed natural to assume he had learned it there. The french were very oral.

"Ben," I asked urgently."How many lovers did you have in Paris?"

"None." He regarded me lovingly. "I wasn't into it. I came close. *Once*. But I wasn't into it."

"How long were you with Eva?"

"I met her the day that I arrived. Why?"

A month. I returned to my journal.

If Ben would only stop munching our sex life could return to normal.

I wasn't so sure about this. What had our sex life been like before? The only word I could conjure up was "good." Our sex life had been good. I had orgasms effortlessly, had never really thought about it. I have always known that for some women, orgasms were, well, rare, elusive even : they were things to be sought. If I didn't have one, I would get on top the next time and make it happen. My mother said she didn't have one until she was thirty. She said she didn't know what had happened when she did. I had my first one at eleven while watching *The Jetsons* on TV. I used an electric tooth brush, a technique I had read about in one of my mother's *Cosmo* magazines. My sex life with Brad had been quite a different matter. Like *Twenty-Minute Work-out*. Thinking about Brad, didn't help. He seemed to have nothing to do with Ben.

Ben didn't *necessarily* learn munching from Eva. He may have developed the technique simply to extract an orgasm, the way Brad Broad extracted a tooth, kind of dig in and pull it out. Had my orgasms stopped because of it?

I had tried using body language. I had tried sliding down with him when he started his pilgrimage, tried tugging his head back up to me. I had even gone as far as to pull his hair. Finally I said "STOP IT! *PLEASE!*" Ben told me I shouldn't be shy : he loved the taste. "Loosen up, Alex — don't fight it," he said. "Experience your pleasure."

I don't mind a little licking. It was the *extent*. Ben had licked away my desire.

"Yay!" said Ben, startling me." Our man is here."

# 8

Milan was dressed in his evening clothes : a skin-tight black T-shirt, ripped around the shoulders to suggest a fringe; a series of silver chains that clanked as he walked; and black jeans. He looked pumped and muscular, as though he would burst through the skin of his clothes, split the seams and continue on naked. All that muscle, on that small, boyish frame, gave him a trollish air. He sat down and roughed the spikes in his hair. The gel scrunched. He ordered a coffee.

"I want to take you to the student pub after the performance. I want you to meet my friend Mitze. He is visiting from California."

Milan had taken us many places and acted as a sort of guide to the unofficial cultural life of Usti (a flourishing underworld which Jindra seemed to know very little about) some folk concerts, a Czech production of Havel's "The Garden Party," the student pub, where long-haired guitarists got drunk and played old Joan Baez tunes. He had also arranged for library cards at the Maxima Gorkeho public library where they were in the midst of a circulation crisis, as banned books found their way back onto the main shelves and into the hands of borrowers.

Jindra didn't say much about Milan, though Milan had made one reference about Jindra which seemed to resonate.

"Jindra changed hats, you know."

He had said it carefully, as though he were parting with a potentially explosive secret. Ben heard the measure in Milan's voice and didn't press him, but alone with me, Ben tried to assemble the pieces and concluded that Jindra must have some very unsavory secrets. "Why else would he have all that electronic equipment? The VCR? The big screen tv? The stereo? And what about Dobka's job at the Pedagogical Institute? Milan says that only the most blatant careerists and collaborators have been allowed to teach teachers." Ben wondered how he would have behaved had he grown

up in Communist Czechoslovakia. Once he said he would have fought and been exiled: "like fucking Solzhenitzyn, off to the Archipelego." But I think Ben's biggest worry was that he would have done what Jindra did.

Ben pulled out his map, a ragged, old Michelin map which gaped on the folds, and they conferred over it for a few minutes. I had adequate map skills but Ben's were better : he never had to turn the map to position himself on it. "See you there," said Milan, rushing off without paying for his coffee.

It was a long walk to the gig, through a wasted area of town, and the sight of all those ruined buildings with their crumbling steps made me feel depressed. I could taste the soot in my throat, feel my lungs tighten in protest, and I lifted my shirt and breathed through the fabric to filter out some of the smog. We turned a corner and continued up another street past more dingy buildings, more dark, inscrutable windows. One of an endless procession of streetcars lurched and clanked by, and in its wake, a trail of exhaust. "It's enough to turn you into a radical Green," said Ben, coughing. "Look at that." We stopped to look at the graffiti on the base of a ruined old building : lovers' names drawn into the soot, a white heart on black. "Are you sure we're going the right way?" I asked. "This is creepy. We haven't seen a living soul since we started." Only the air seemed aiive : the way it hummed.

"This is it, I think." We squinted down at the map in Ben's hands and up at the number. The building was vibrating. Suddenly, the door at the top of the stairs burst open and we moved aside to let four punkers descend. There was a lot of leather and clanking. One of them pushed against me — another was banging a metal ashtray against his head as he walked. They crossed the street and disappeared into the student bar. A security guard with slitty eyes blocked our entrance.

"Milan, Milan," said Ben. "The drummer is our friend."

The man thrust his jaw forward and crossed his arms, but his eyes were on the four punkers who were returning already with large jugs of beer. As he stepped aside to let them in, we slipped past him into the auditorium and found chairs along the wall.

It was hard to locate Milan behind the curtain of body slammers on the dance floor. Their movements were twitchy and watching them made the muscles in my legs

jump, the way they do when I'm falling off to sleep. It was a disturbing scene that made me think of insane asylums you see in movies, the archaic ones where the patients loiter about in the wards having quarrels with themselves and performing baroque rituals of self-mutilation. A bald neo-nazi type clenched his jaw, arched backward, and with a scream threw his head down on the table in front of us. A girl with fuchsia hair hurled herself against him and they fell over and disappeared from sight. A space was cleared and a dozen or so dancers fell to the floor and started to jerk their arms and legs. A man with a video camera climbed up on the chair next to me and aimed it like a gun down at the floor-dancers. In the midst of this, I caught a glimpse of Milan, hunched over his drums, pumping his arms violently. The noise was unbearable.

A half hour later, Milan met us in the hallway and introduced us to Mitze, the man with the video-camera. Milan told us to go ahead and drink. He'd join us later. We followed Mitze past the security guard and down the stairs to the student pub across the street. "My business is Poker-Pizza," he announced with a smile that could have meant anything. I was struck by his eyes — he seemed to be staring at two different parts of my face. "And we clean the tables. If we don't, we get no business." He waved his arm and invited us to regard the pub through his eyes, the mountain of cigarettes in the ash tray, the tablecloth with its burns and crumbs and stains, the general tattiness and disregard for order and cleanliness in the little pub, in the pubs everywhere in Usti, everywhere, for that matter, in the country. Suddenly, he turned shy, fled and returned carrying three delicious-looking Budvar, Ben's favorite beer. He measured the foam, which was high as his index finger, and apologized to us. "Too much foam on the beer. But there is no incentive to give good business. It is terrible. And our houses. Not like they are in your country. Small and bad. How many rooms in your house in Canada?"

"One," said Ben, coolly.

Mitze looked surprised and there was an uncomfortable silence which he filled by reaching for his video-camera."Let me film you," he said.

Ben put his hand over his face. I smiled at the camera, automatically.

"You look like - what is her name-" He put the camera down and tried to recollect. "Meg! *What is her name*. She was in— I forget the movie."

We all tried to remember.

Mitze changed the subject. He told us about his pizza delivery service in LA, his wife, his three children, his escape from Czechoslovakia. "Milan would not come," he said mournfully. "I tried to make him come with me but he wouldn't leave. This is my first trip back to Usti in ten years —" He looked around impatiently. "I'm sorry," he repeated and went to get another round of beer himself. I had barely touched the first.

"Meg," I said to Ben. "Do I look like a Meg?"

"No," Ben replied. "Not even close."

Mitze returned with three more steins.

"Ahoy!" he said, ceremoniously.

"Nadrazi!" I toasted.

Mitze smiled. "This means bus station. You mean nazdravi."

We all drank.

"I thought I wanted to move back," he said, wiping his sleeve across his mouth. "I was always home-sick. But I won't return. Everyone here is lazy. They have forgotten how to work. They sit in offices all day and do nothing. Then they come here" — another wave, this time at an obese man seated on a barrel at the table next to us " — and drink all night. It is terrible. The country is ruined. It must be hard for you here. Why did you come?"

"Because it is a wonderful country," said Ben. "And a very interesting time in history. The elections next week are going to be change everything."

"You came to this country for the elections? You can't vote. You can't even get a drink on June 5th." He chuckled.

"June 8th," said Ben quickly.

Mitze gulped his beer. "A little joke—"

"Havel is a great man." said Ben. "I've been reading the essays he wrote in prison—you know, *Living in Truth* —but the essay that impressed me most was his open letter to Gustav Husak. The man is incorruptible—Havel, I mean—we should only be so lucky. Canadian politicians are shit—corrupt, small minded, self-serving—I mean, democracy—what is democracy, eh? Democracy can be *just* as insidious—another word for yuppy—consumerism—I could go on. Havel knows this."

"Oh yes, Havel, yes, he is good but he is more an entertainer than a politician. This isn't good. He may write well, I don't know this, I haven't read his plays, or this *Living Truth* book, you say, but what does he know about running a country? He will win of course but he will have many problems. The Slovaks want Dubcek. They are a militant group."

"Oh, come on. They're a small minority with a loud voice. Havel has integrity. He didn't leave when things got rough."

"Integrity?"

"Honesty," I supplied.

"Moral honesty," quipped Ben, glancing at me.

"We have talked enough about this," said Mitze lamely. He looked over towards the door. "Look. Our punker is here."

Ben was overjoyed to see Milan. He jumped up and hugged him. The men at the table next to ours laughed. One of them yelled something in Czech and Milan sneered. "It was wonderful to see you play," said Ben with great sincerity. "The band is tight...very together... incredibly—"

"Loud," said Milan with a grin.

"Well, hell, it's *punk*," said Ben, then: "I want a tape."

"Did *you* like it?" asked Milan, turning to me."This is a very particular kind of punk music, you know."

"I don't really know punk music," I replied, diplomatically.

Mitze held up his video camera. "I have one hour on film," he said. "The least a friend can do."

Next to Mitze, Milan looked like an old man. His hair was flopping over the shaved patch on his temple and in the pub light, it looked greasy and grey. He glanced up at me and I felt the blood rush to my cheeks. There was a flicker of something in his eyes that I recognized. He looked at me with a sad, ancient smile, and ran his fingers through his hair. His fingers were stained dark yellow.

Mitze checked the zipper of the camera bag and stood up to shake our hands. "I must return," he said. "I am sorry our country is so terrible."

"Oh Christ," said Ben, turning away.

"I like your country," I said.

"There are many problems. It will take a long time. The beginning and end of Vaclav Havel." He smiled and shook my hand.

"What's wrong with his eye?" asked Ben when Mitze was gone.

"He has a lazy eye," responded Milan. "He is very—"

"Don't say it," said Ben. "He is very sorry that he has a lazy eye."

Milan laughed and ordered more beer from a sweating waiter in a black vest. We sat in silence for a few minutes, smoking and observing the bustle around us. Then Ben pulled out his journal and flipped to the food list from the student vocabulary sheet. Looking me in the eye, Milan assured us that slug, brain-omelettes and the like, were unusual dishes, not usually available in Usti restaurants. Ben's journal had the same effect on people as baby pictures or vacation photos—it either got them oohing and awing or it put them to sleep. I felt the conversation slipping away as Ben guided it towards a Czech Language lesson, turned our night out into another fact-finding mission. Milan seemed tired and his words were skidding.

"Isn't that incredible?" said Ben.

I started.

"What?"

"There are fourteen ways to write the word barrel!" His eyes were shining and I felt a pang of love for pure, clear Ben. "Wow," I said. I knew my tone was off. I knew it came out sounding, so what.

# 9

"What an *ass-hole*," said Ben as we rode the Number 15 home to 14 Dimitrovova Street. "Talking about his country that way — returning like some ass-hole American who's made it — the American dream — a shitty little pizza joint in L.A. —"

I sat very still, listening to his angry words. He was drunk.

"And assuming we share the same shitty little vision, which, by the way, is a put-down to his so-called best friend. And the video-camera! Running around like a dweeb, filming alien culture. ' The least a friend can do,' he says, yah, well, as if Milan has a VCR to watch the video on — he doesn't even have a fucking telephone."

"Well," I said primly, "he didn't have to apologize. He probably said what he thought we wanted to hear, but that doesn't mean he believed it — he probably has good reasons for assuming we share the American vision." My argument sounded cool and rational in my own ears." Why wouldn't he think we'd judge the place through our own culture—"

There was disbelief in Ben's eyes. "He was an ass hole. I'm surprised that he and Milan are friends."

"They grew up together."

"They're different animals, altogether. That whole piss on your country attitude of Mitze's, is — it's despicable, that's what it is. You don't hear Milan pissing on his country —"

"What do you call punk rock? Praise ?"

"Come off it, Alex. You don't know punk music. You don't piss on your country. It's like pissing on your family."

"Oh, excuse me!" I regretted the tone that slipped in, the defensive little flame of self-righteousness, but I continued." So you're the authority on punk music now. Maybe you can explain it to me."

"You said, yourself—in the pub—that you didn't know punk music. You said it first. I'm only repeating what you said."

I felt a blast of dislike for Ben and a powerful surge of loyalty towards Mitze, my ally : we had failed Ben's morality test together. Mitze had wanted a better life, the chance to re-make himself, to start over, and here was Ben, the moral cop, blowing the whistle. "You think you have some *in* on what's cool," I said. "There's probably a lot of reasons that Mitze says what he says. You don't know the full story."

"S-not cool," said Ben. He was shaking his head and the things he wanted to say and wasn't were making his eyes do all sorts of weird things.

"*Snot cool*, " I imitated. I drooled the last word so I sounded loaded. Acting drunk made me snap out of my own beery haze and into a kind of hyper-consciousness. My head cleared and I was overcome with a certain consoling melancholy. I stared sadly out at the dark streets, identifying in the groans and creaks of the tram as it struggled up the hill, another ally. Ben was still shaking his head, still considering my words. This bothered me. Already I had forgotten what I'd said.

"Just isn't. Isn't at all. I don't need this. This is shit." He inched away from me so our thighs weren't touching.

"Why don't you announce it to the entire bus?"

The tram was full of partiers returning home and people were staring at us. I hoped nobody understood. Arguments in a foreign language lose their banality, sound exciting, mysterious.

"You don't get it, do you? I don't need this shit." He spoke rapidly.

"Get it out," I said, wearily. "What is this *thing* I don't get?"

"Ok. Ok. You asked. You make fun of the clothes they wear. You compare them. You single out things that can't be helped. You bullshit the students. I can't correct you without wounding your delicate little ego."

I flinched. He was right about the first three. I *did* make fun of the white ankle socks and I *did* make comparisons and I *did* single out things that couldn't be helped. But I wasn't hateful or malicious or condescending. And if I was, I didn't mean it that way. And I didn't bullshit the students, I just got in over my head, sometimes.

I told Ben that he was drunk. " You need fifteen quarts of beer to get up the courage to say what's on your mind. All your openness begins when you're stoned, or drunk, or in some altered state. I never know what I'm dealing with." My melancholy had been subsumed by a noble rage. I felt firm. In the tram window, my eyes were bright with honesty.

"This is shit. I can't say anything to you — you make me tread on eggs. Nag, nag, nag!"

"Deep down you're judging and hard."

"I don't need this — and don't use your Katherine voice on me."

"What?" This was dangerous territory and Ben knew it. "My *Katherine* voice?

"— forget it."

We missed our stop and got out a quarter mile down the road. It was dark, we were drunk and the buildings and bays of the housing complex loomed, almost the same color as the sky, row after row, after row. Ben slowed and fell behind. "It's over here! "

I picked up my pace. "You're dreaming. That's the way to the store. It's this way."

The only sound now, was of my own steps on the cement sidewalk, my quick, short breaths. I passed a bench that I recognized, but when I turned the corner, the buildings

didn't cohere into anything familiar. The image I had in my mind of the apartment door became a composite. I looked around for Ben, and a little unnerved to discover he hadn't followed me, I re-traced my steps past the bench to find him lying on the grass beside a hedge. "You've got the keys and you're going the wrong way," he said.

"Then take them!" I threw the keys at him. He caught them with one hand and threw them back at me. There was tinkle as they landed in the hedge. Peering into the thicket of leaves, I realized I had to pee. Very badly. "Oh, really great. They're gone. Good one!"

"Find them." His voice had turned vague, the way it got when he thought he was right. This maddened me. I tore at the branches. Ben was on his hands and knees now, moving towards me, his eyes like two dark caves above his beard. "Ruff! Ruff!" He lifted his leg and pretended to pee on me. "Stop it, Ben — down, down! " I shrieked. "They're gone. You find them—you threw them."

"You threw them first."

"At *you*. Not in the fucking ***hedge***, idiot!"

"Ruff! Ruff!" He licked my leg.

"Don't."

He stood up and nuzzled his face in my neck. His tongue was warm and wet.

"No, Ben. Don't."

# 10

I took a deep breath as we entered the Trpisovsky's apartment. Instant repose. Instant cheer. Our fight had energized me. The clarity I had achieved in the tram returned and we parted without a word in the hallway. Ben slammed the sliding door to the bed-room, and with a bounce in my step, I made my way to the kitchen.

Dobka looked up from a stack of student papers and pushed her chair back. Her hair was pulled off her face in a straggly bun and she looked exhausted. Jindra emerged from the toilet, a trail of fumes reminding him to close the door. "Oops," he said, happily. *Slam.* "You were where tonight?"

"We saw Milan's band tonight," I said, deciding my bladder would have to wait.

"It has given Ben a head-ache? Haha. You like this music? This, I do not understand," said Jindra. "I am a jazz-man." He broke an egg into a pot of rolling soup. "What is this music?"

"Punk."

"Yes, punk. Milan does travel with his band. Own to his each," he shrugged, lusty and pleased. He stirred the egg until the whites became stringy and opaque "Want a piece? No, some! It makes me sleep," he said. "Is good for my teeth." Deftly, he poured the mixture into a bowl and began blowing its steaming surface.

"No thanks," I replied and Dobka emerged from her silence with a low chuckle. Jindra's eyes bulged merrily and he joined her. *Haha.* "This is very good soup," he said. "You will be sorry!"

Ben didn't look up from his book when I entered the bed-room. He was lying on the top bunk with an ashtray balanced between his knees. The air was heavy with his cigarette smoke, and with an ostentatious cough, I opened the window to let in some

fresh air and began picking through the heap of clothes on the floor for something clean to wear to bed. The room was a mess but we hadn't managed to extinguish the phantom presence of the two little girls — they sat at the school desk, in the corner of the room, observing us with the steady eyes of window watchers. I looked around at the Slovakian pop-star posted on the walls; the locked cupboard which contained their jump-suits and school-uniforms ; the brush and comb set that lay beside Ben's money belt. Something about the brush and comb set touched me, made me feel sad for the destruction we were levelling on their room. I pulled on a T-shirt and climbed into the bottom bunk, feeling the air from the open window on my feet and ankles. A moment later Ben leaned over and shut the window with a slam. As he settled back to read, I heard the *ploof* of a wooden match lighting, watched the smoke from his cigarette swirl in strands across the room, and I could almost see the girls in the corner of the room, turning their heads away and giving weak, consumptive coughs. The idea of their thin arms scrubbing the walls and beating the carpets to clear the room of our poisons gave my sadness the virtuous quality it had had an hour earlier on the tram, a melancholy edged with the calm, clear, regret of the truth-seer. Alone in the too-short bed, tragically inhaling Ben's smoke, I turned over to pay further penance, put my face into the pillow, and replayed Ben's words in my mind. *Don't use your Katherine voice on me.* At that point, I heard him place the ashtray on the ledge and swing himself over the safety rail to the floor. "Alex," he finally whispered. "Can we talk?

He signalled me to move over and climbed into the bottom bunk beside me. The wall smelled faintly of mold and I touched its surface with my nose. He began to stroke my back. "Alex, you've changed. You never used to talk to me that way." His hand continued to stroke me."Please. Talk to me."

"I don't have anything to say."

He worked his free hand down along my spine and under my panties. "I love you, Alex," he whispered. I inhaled the odor of the wall and pressed my arms against my sides. "Don't," I said. I could feel my eyes well with tears and I tried to conjure up the anger I'd felt on the tram but there was only a crushing heaviness. "Don't," I repeated.

"What is it?" He lifted himself up on his elbows and tried to turn my head towards his. "Talk to me, Alex." His breath was sour and I wrenched my face away. The heaviness was pulling me down into it, and I just wanted him to go so that I could

sleep. I wanted him to stop confusing my body with his hands, stop massaging it into compliance. I exhaled, slowly, and under the pressure and movement, I felt my body relax, felt his hands move deeper into my muscles, the tips of his fingers touching bone, and lifting my arms above my head, I twisted over and drifted and it felt sweet. I was on my back drifting into sleep, stretching long and luxuriously under Ben's touch, warm on my face and breasts and thighs, warm between my legs.

I woke aroused. His face was lost between my thighs. He was licking me and rubbing himself on my shin bone. I could hear the familiar *click, click* sound that his jaw made when he ate. He felt my eyes and looked up. His nose and lips were glistening and on either side of his head, my thighs rose long in the shadow. The little girls in the corner of the room turned away, frightened. I reached down and touched the shadow between my legs, wanting to distinguish between my pubic hair and his moustache. The idea of them as one in the same suddenly struck me as comical. My fingers touched his face and Ben took them in his mouth and began to gnaw.

"Ruff! Ruff!" I fell back on to the pillow, laughing, feeling the tears on my cheeks, the wetness on my neck. With as much force as I could, I squeezed my skater's legs together until he gasped and rolled off the bed and finally, I could sleep in peace.

# 11

When does privacy become a lie? My mother always told me that women should cultivate mystery : "Never apologize; never explain," she would say. But at some point, the boundaries blur and withholding information from someone becomes the same as lying.

I was a secretive child with a will to impress : I told white lies to improve on the truth, to draw attention to my special talents and, most importantly, to give substance to the future that awaited me. I found my impulse in the world around me and extrapolated like a scientist drawing a curve across a sheet of graph paper. My lies were the curves that joined the beginning with the possible, that created and sustained the grand scheme that awaited me somewhere off in the unfathomable future. My lies were also the masks that freed me to speak the truth.

When I was eight years old, I was cast as one of Macbeth's hags in a Hallowe'en play—the disputed Act IV, Scene I—and I threw myself into the role with an abandon that astonished my third-grade teacher. "Round and round the cauldron go! In the poison entrails throw!" I shrieked my lines in a voice that ricocheted off the auditorium walls and back into my own disbelieving ears. "Liver of blaspheming Jew! Gall of goat, and slips of yew!" My mother returned from the parent-teacher interviews a week later and said: " 'Put a paper bag over your head and you'll say anything'—that's what Mrs. Butterfield said about you."

Mrs. Butterfield thought she had discovered a talent and I was cast as *Mother* in the next school play. But with only an apron to hide behind, I was too conscious of being myself : the lines never made it past my throat. I choked and stared out at the sea of faces in the gymnasium and then sprinted from the stage. Mrs. Butterfield, who was short and made a good mother, filled in for me. She told me that I needed a complete costume to perform.

Later, I performed well in my speedskating costume and with no lines to speak, my relationship to the audience in the bleachers—mainly parents who had come to see their

own children skate—was manageable. I could perform with my body more easily than with my voice. But as I rounded the last corner of an important three-thousand meter race in Innsbruck, my body betrayed me, refused to continue on out of the corner into the final straight-a-way. And as I flew, tangentially, out of the corner and into a soft snowbank, I knew that I was finished. My speedskating career was over.

But you can't tell the coach of the National speedskating team that your body's seized up. Not after twelve years of preparation, twenty-thousand laps, twelve-thousand sit-ups, five-hundred fartleks—not after you've finally managed to push 360 kilograms on the leg press. And not after the team masseuse has worked on your thighs, come to know the density of your muscles, felt the bones in your legs with his fingertips. And so it was a lie that ended my speedskating career, that gave me the vehicle to accomplish the same ends had I said: "Stick it—I'm quitting!" I told the coach that my aunt had died and I was sent home from Europe immediately to attend the imaginary funeral. One simple lie cut the cord that had tied me to the speedskating rink for twelve years. I was given a training schedule to follow, a home-practice routine, like the list of exercises you give a patient when she leaves the hospital. I put it away with my fibre-glass skates in a duffel bag and took out my old indoor-outdoors with the plastic safety-guard on the blades, the kind you buy at skate-exchanges at the community club down the street.

I was excited by the prospect of a fresh start but I had underestimated the importance of skating in my life. The status I was awarded as a carded athlete was revoked and the grief I had feigned became real. The life of the recreational skater was a drag.

"Never apologize; never explain," my mother said. I shrugged off my father's concern — there is power in nonchalance—and set my sights on other things, school, career plans, and boys. But my body was unwilling : it reviled my attempts to reach for the stars, and it fled from the boyfriends the way it had fled from the stage when it played mother, baffled but adamant. It knew what it had to do.

The body knows. It received Ben into it with a warning which I, amazed that such a wondrous creature could be interested in me, mistook for fear. It tried to run away, but Ben worked differently than the PCYF types that had come before him. He lured it back with massages and pinned me against the wall with love poems that I didn't

understand. My body was confused by the new sensations, the exotic foods with their fish sauce and green-pepper paste, the drunken dancing, the puffs it took of his cigarettes and hash. But I persevered because I thought it was fear that held me back and as Ben and I agreed, I had to learn how to love. I trained it, as I had on the oval, taught it to sit when it wanted to run, smile when it wanted to scream, understand its pain as pleasure, and, when it cried and protested, I took it home to my mother's bed and nursed it back to health with a hot-water bottle.

I read somewhere that you have to train your senses into liking foreign sensations and tastes,that there is a labor involved preferring the taste of tobacco over sugar or the flavor of vinegar to milk, or opium to honey and butter. But what was an effortless habit for Ben — smoking, drinking beer with scotch shooters, inhaling the musky hash from his two hot-knives on the elements — involved a kind of excruciating labor that I was not unaccustomed to. I ignored the warnings : athletes do that a lot. You hear about these runners who pride themselves on finishing marathons with stress fractures. Runners who hit the wall at mile twenty but run through it to the other side and live to tell the tale to other athletes, who admire that sort of thing. But everyone knows that you can only push the body so far. Not even *will* can see you through the last hundred meters of a race if you pushed too hard at the beginning and your blood is burning up the muscle in your legs for oxygen and catabolizing tissue for fuel. At some point, the body seizes up, as mine did on the stage playing mother, on the last corner of the three-thousand meter race in Innsbruck, and then again, in bed with Ben.

How do you tell someone you love that you don't want them. "Never apologize; never explain," had no currency in the bed with Ben, though my failure to speak, the fact that I turned mute when he asked me what was wrong tells me now that I had mastered her lesson more completely than I would have thought. The body is slower than the tongue to act, but it contains more wisdom, carries knowledge around in its vaults, cannot be convinced by the mind to re-arrange its inheritance without some violence. Look at a strand of DNA, the way it builds your chromosomes, rung by rung, look at the complexity of the information that makes one eyelash. Read my body, Ben. Follow the narrative of my eyes, my arms, my ass, the space between my thighs that refuses your tongue. Listen to the muscles that welcome you as they welcome a masseuse's hands, but don't mistake that for desire, understand that the bones you touch with your fingertips are hard. The tongue must learn to speak the body.

## 12

The pool was windex-blue and striped with sunlight. I dipped my goggles into the water, squished the foam lens around my eyes and began a slow crawl. He told me I'd have to choose. He thought I was in an evil sisterhood with my mother and that I'd always rush back to her when things got tough. He'd quoted Steven Hero's line to me or maybe it was James Joyce's. Something about the necessity of striking out on your own, leaving family and country behind. As I swam, I tried to think about what Ben and I were going to do. I tried to imagine making up. Maybe we'd stare into each other's eyes for a terrible five minutes and make love and that would be it. Making love dissolves a lot of rage, but somehow I couldn't see it happening this time. I had the feeling that if we made love, we'd be doing it for the last time. We'd be saying good-bye. Before I'd left for the pool, I'd sat in the kitchen watching Ben make coffee. He looked so thin in his underwear. I imagined his body as a thin triangle of skin, almost translucent, the way it is behind the ankle bone of certain finely boned people. There was a dreadful stillness in his eyes.

This was supposed to be the best time of my life and I felt miserable. This was my big adventure and I was swimming laps. I could have been anywhere, except that the water here was a little cooler than the pools I knew in Canada and contained a little less chlorine. For some reason, I had imagined that things would be different in a foreign country. I had known that it might not work out with Ben, but I had imagined a different sort of break-up, one with a revelation which might be painful but which would give me some kind of knowledge about myself. I guess I imagined wearing my revelation like a pair of eyeglasses. I would look at everything differently, the way I had when I had first fallen in love with Ben. The sky would be a little deeper, the branches more sharply focused, the little routines that make up a day — going to the insta-bank or picking up a paper from the convenience store — would trigger reflections of our time together that would choke me up and make me consider all that I had lost. I would smart in that lonely, painful way that makes you cry over the smallest display of consideration from strangers. But there was something in me that resisted thoughts of a life without Ben. I must have thought that Ben would always be there,

waiting in the wings of my doubts, ready to forgive and forget. I needed to believe that even if it wasn't true. I started to cry and I thought it was the weight of Ben's fears and difficulties that I was carrying in me, that dragged me towards the cement floor of the pool. But I guess I was sinking for myself, weighted down by all that love that Ben had bestowed upon me and that I couldn't return. After a while, the lines that marked the lanes on the cement floor of the pool seemed to move under the weight of the water. My goggles fogged up so badly that I couldn't see anything at all.

# 13

"Being in a foreign country means walking a tightrope high above the ground without the net afforded a person by the country where he has his family, colleagues, friends, and where he can easily say what he has to say in a language he has known from childhood."

It was a relief to fall into the net of these words. I held the book up so that the people in the seat across from mine could read Kundera's name. This book was my signal to all of Northern Bohemia that I shared the country's secrets. With the emigre author's name and picture on the dust jacket, this book announced my solidarity with the great struggle against the Sovietization of Czechoslovakia. I peeked over the top of the novel at the man and woman who shared my train compartment. The man was smoking and staring out the window. The young woman beside him was wearing a checkered dress, white ankle socks, and sandals. Every few minutes, she wrenched the compartment door open and the gusts that blew up through the doorway and lifted her dress had the musty smell of cigarette butts, dust, and public upholstery.

Through the window, darkness was spreading out across the hops-fields and the sky was softening to a flat slate color. We passed through a small village, past some barns and a cluster of villagers selling onions by the road. An old woman in a white sweater waved at the train and the man in the compartment lifted his hand and waved back. The expression on his face was sad, as though he were waving good-bye to his mother at war-time. He caught me looking at him and I raised my eyebrows and nibbled at the hunk of bread I'd brought. It was hot in the compartment. I was itching all over, too, because I hadn't bothered to shower after my swim. Instead, I'd rushed back to the Trpisovsky's apartment, packed an overnight bag, and written a note to Ben.

Hi Ben,

Thought a week-end away might help us settle the differences. I haven't done much travelling on my own and while I was swimming, I decided it was time I tried. I'm off to Prague for the week-end. Love Alex.

That wouldn't do. Too cold.

dear ben,
to shout and thereby hasten the end or to keep silent and gain thereby a slower death (kundera)
we mustn't do these things to each other — i feel like a part of me dies each time we fight — i need some time alone — i'm in Prague and will be back monday or tuesday.

Too arty.

Ben,
I think we could both use some time to think about things and clear our heads. I'm sorry if I hurt you.
See you Sunday or Monday,

Ms. Adamsova.

It would have to do. It was getting late.

## 14

I had felt miserable at the swimming pool, but sitting in the train compartment, heading for Prague, I began to think of all that I would do and see. That first night I had trailed around after Ben seemed very far away. I felt like I was arriving in the city for the first time. This time I would do it right. Now that I had finally said no to Ben, I had to decide what it was that I was saying yes to. If you are always saying no, you forget what it takes to say yes. It's much easier to know what you don't want. But that was all behind me. Before me—another fresh start. New precious experiences. *Prague*. And what a time to be there! I imagined ebullient voters talking passionately about the revolution's ideals; chain-smoking dissidents at the Slavia Cafe. This election was their struggle for choice. In an instant of swollen emotion, I identified with the country, saw a lesson in their struggle, drew inspiration from their imminent triumph. Finally, they would be free to live in truth!

It was nearing midnight when the train rolled into Prague. I walked slowly through the station, feeling the ground hard underfoot, savouring the fact that I was in *Prague* —alone, and young, and free. I took the sub-way to the *Autobusove Nadrazi*, thinking warmly of Mitze and my comical error in the student pub. But when I tried to find the street where the hostel was located, I got confused and spent an hour ducking the head-lights of speeding cars on the expressway bridge. A set of tall wire fences and abandoned railway tracks, not accounted for on the map Jindra had given me, blocked my passage to Zivkov Street. A couple of cabs sped by but didn't stop. Finally, I decided to chance it. I walked through the pitch black grotto under the bridge, climbed the lowest of the wire fences, and found the hostel, a dreary school-building with the sign "Students and Travellers Welcome,"written in four languages in the window. The other window had been covered up from the inside with brown paper. I rang the bell and tried to calm myself down by reading the sign in the three other tongues. German, Czech and, I guessed, Russian.

Eventually, the lock rattled and the door opened. A tall, stooped man gestured for me to enter, and I followed him through the hallway, past a water fountain and a

bulletin-board to a large, unlit gymnasium. The doors were held open by two wedges of wood. He grabbed hold of the flashlight that was dangling on a rope from his belt. Then he glanced over at me, cocked one of his eyes, and snapped his arm forward. He ran his column of light over the sleepers : rows and rows of bodies under brown wool blankets. There was some movement but not much. I was confused. "Here?" I asked.

"No beds." He looked like he was lying. He had a broad nose with a deep vertical cleft in the tip. Another in his chin. A phone started to ring and he clicked off the flashlight and galloped towards the office. I looked into the gymnasium at the sleepers. Where would I go? It was stupid to have arrived so late without reservations somewhere. Ben always said that this was the absolute number one travel rule : arrive early and find a place to sleep. What had I been thinking? That was the problem. I hadn't. I just thought it would work out somehow. I still had that feeling even though there was no evidence to support it.

"I have room! Come!" He flicked the end of his nose and smiled. I followed him down a corridor to a red door. "Here," he said, swinging it open. The room was small and there were bars on the window. "Is a very good room," he said.

I nodded, doubtfully.

"And very cheap. Clean sheets, warm blanket."

I gave him twenty crowns and waited for him to leave."Thank-you," I repeated but he didn't move. My heart started to leap around in my chest.

"My room, too," he said, slyly. He adjusted his glasses and flicked the tip of his nose again.

I picked up my bag.

"No, No. This is a good room."

"I'm not sharing the bed with you." I said the words slowly, trying to comprehend the situation.

"I do not understand." He moved in front of the door to block my passage and the edges of his mouth were turned up in a curious smile.

"I'll sleep on the floor. In the gymnasium."

"No, no, no! *I* will sleep on the floor! This is no problem. No problem." He opened a cupboard door and pulled out a pile of brown blankets. "A very comfortable floor," he smiled broadly, shaking them out. A couple of moths fluttered out and settled on the ceiling light.

In a gesture of defeat, I lay down on top of the covers, telling myself as I did, to get out of there, to go to the station, to get the next train to Usti. But I didn't. I closed my eyes, willing the hostel owner into harmlessness. He was definitely less threatening than the unknown people I might encounter walking to the station. I lay there on the bed, blocking my ears with my hands, and listened to the sound of the blood rushing through my body, pulsing at points on my neck, my wrists, my temples. It wasn't the smooth rhythmic sound that a heart usually makes; it was more like a warning, an irregular thumping that made me think of my heart as a trapped animal, a soft wild animal the size and shape of a fist.

I dreamed that Ben and I were in the class-room at the Kultural Institute passing pictures we had ripped out of magazines around to the students. We told them to describe what they saw in the picture and we would all try to guess the image. Manfred described a three-headed pig. Eva told him to shut up, and then she described her own picture, holding it closely and guarding the edges so no-one could peek. She described a public square with Greek pillars covered with dead bodies and before we could guess the image, she got angry and spat "children." She threw her picture down on her desk and left the class. Ben stood at the blackboard writing words : *mutant, nuclear explosion, pillars and posts* . Then it was Lubomir's turn. "This happened in our town," he said, his eyes growing rounder and bluer. Manfred screamed at him: "What kind of clue is that, you stupid fool?" Ben plucked the picture out of Lubomir's hands, held it up for all of us to see: a full-color picture of a woman with huge tits, and splayed legs. Manfred clicked a flashlight on and aimed it between her legs and then Lubomir began to stroke my back, looking at me differently, as though he had just understood how to master me. I leapt up and out of Lubomir's reach, breathing hard, confused, and in the dark room, it was the hostel owner, not Lubomir, who was

stroking my back. I snatched my bag and fled down the corridor to a washroom, where I sat on the toilet seat until my watch read six and I felt I could handle climbing the fence and walking through the grotto by myself.

## 15

June 7

Education For Democracy. Revolucni Street 16. I like that. It sounds very political. I'm hungry, starving, actually, and my hands are trembling. It's still early. People rushing to work, going about their routines, seeing through me. I feel like everyone is pausing to note my fear. It's the same way I felt when I lost my virginity. I was sure that I had it written all over my face. "I fucked last night!" Sometimes I felt this way teaching, standing in front of the students, leaking a little from the night before, my body open and fragrant while my mouth tried to take attendance. People can tell. They can sniff it on you. I order myself to stop being morose. He only stroked my back. I did the right thing. It was all I could do in the circumstance. But I can't stop my hands from shaking. The adrenalin is pumping like mad.

I climb the stairs and find Mitch from Alabama alone in the office. The place is still a clutter of posters and papers, a real sty. It looks like people are camping out. There are sleeping bags and knapsacks and bits of uneaten food on the floor. Mitch rolls over to me on his roller-ball chair and squints a little, trying to place me. "Alex," I say, somehow not believing that he doesn't remember me. "You with that Ben-guy?" he says. Then he laughs and reaches for his clipboard. He's wearing a pen-cap on a rope around his neck but there's no pen. "***Ben-gay*** !" Isn't that the name of a laxative or something?"

I tell him it's for sore muscles. "Like *Absorbine Junior*. " But he's not listening. Or at least, he's pretending not to listen because his joke fell flat. It's strange though, because I don't care whether this guy doesn't like me. I am aware of this in a way that's so powerful, I feel exhilarated. I ask him if he knows of a place where I could stay for the week-end.

"Well, ain't this the most." He shakes his head and gestures to the sleeping bags. "We got two people camping out here already. This place is turning into a fricking half-way house. You do know, don't you, that there's an accommodation problem in

Prague? Good. Just wondering. " Then Mitch tells me that I'm a very lucky girl and sends me to an office one floor down. Some students are willing to rent their apartments for five Canadian dollars a night.

Marenka's apartment is off Vatlasky Namesti. The place is small and narrow, like a corridor, and decorated with plants, postcards of naked women and an aquarium filled with tiny, flickering fish. I wash my hair under a trickle of cold water in the kitchen sink, and I can't help thinking of the time I first did it, and the way I scrubbed myself down the next morning in the cold water at the Ghasthaus Waltraut. Water is a cleansing thing. I am a Pisces and my mother always told me that I loved baths more than anything. Funny that I became a speedskater when I liked water so much. Skating over top the black ice and always imagining the fish underneath. I get a little carried away and end up naked and sponging myself everywhere, which is fine except that I'm freezing now and the water is so cold that my fingernails have turned purple and my nipples have scrunched into two painful little points. I can hear the soap bubbles whispering as I brush my hair out, but I don't care. Normally I would go back for another rinse but today I say fuck it, and with my hair still wet, I set out on an aimless walk. I am accountable to nobody. I have no map, no guide-book, no list of things to see. I plan to walk like this all day long.

Things are more cheerful in Prague than in Usti. It's dirty, yes, but not drab and the buildings are older, grander. Spires and domes everywhere. I duck into a dark little store and pick up some yogurt and bread. The bread is warm, and when I tear it, the course salt grains pour into my hand. The sun is hot on my face and I walk on, reading signs and looking in windows. I almost hope to lose myself in the maze of streets and lanes, but maybe not, because I recognize that without intending to, I'm headed in the direction of the Old Town Square. There is something nice about this uncalculated route. If I was searching for the heart of the town, it would surely elude me. A motorcyclist guns past and I jump to the side. An elderly woman, dressed in widow black, leans out of her balcony and shouts something I don't understand. She's shaking her fist and the skin in her neck is swinging back and forth. I pause in front of an old church, plastered with cement garlands and obscured, like most of the nicer buildings, behind complicated networks of scaffolding. Everything in Prague is on the mend.

The Old Town Square is busier than the month before, and everywhere I can hear English being spoken. Hari Krishna has made it to town, and some vacant-eyed

moonies are chanting and trying to lure young Czechs into their caravans where they'll strip them and shave them and get them to give up their parents. It's almost on the hour and a group is collecting under the old town clock to watch the hourly pantomime of the saints. Over by the statue, a crowd has formed around two drunks. They're clutching each other like lovers, teetering back and forth, and for an agonizing moment they don't move at all, they just stand there at an angle to the sky. Then one of them gives, and together, they tumble down. The crowd roars. Some people clap. *Encore. Encore.* I watch all of this almost dispassionately, barely nodding when an American turns and says to me: "an election-eve binge. No booze tomorrow." I wonder how he knew I speak English. I'm a little disappointed to think that I am so obviously North American looking.

Naprikope. The base of Wencelas Square where the buildings stand back of the wide streets and sidewalks. If I stop walking, I'll get knocked down. Shoppers, tourists, beggars, the local men in their short, short cut-offs — I have never seen such short shorts in my life. And Ben can call me on it if he wants, but it's nonetheless true — white ankle socks are big. I think about this for a moment, wonder if he thinks you can climb onto some neutral shoal and observe the other without attaching value. Wonder if my observation is a put-down. Then so would the observation that there are a lot of peroxide blondes out shopping today. And so is the fact that the Dixie-land buskers are playing a sorry rendition of *Roll out the Barrel.* I think of Ben and his copious notes, and wonder where Ben is in all of that, what Ben feels when he looks out at a crowd of people he doesn't know, if he always feels as happy and free in his anonymity as he says.

For the moment, I feel this way too : tall and free and alone and very aware of the people around me, their clothes, their hairstyles, the expressions on their faces. I'm excited by the rush of bodies around me, the eyes, glancing my way. I'm not used to this. They're all so close I can see the bone-white line on their scalp, I can smell their cologne, the schnitzel they're eating, the beer on their breath. I can see the tiny moles on their cheeks. Here I go — singling things out. But I can't help myself, I feel myself drawn to differences, searching out what is foreign against my will, noting the warts on the women's faces, the thick, purple veins that run around their calves, the hand-sewn seams of their skirts, and reading this for information about their lives. The elderly women's legs are bad. Lumpy and bound with elastoplast bandages and thick beige stockings. Looking at them makes my joints hurt. You can see long line-ups, child-

birth, and pain, but mainly waiting. Some of the women I pass look like they've been on their feet all their lives.

I stop and look in the window of a Benneton's outlet. Bold clothes, bright colors, promises of youthful, inter-racial experiences. It's hard to pass by. The human landscape is one color in Northern Bohemia. There were a few Cubans at the Student Bar in Usti, and I saw two Vietnamese boys on a bus once. Supposedly the Gypsies are taking over the country. Our students said they thieve, pan-handle, and destroy good apartment blocks by having bonfires in the rooms. Manfred told us a Slovak proverb: "Where there's a Slovak, there's a song; / Where there's a Gypsy, there's a thief." That wasn't the entire proverb : there were other lines about Germans being untrue lovers and the Magyars causing strife, but I forget them. I buy a blood sausage sandwich from a road-side stand and eat it as I walk. The skin of the meat is tough and when I bite it, the juice squirts into my eye. The combination of salt, mustard, and grease is delicious.

## 16

**PM**

I want the day to last forever, but already the summer shadows are lengthening. People look a little less relaxed. There's a chill in the air and I'm still hungry. I pass The Grand Hotel on Wencelas and wish I could go in and order room service and eat my dinner on the iron-wrought balcony. I'd like to watch the dark fold in over the city. I enter the hotel cafe, and the smell of strong brewed coffee and American tobacco is tantalizing. The cafe is filled with expensively dressed foreigners writing postcards and reading English and German papers. Some of them just recline in their chairs looking bored. One of them is astonishingly good-looking. He's sitting with his legs turned to one side because they're too long and big to fit under the little cafe tables. He looks like he would rather be somewhere else, banging nails or riding a horse. I take my place at a table next to his and unfold the newspaper that someone has left behind. I feign total absorption, read about the arrest of some Czechs who, it is rumored, invited the Soviets to invade the country in 1968. The article predicts a Civic Forum sweep. A waiter approaches me. "You must go," he says. I look around, wondering whom he's speaking to. "Go, now, please go." I ask him why. "This table is reserved!" he hisses. I tell him I'll move to another table. "All the tables are reserved. You must go!" Mortified, I gather my things.

"You can join me."

I look up into the pale eyes of the cowboy. He's at least six foot six.

"Ignore them. You can sit at my table."

I hesitate, knowing full well, I'll join him.

"If you want, I mean."

His back is unbelievably broad, his skin is the color of cappucino after you've eaten the foam off the top. He twists around to smile at me and his eyes crinkle. He's

spent his life squinting into the sun. A glint of teeth, slightly crooked but very white. I wonder where he's from. "Very good," he says, struggling to cross his legs in the style of the other people in the cafe.

"You speak well." I have made a habit of telling people this, to encourage them.

He laughs. "I should. I travel a lot." He hands me the menu and I order an Irish coffee and a bowl of meat soup. I wish I'd ordered something else but he doesn't seem to find my choice unusual. "What brings you to Prague?" he asks.

"I'm teaching in Usti."

"Usti! Well, well. Have you seen Strekov?" he asks, extending his brown arm and taking my hand.

"The castle?" His eyes are unnerving.

"Not much else in Usti. Nice to meet you. Mikel."

"Alex," I say, giving him my most dazzling smile.

He takes his hand away and I wipe my palm on my thigh. "A pleasure. Are you on your own?"

I hesitate.

"Is he here?"

"No."

Again, a glint of white teeth. "In Canada?"

"How do you know?" I ask, impressed.

"Just a guess."

I'm dizzy.

"So he's in Canada."

"No. And I don't think that's any of your business." I lick the whipped cream off the plastic swizzle stick. I have a long tongue. He's a lot different than I thought. I never associate big men with this kind of banter.

"Sorry," he says, but he doesn't look sorry at all. "Do you like Prague?"

"Very much."

"Where are you staying?"

"With a friend," I respond, instantly. "Where are you from?"

"Pilsen. I'm playing in a waterpolo tournament in Prague. I'm staying at a hotel down the street. But I like to come to the Grand Hotel to have a whiskey and meet girls like you."

"Oh, puh-leez," I say. But my heart leaps. A waterpolo player. I think of the images I saw from the last Olympics of men leaving the pool, bleeding. A violent sport.

"I used to speedskate," I say casually. "On the national team. I trained in Germany."

"Which Olympics?" This time, he looks impressed.

I'm tempted to lie but I don't. "I didn't go to the Olympics. I wanted to go to university, instead."

"I did both," he smiles. "The communists took good care of their athletes."

Mikel orders me another coffee and himself a whiskey. I haven't touched my soup. A funny little man, dressed in a tux, is playing the violin, dipping his shoulder our way and pausing, as though he were dispatching us good luck. The bored expatriates go away and return in their dining clothes to have a drink.

"Are you married?" I ask. My mother has taught me to ask this of prospective suitors. Out of the blue. It catches them off guard. He doesn't miss a beat, though.

"Divorced."

"I'm sorry," I say, happily.

"I was too young. In this country, everyone gets married and divorced. Something to do."

"My parents are divorced."

He asks me if I would like to join him and his friends that night, for dinner and drinks at a jazz club on Narodni. "It is very expensive place but I am on holiday."

"I thought you were playing in a water polo tournament."

"Exactly. I am on holiday." He draws me a map on the back of a used subway ticket, a tiny, technical map with North, South, East, West, demarcated in perfect, draftsman style letters. Then he leans over and kisses me. "Mmmm," he said. "I'm afraid I'll have to meet you there. I have some business to take care of first. You are a beautiful girl. I look forward to this evening."

# 17

**PM**

The jazz club. A dim, red-lit place, sectioned off into a series of intimate rooms. I'm wearing a short black dress and Nefertiti-style gold earrings that tinkle. I don't remember feeling this tall and straight and unconcerned. I hold my shoulders back and breeze past the ogling men at the coat check, into a long, dark corridor. I have one thing on my mind.

"Alex!" Lips brush my neck. "Hmmm," says Mikel. "You look very beautiful." His hand on my waist.

Laughing, I wriggle free and turn to face him. His height delights me. He smells like licorice.

"Do you smoke?"

"Yes."

His hand returns to my waist. The corridor leads to an enclosed terrace. He hands me a joint. I thought he meant cigarettes.

"You should always wear gold." He touches my earrings and exhales. It's cool out here and very dark. The tips of cigarettes glow orange.

"Come on. I want to introduce you to my friends."

There are four of them. "Pavla, Peter, Lenka, Pierre-Francois : meet Alex. My Canadian friend."

"Svoboda," says Peter.

"Freedom?"

They all laugh.

"Hockey," says Mikel. "Petr Svoboda plays for Oilers."

Ben is a fan. "The Stasny brothers?"

Peter cries in delight and toasts me.

"I lived in Baltimore one summer," says Pierre Francois. "When I was a student. I love America."

Pavla touches his shoulder and looks significantly at Mikel.

"My babies," Peter says. He passes me a photograph of two little boys with yellow hair. Lenka looks disgusted. She pulls at the tips of her bleached hair and leaves.

"She doesn't like it when Peter shows his pictures," says Mikel. "He's married."

"My Lenka is a beautiful lady," says Peter. "Everywhere, the walls are coming down but Lenka is building them up."

"Lenka lives with her ex-husband," whispers Mikel, staring, now, at Pavla's breasts. "She built a brick wall down the middle of her living room."

"Oh." Against my will, my eyes land on Pavla's breasts.

"There's a housing shortage in Pilsen."

Pierre-Francois returns. Pavla says something into his ear and they both look at me. I return Pavla's gaze. Her eyes are widely spaced and it gives her a stunned look. Honey blonde hair, perfect skin, big breasts. It's the breasts that get me. I gulp my drink and sputter, feeling a trail of fire down my throat.

"Slivovitz!" says Pierre Francois. Light bounces off the frames of his big, blue, Elton-John glasses.

I fan my mouth and ask Mikel what slivovitz is made from.

"Plums," he says, with a distracted smile. His pale blue eyes beam in again on Pavla. She's leaning forward and her breasts are resting on the high glass-top table beside our drinks. Pierre-Francois is speaking to her in French. Her eyes are down-cast. I poke Mikel's elbow in a bid to draw his attention back. "You know, I can't get over how well all of you speak English."

"Hmm, yes. Yes? I have a lot of American friends."

"Petr Klima has troubles in Canada, no?" Peter is addressing me with a friendly, drunken smile. I nod and feel Mikel move away. Out of the corner of my eye, I see his tall frame disappear through the beaded curtain. I sigh, face Peter, and admit I'm not a hockey fan. He hands me his drink.

*

Midnight and I'm still listening to Peter. I can't understand a word he's saying, anymore. Our table is littered with empty glasses. Pierre-Francois is running his fingers along the dusky slopes of Pavla's breasts. I feel slightly dazed as I watch Pierre Francois' hands on Pavla's body. Under my dress, my nipples are hard. My nerves are stretching. I close my eyes and pretend I feel Mikel's hands on my body, the hot tips of his fingers. Peter puts his hand on my thigh, wet palmed and friendly. I brush it away and resume my waiting, send little telepathic messages to Mikel who is now seated at one of the bar stools on the other side of the room. He is smoking and throwing defeated glances in the direction of Pavla.

*

12:30. Pavla and Pierre Francois have left. Peter is asleep on the empty dance floor. Mikel is beside me, once again, but he's gazing silently at the door, his pale eyes reflecting the reddish glow from the back-lights that line the walls of the room. I feel a trickle of sweat run down between my breasts. I cross my legs and my thighs slide.

Smoke is drifting up from the ashtrays in goblin swirls. I'm jumpy and my eyes are pricking with thorny tears, or maybe it's the smoke. The room is so hot that I'm having trouble breathing. My ribs are pinning me against myself. There's an itch on my back. I'm watching Mikel, waiting for his eyes to soften. He lifts his arm to drink and I angle forward to inhale a slender riff of his scent. I touch his arm and my throat blanches, waiting for him to say no, to tell me to stop. He turns an opaque gaze on me and smiles sadly. My head is in my heart, my heart in my hands, hands running with the insistence of smooth pavement over Mikel's body. The room spins sweetly and contracts so that all it contains is Mikel, and the palms of my hands running up his arms to his broad shoulders to his neck. I lean forward and kiss him at a spot under his ear. He doesn't respond but he doesn't push me away. Then I do something that shocks me, that my body's been saying all along. I'm relieved to have unburdened myself of those words, words I've never felt in my mouth. The words are so sweet, I repeat them, I pass them from my mouth into his, like a sweet, cool liquid. "I want you, Mikel."

## 18

We're in his hotel room and we're almost naked. It would take so little to reach down and unzip his fly. I can feel him without doing it, the softness of his hard prick, that kid-glove velvet that surprised me the first time I took a cock in my bare hand. But I'm going slow, too, kissing the lines around his eyes, feeling foolish and delighted with his size. I whisper his name and run my hands down the sides of his stomach, take his hand and put it on my breast. It falls away, and desperately, I reach for it again, when I hear a key rattling in the door. I think I'm imagining it. But Mikel has stopped moving his hips. I roll off him and look around his knee to see Pavla and her cleavage in the doorway. Her eyes are blazing. I grab the bedspread but it's tucked so tightly that it doesn't give. I cover my breasts with my hands, one breast in each, feeling ridiculous. I can't believe what is happening. She's shouting things in Czech and I'm hunting around for my dress, which is underneath Mikel. Suddenly the bed gives and she's straddling Mikel, whom I was straddling a few seconds before. She's hitting him, but Mikel flips over on top of her and pins her wrists down over her head. It's taking a century to unfold, this sequence, this drama that can only have one ending and in a flash, I see it was leading to this all the time, that it could not just as well have been otherwise. Their movements are slow, surreal, as if they are giving me time to get dressed. She's kicking like a capsized turtle underneath his body and I'm paralyzed there on the bed beside them. It's me he's mounting, really, but no, I'm groping for the black sleeve of my dress, while my body gazes mournfully at their rocking hips. I can see my shirt in flashes under Pavla's body and finally, the fabric is in my hands and I'm labouring to pull it out from under them, sweating from the effort. Pavla has unzipped Mikel's pants and is pushing them down with her foot so that the pants are around his ankles. *They're about to fuck*, says my body, wanting to join. *Leave*, says my head, guiding the rest of me back into the crumpled black dress. Before I leave, I grab Mikel's underwear and leave them on the knob of the hotel suite door, along with the sign that reads either MAID SERVICE or DO NOT DISTURB, it's in Czech so how am I to know.

## 19

**Election Day**

It's six o clock in the morning. I'm sitting beside the aquarium, watching the fish dart. My hands and arms and hair smell like Mikel.

Before I went to sleep, I tried to call Ben in Usti. I don't remember what I was going to say. I just wanted to hear his voice, I guess. But when Dobka answered, I hung up. I should try again but somehow, the urgency is gone. As I drifted off to sleep last night, I saw Pavla's breasts in the moon through the window. I tried to block the light they cast through the apartment, by hanging a blanket over the pane, but they crept through the gaps and formed silvery spots on the apartment wall. I had a hard time falling asleep.

My stomach is aching with hunger and there's a ringing sound in my ears. I put my head between my knees until it passes, go to the kitchen, and look in Marenka's fridge. A little tub of soft cheese with red pimentos. I eat what's left and think about a huge plate of goulash, with strips of roast beef and boiled potatoes. It will be a few hours before the pivnicys serve lunch.

I'm ashamed about what happened last night. After all that Ben and I have been through. One stupid yes has ruined it all. I think of his eyes and the way they fixed on me the morning before I left and suddenly, it's as if I've been punched in the stomach. I stand there frozen in a grotesque salute to the damage I've levelled, feeling the utter defenselessness of love; the delicacy of those threads holding it all together, and I'm overcome with a sense of how precariously love hangs, how desperately it requires our attention and care. My mind fills with contempt for my body; my body which is humming and warm and still smells of smoke and licorice. I smell the top of my hand, lean on the edge of the counter, and take another deep breath. I can't get enough air into my lungs.

I wanted it. I didn't think about it. There were no alarms or warnings sounding in my body. No urge to flee and hide. No desire to dissemble. It was just there and I couldn't have hidden it if I had wanted. I feel ashamed because my body said yes and made its claim, and there it was, for everyone to see, like a menstrual spot on a chair slip. My body's will. I feel ashamed but I understand that I would do it all again, even if it ended up the way it did, even if it meant hurting Ben.

My eyes are burning. Little floaty things make my vision blur. I pace down the length of the narrow room examining the postcards on the wall, feeling an irrational hatred for the images. They don't look like any postcards I've seen in Czechoslovakia. Arty images of naked women. Narrow hips and long legs. Like boys. I lie down on the floor beside the aquarium and as soon as my eyes are shut, I see Mikel.

—He's walking ahead of me and his ass is round and tight in his bathing suit. His entire body is a rich coffee color. He turns his magnificent torso around to smile at me, and I smile back, matching his long, easy strides to the edge of the pool. We slip into the water and swim to the other side. When we climb out, we're staring, hungry and unembarrassed. My eyes drink him in — his shoulders, the dusky length of his arms, stomach, and thighs. The space between us is small. The size of a hand. We're breathing hotly, looking, and my body is alive, crackling, pulling me towards him so insistently that my skin begins to hurt and the need to feel him is so great that I'm almost crying, dying with my need to feel him against me. I grab his waist with both hands and taste the salt on his neck —

—We're down on the mat in a room filled with bar bells and exercise bicycles and he's ripping my bathing suit with his teeth, pinning my arms above my head, pressing on me, entering me —

—We're in the white heat of the steam room, my leg around his waist, riding him, bellies slapping, salty and warm and I'm full of him, his eyes warm in the damp light, his fingers feeling the flesh inside my cheek, my spine up against the hot tiles —

—We're in the hotel room and Pavla is sitting on the bed beside us, touching herself as she watches us. I'm on top of him, my feet on the bed, my legs bent at crazy impossible angles, and Pavla is cursing him while she masturbates but he's too hot to

hear her, too busy fucking me, and I'm struggling to overlap his rhythm, to bring myself to orgasm, but he's stronger, moving savagely as I whisper *yes, harder-*

I come, violently, gasping, half-blind because I've been staring at the bright ceiling light. But the floor is hard under me; my stomach empty and so flat that my hip-bones are sticking out and Mikel, is, after all, still sleeping where I left him, beside his bosomy Cosmo girl at the hotel. I wipe my hand on my shirt and with my underwear still around my ankles, make my way to the can. My ears are ringing again. I sit for what seems like a very long time, waiting for the piss. The congestion has been relieved but a sad, flat sensation has taken over. I examine the stubble on my shins and wait. The day stretches ahead of me like a long, flat, highway.

*

I say the Czech word for collect call.

"Ben? Is that you? It's me, Alex!"

"Jesus, Alex, I can hear you."

"I woke you up. I'm sorry."

"Where the fuck have you been!" He spits the word "fuck." "Your mother's been calling all weekend."

I feel a wave of fear. "Is she ok?"

"As far as I know. But she's in Vienna —some conference—and she wants you to go there. Do you have a pen?"

I take down some details.

"So I guess I go it alone now? "

"Oh, Ben, don't say that." I say, confused. "I'll call you from Vienna."

"Don't forget to vote," says Ben, in a flat tone. His voice sounds so cold that I don't realize until much later that he's making a little joke.

## 20

The Charles Bridge, home to 29 looming bronze apostles. Ben could identify them all by name. I only know one, St Paul, beside which Ben and I had stood that first night and exchanged a gritty little kiss. I stop in a momentary panic and hunt through my pockets for my ticket to Vienna. I'm terrified of losing it. I'm down to my last twenty dollars. The beer in the pivnicy, where I wolfed down goulash, *knedlicky*, and six papery dinner rolls is up ten cents a stein. Twice the price we paid in Usti. It's starting to rain and the wind is blowing in chilly strands through my hair. I feel lost and cold. This isn't the way I imagined it. I tell myself that I'm in Prague, crossing famous Charles Bridge. And across the river? The castle where they filmed Amadeus. But the bridge is crowded with tourists and there is absolutely nothing remarkable about any of it. I strain to hear some foreign tongues and all I can make out is the broad flat wine of an American bartering with an artist in a tie-dye sweatshirt, a cigarette dangling from the corner of her mouth. The artist shrugs and stretches a sheet of plastic over her etchings of Prague, unremarkable prints in black and white, obscured now in their body bags. Buskers lounge under umbrellas tuning their guitars. Through the grey mist rising from the river, I can make out the hulky dome of the St. Nicholas cathedral and the huge Gothic spires of the Hradny castle. I climb the long road and pause at the entrance way to the castle. Ben brought me here the first night, but I was too tired to absorb it. And now, looking at it, waiting to be moved, I feel nothing but the desire for warmth and shelter. My omniscient eye is failing me. My body is contracting into itself once again.

The National Museum. I give my five crowns to a grandmotherly woman and walk through the courtyard, grateful to have an objective. The place is pretty much empty. The security guards—elderly women in blue uniforms who don't even look up

when I pass—are more interesting than the paintings. The last vestibule contains the modernists—Chagall, Van Gogh, Delacroix—nice, familiar, but it's the Daumier that stops me—*Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*. The old man on his gaunt horse, his head capped by a bucket galloping off on another adventure. Staggering after him, his loyal, fat, uncomprehending side-kick. I don't know for sure which one I identify with or whether I have to choose. Maybe it's both. Standing there in the silent room I see the whole of my life in the energy and looseness of Daumier's lines. I see myself galloping into the night on a bony charger, while my other self watches and waits to rescue me from the dung heap. I think of myself in the attic room, on the stage playing mother, at the cottage with my half-sisters, in the snowbank in Innsbruck. I see myself on the plane, suspended between my mother and the oval; my mother and Ben. I think of Ben rolling off my bed with a gasp, of Mikel's coffee-colored arms. I think of myself chasing myself across a lumpy plane whose frontier ends only where the earth and sky join on the beautiful bonded pages of my journal. I could see that I had quite a bit of work to do.

I like teaching high-school. I'm a good teacher too, though not in the way I used to think. It's different now. I don't get my kicks anymore from telling the students what to do. Sometimes I wish I was as clear and certain as I used to be. Every so often, I long for that feeling of omniscience, the sense of power and simplicity that comes with being right. I'll get this image of myself in the classroom and I'll feel impressed for a moment and a little jealous about what I was like. It's as if I've caught a glimpse of a photo of myself when I was looking really good—when the light was flattering. But as I'm longing to recover that confidence, that authority and clarity, I'm aware that it really wasn't like that. I wasn't listening the students into belief, I was asking them to listen *me* into belief. I was desperate to hear that note of authority in my voice.

It was quite a revelation to me when I realized that I was in cahoots with the students, speaking lies and half-truths with the authority that made them, at that moment, absolutely possible. I cringe when I think of the way I'd butcher *Hamlet*, how I'd lie if I didn't know the answers to the questions they asked me, how I couldn't explain why you can't say: "A good example of deception is when. . . " It was very gratifying to watch them transcribe my words in their Hilroys and then, again, in their exam booklets at the end of the semester. The blind leading the blind, and no worse off, because we didn't know any better. Or maybe that's what made it worse.

Most students are impatient with ambiguity : it irritates them. "What's the solution?" they demand. "What, *exactly*, do you want us to say in this essay?" Then they sidle up to me, after their essays have been returned, and, with great indignation, accuse me of lying to them. "Besides," they say," how can you tell me my interpretation is *wrong* ? You *said* there was no one correct answer." I think I've been pegged a flake. A sex-obsessed feminist flake. There's always somebody who has to bear that label, I guess. It doesn't really bother me because there are always a handful of students who get it. Not all students mistake uncertainty for weakness and they're the ones who make it worthwhile.

*

My mother had a lover named Mojimir, a writer with eyebrows like black haystacks. I couldn't tell, from the photographs she eventually surrendered, what color his eyes were though : green in one picture, blue in another, almost yellow, in the third, as though there was no pigment in them at all, just these transparent globes absorbing and reflecting the colors around him. My father and Mojimir were friends. The three of them were involved in an organization that collected defectors from the airport in Montreal and helped them settle in Canada. In 1965, my father and Mojimir were driving in to Montreal from Quebec city when their brakes failed and they crashed. Mojimir died and my mother married Michael. There was an investigation of sorts but they didn't find anything. My father said the circumstances were sketchy. He said that the authorities in Prague did not approve of Mojimir's activities in Canada.

These facts haven't changed much. My mother is still a senator, still shuttling between Ottawa and Winnipeg, still single, still calling me at inopportune times on her car phone. My father has divorced Debbie Diamond and is alone for the first time in his life, though his name still appears in the papers in connection with shady lobbying deals. He maintains his habit of sending me birthday cards with fat checks that I use to buy the things I can't afford on my teacher's salary. Last summer, at the cottage, he had too many Fresca-vodkas, and told me that Mojimir chose Canada because he liked the poems of Robert Service and had romantic ideas about the Klondike trail. He ran out of money in Winnipeg and had to stay with his aunt, Mrs. Zuber. He taught himself English and got a job with the maintenance department at the University, where he met my mother.

Knowing about my mother's dead lover has explained to me how it was that she and my father — the most unlikely couple in Canada — got together and had me. When I first heard about it, I wondered if he was my father, this Mojimir man. The timing was too perfect. But I was glad he wasn't. I was relieved that the story didn't extend to my own biology, that I didn't have to erase what little I had, or turn inside out, the fact that I never got around to looking up Mrs. Zuber, Mojimir's mother, who died that summer I went to Prague. But I felt strange imagining the possibilities.

## 22

My mother wasn't very talkative in the hotel room that night in Vienna. She'd been attending meetings all day and she seemed frazzled, displaced, brittle, even. I was just gearing up to cry, when she pre-empted me and burst into tears. I held her, feeling scared, imagining all sorts of terrible things and feeling inadequate to the task of comforting her. Away from the blue-eyed bell-boys at the Chateau, the well-worn grooves of her rituals and ceremonies, she was at sea. She rested her head on my shoulder but even in her confusion and need, I sensed her resistance, understood that we would continue on as though this hadn't happened, and I felt sorry for her : that she couldn't be comforted, that she couldn't take what she needed without it registering somewhere inside of her, as a loss. She tried to pull herself together, wiped her eyes, put on some fresh lipstick, and got into bed.

"Open the window," she said, her voice shaking, "and pass me the Maalox. The food was too rich. *German food makes me vomit*!"

Maybe I still don't want to believe that my mother needs me in the way I needed her. Sometimes, I envy her impenetrable core — her rituals, her routines, her traditions. She lives behind a shield of certainties. Nobody can get in. She'd die without them. So I focus on my own uncertainties when I'm with her and let her live her fears vicariously.

There is no blue-print to discern, no grand scheme to save me from the impress of time, from the classroom, or from myself. "You've changed," my mother tells me. She wonders whether I'm being honest when I say I like teaching; how I can be content with so little. She wonders where this comes from. "Certainly not from me," she says, implying, of course, that there's something foreign about it, something different that she doesn't get and that therefore is not to be trusted. I get on with things. I don't lie around anymore longing for unfathomable somethings. I'm teaching for now, and that's what I'm doing.

But for all my recently acquired ease, I'll never really be a recreational skater.There's no urgency or drama in recreational skating, no lines to mark the start and finish, only nice, boring, common sense stretches of ice that are all carved up by the blades of the other recreational skaters. Olympic athletes avoid family skating. We don't want to dull our blades on the ruts. But sometimes you can see us out there, searching for a straightaway to sprint, inscribing the surface with long white lines that extend forever. When the ice is clear and hard and smooth and stretches ahead of you like a beautiful clean page of bonded paper, you know that it's worth every stroke, that it will hurt, but that it's worth it.

As I was returning to the hotel from a small excursion to buy my mother chocolates and a new hot water bottle, I looked up and saw her watching for me from the window of the hotel. Her face looked tiny and very white against the glass. Upstairs, in the room, I filled the bottle with boiling water, wrapped it in towels, and handed it to her. With great ceremony, she placed it on her chest. It lay there, like a flabby rubber heart, warming her body and comforting her the way she wouldn't permit me.

"Get your journal " she ordered. "I suspect you have a few things to read me." She looked down and tightened the plug of the hot water bottle. "I mean—just what you want. Read me what you want."

I sat down on the bed beside her and adjusted the lamp until a little spot of light fell onto the smooth bonded pages of my journal, and then, a little shyly, I began to read.

*It was as though one decision had set in place a blue-print and the blue-print had its own private logic.*

Johnson, *Prague Summer*

The narrator in *Prague Summer* discovers as she writes that there *are* no blue-prints to discover, no true life to discern, and no essential self to find out. Writing about her life, as a means to uncover her true self, or to reveal to herself what she was all along, is futile. The act of "self-redescription" (Rorty 99) yields a different kind of reward. Through narrative, she can weave instances of her life into a network of memories. By fixing the past, she can come to understand it on her own terms. By stamping onto it her own idiosyncratic impressions of herself and the people in her life, she can begin to achieve the kind of autonomy that comes with replacing the truths one inherits about oneself with, as Richard Rorty phrases it, "self-made contingencies" (98). This process has been described by Rorty as the process of self-redescription, a process which for the artist is "bound to be still going on at one's death" (99).

Rorty provides a framework within which Johnson's[1] self-redescription can be evaluated. For Rorty, the emphasis is on creation, and the goal, as he envisages it, is the creation of a "liberal utopia," where human solidarity will be made possible by its citizens' recognition of the "contingency" (xvi) of the vocabularies they use. Rorty describes himself as a liberal ironist. He defines a liberal as a person who believes that "cruelty is the worst thing we do" (xv) and an ironist as someone who "faces up to the contingency of her own most central beliefs and desires" (xv). Recognition of this contingency, argues Rorty, could lead to

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[1] Given that my novel uses the first person, I have decided to relieve the reader of the labour of distinguishing between the "I's" that will proliferate if I discuss *Prague Summer* in the first person. Thus I am using "Johnson" to refer to the writer,who is me.

> a recognition of the contingency of conscience, and how both recognitions lead to a picture of intellectual and moral progress as a history of increasingly useful metaphors rather than increasing understanding of how things really are (9).

In this world, narrative will be privileged over theory. This necessarily implies that we recognize that truth is composed by human beings in exactly the same way that sentences are created:

> . . since truth is a property of sentences, since sentences are dependent for their existence upon vocabularies, and since vocabularies are made by human beings, so are truths (21).

Basically, Rorty would like to see the elimination of cruelty and humiliation through the creation of "human solidarity" (120). If human beings are able to see other human beings or cultures as having more in common with them than not, solidarity will be possible. For the "imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers can cause people to re-evaluate their own capacity for cruelty and thereby redescribe themselves" (xvi). Because novels provide us with detailed descriptions of what other people are like, Rorty believes they are better than theories for providing us with examples and materials that we can use in our own attempts to create new selves (118). Authors, say Rorty, have the most to teach us when they are "celebrating personal canons" (119) and "sticking to the little things" (119).

In *The Art of the Novel* , Milan Kundera offers another reason for taking novels very seriously:

> The novel's wisdom is different from that of philosophy. The novel is born not out of the theoretical spirit but of the spirit of humor. One of Europe's major failures is that it never understood the most European of the arts — the novel; neither its spirit, nor its great knowledge and discoveries, nor the autonomy of its history. The art inspired by God's laughter does not by nature serve ideological certitudes, it contradicts them. Like Penelope, it undoes each night the tapestry that the theologians, philosophers, and learned men have woven the day before (160).

The novelist is not searching for the one correct answer; nor is she searching for ideological certitudes:

> it is precisely in losing the certainty for truth and the unanimous agreement of others that man becomes an individual. The novel is the imaginary paradise of individuals. It is the territory where no one possesses the truth, neither Anna nor Karenin, but where everyone has the right to be understood, both Anna and Karenin (159).

Kundera is the type of novelist Rorty likes, for he sees him as working against the Plato-Kant canon or ". . . the tradition of Western metaphysics, the tradition which hints at the One True Description which exhibits the underlying pattern behind apparent diversity" ("Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens" 75). But this does not mean that Rorty endorses only one kind of writer. It is just that he refuses to privilege philosophical stand-points. That is, he does not grant Nietzsche authority over Kundera; Mill over Nabokov; Habermas over Proust. He sees them all as fellow citizens rather than exemplars (xiv): "I urge that we not try to choose between them but, rather, give them equal weight and then use them for different purposes" (xvi). But because, as he admits, "no philosophy or any other theoretical discipline will ever let us do that" (xiv), he proposes the separation of private and public realms, in which self-redescription belongs wholly to the private sphere of human activity.

Private aesthetic values belong to the domain of writers like Proust and Nabokov (and Kundera), writers who help us see the effects of our private idiosyncrasies on others. Liberal values—freedom, the eradication of inequality, the achievement of human solidarity—belong to the domain of the imagination, not theory, and its spokespeople are writers like Orwell and Dickens who teach us to be less cruel by providing us with details about the effects of institutions on other people (91). Rorty's proposal entails a radical re-evaluation of the way in which we conceive of our society which I will not explore here. But , ultimately, he suggests that J.S. Mill had it just about right:

> J.S. Mill's suggestion that governments devote themselves to optimizing the balance between leaving people's private worlds alone and preventing suffering seems to me pretty much the last word (63).

Rorty would like the notion of truth as reflecting reality to be replaced with the idea of truth as "what comes to be believed as the result of free and open encounters" (68). He wants politics to replace epistemology (68). The poeticized culture which would emerge, argues Rorty, would be able to manoeuvre around the stultifying calcification of the status quo, with its characteristic drive toward a final vocabulary and a language of "common sense" (74).[2] In his essay "Heidegger, Kundera and Dickens" Rorty suggests that we regard the novel as "the genre most closely associated with the struggle for freedom and democracy" (68).

Worthy of membership in Rorty's liberal utopia are the strong poets : figures such as Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, Freud, Heidegger, and Proust, for they are the ones who see "their language, their morality, and their highest hopes as contingent on historical circumstances." ("The moral prophets of humanity have always been poets" [69] ). For Rorty, it was Nietzsche who led the assault on the whole idea of "knowing the truth" (27). His definition of truth as "a mobile army of metaphors" (27) pulled the carpet from under the notion that language could be used to represent reality. Thus, Nietzsche was a consummate liberal ironist, a poet who confronted his contingency, invented a new language, thought up new metaphors and succeeded in "constructing his own mind" (27).[3]

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[2] According to Rorty, common sense is less porous than irony, less self-conscious, less patient with uncertainty. It assumes the existence of a final vocabulary. To be common sensical is to accept the platutude which says there is a "single, permanent reality to be found behind the many temporary appearances" (74). Rorty charts the differences between the metaphysician and the ironist. The main issue between them is that of the contingency of language. Phrased another way, the metaphysician sees the common sense of our own culture (as embodied say in the canonical Plato-Kant sequence) as a picture of the way the world really is, while the ironist sees it as a mutable description of the world put forth by people inhabiting a particular time and place in history (76). For the metaphysician, a final vocabulary is a picture of reality. For the ironist, it is a poetic achievement.

[3] Rorty's liberal ironist fulfills three conditions : [s]he has "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she. . . uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies; . . . [s]he realizes that argument phrases in her present

The failed poet, suggests Rorty, languishes in the compost heap of old language, common sense, and dead metaphors. He measures success by the degree to which one seizes language and wrestles it into new shapes. According to Rorty, Nietzsche thinks

> the important boundary to cross is not the one separating time from atemporal truth but rather the one which divides the old from the new. He thinks a human life triumphant just insofar as it escapes from inherited descriptions of the contingencies of its existence and finds new descriptions (29).

*

I have summarized Rorty's account of language and selfhood because I want to use his terms to do four things in the remainder of this paper. First, I will use the examples of Proust's *Rememberance of Things Past,* and Kundera's *The Art of the Novel* and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being,* to illustrate, briefly, how Rorty's ideas about contingency are exemplified by these consummate "liberal ironist" writers. Second, I will offer an account of *Prague Summer* as a novel which incorporates some of Rorty's tenets. Specifically, I shall examine the notion of self-redescription as a process which leads to personal autonomy (Rorty's idea that creating one's own language is akin to creating one's own self ). Third, I will analyze Johnson's recurring motif of the body and argue that it is subject to the same contingencies as language and therefore not a reliable basis for self-knowledge. Fourth, I shall note the way Johnson uses time and memory as an instrument of control. Ultimately, I suggest that Johnson's transcription of her own creative becoming is both an account of an idiosyncratic artistic journey, and an account of the processes involved in self-transformation.

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vocabulary can neither underwrite not dissolve these doubts; . . . she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. The liberal ironist, says Rorty, occupies a position that Sartre called "meta-stable" : "never quite able to take themselves seriously because always aware that the terms in which they describe themselves are subject to change, always aware of the contingency and fragility of their final vocabularies, and thus of their selves" (73). For Rorty, the opposite of irony is common sense (74).

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*to prepare the hundred masks that needs must be attached to a single face*
Proust, *The Past Recaptured*

Proust is a writer committed to "self-redescription" (Rorty 99). His work embodies the ideas that truth and the self are created rather than discovered. Both *Rememberance of Things Past* and *The Past Recaptured* exemplify his awareness of the contingency of the language which he uses to state his relations to himself, to others, and to the world in which he lived. This awareness points to his attempt to replace inherited descriptions with his own. By showing us that self-redescription is possible, that is, by providing us with a detailed account of the processes involved in self-redescription, Proust sensitizes us to the contingency of the language we use to define ourselves and others.

Marcel is always aware of the gap between what he feels and what he thinks he should be discerning : he despairs over the "opaque" quality of words (90), and laments the difficulty in registering in language the subtle and complex emotions which his senses evoke: "I felt that I was not penetrating to the core of my impression, that something more lay behind that mobility, that luminosity which [the church spires] seemed at once to contain and conceal" (196).

This gap, however, is what motivates him to keep on trying. It drives him to record his memories (in all their insufficiency) so that they may "extend. . . boundlessly. . . giant-like, back into the years" (1124). As Charles Taylor suggests, in *Sources of the Self*, recording moments of his life and consciousness gives Marcel the sense that he is recovering the time he so fears wasting (464) and allows him to redeem the past which, until it came together through narrative, threatened to drag him down (Proust 1112) and overcome him (1122). But always, the narrator is plagued by an awareness of the inadequacy of his language and an understanding that it was a matter of chance that certain events led him to experience certain seminal impressions.

The narrator in *The Past Recaptured* "understands that it was a mere matter of chance" (1115) that certain ideas and impressions have made their way into his consciousness and finally into his work. And throughout the work, he addresses the fact that he may not be getting it down the way he experiences them. In *Combray*, the

older-book writing narrator describes the "anxiety" (103) he feels when he tries to "reproduce what [he] had perceived in [his] mind's eye" (103). He writes that he is struck by the "discordance between impressions and their habitual expressions" (91). The madelaine episode shows how his sense of contingency heightens his awareness of the gap between language and experience.

In the madelaine scene, the narrator recalls his older self returning home one winter to visit his mother in Combray. "Many years had elapsed" he writes ". . . during which nothing of Combray. . . had any existence for me" (48). But when *by chance*, he tastes the tea-soaked madelaine, his senses are "invaded" (49) by an "exquisite pleasure" (48). His mind furiously attempts to locate the source of the joy that the taste of the madelaine inspires. Questions flood his mind: why does he suddenly cease to feel "mediocre, contingent, mortal?" (48); "Whence did it come? What did it mean? How could I seize it and apprehend it?" (48). He gulps the tea in an attempt to prolong his feeling of "all powerful joy" (48) — but with each mouthful, the potion's magic grows weaker. He knows that his sudden liberation—his feeling that he is a being outside time—is associated with the taste of what he has eaten but that it goes beyond it as well : "I sensed that I was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours" (48). What Proust is seeking when he takes a second, and a third mouthful of tea and cake is not just a recreation of the experience but of the self that experienced it. His joy has made him into a different person. A self with a deep sense of his own artistic potential :

> What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. *Seek? More than that : create*. It is face to face with something that does not yet exist, to which it alone can give reality and substance, which it alone can bring into the light of day (49).

The answers Marcel is searching for are not contained in the taste of the tea and cake but in his own mind. Yet the object which triggers his reflections cannot be controlled: "it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die" (48). Once encountered, there must ensue a *will* to submit to the process of reflection. And he must be alert if he is to recognize that this object (the madelaine) can serve as a starting point for something much larger than the object itself : namely, self-conscious creation. He explores this phenomenon when he says that "for

no particular reason"(48) he changed his mind and accepted the tea and cake from his mother : "[S]he offered me some tea, a thing I did not ordinarily take. I declined at first, and then for no particular reason, changed my mind" (48). And what ensues is the subject of the book—his nearly forgotten childhood universe, nothing less than "the whole of Combray" (51) as well as the growing recognition of his creative capacity.

In *Contingency, Irony and Soldidarity*, Rorty calls Proust's text ". . . a network of small, interanimating contingencies" (100) because its author recognizes that the events he records are not connected to some kind of time-honored, immutable past which tries to establish "a relation to real essence" (101). Rather, they are a whole series of coincidences (which as Tomas, in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* , might say, "could just have well been otherwise" [Kundera 35]). As the conscious controller of the text, Proust establishes their significance in retrospect. He describes himself over and over again and, in the process, frees himself from the descriptions of himself offered to him by the people in his life (102).What is so valuable about self-redescription?

Rorty argues that self-redescription reveals to us that the linguistic patterns we use to understand ourselves and the world *are of our own making*. And when we begin to see this, we are in a better position to realize our own freedom. Proust, says Rorty

> . . . became autonomous by explaining to himself why the others were not authorities, but simply fellow contingencies. . . He had become as much of an authority on the people whom he knew as his younger self had feared they might be an authority on him (102).

*

*The answer may seem simple; it is not*
Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*

Kundera's novel presents many characters caught in the web of contingent circumstances. To the extent that he reveals the role that chance encounters and

contingencies play in shaping an individual and the language or vocabularies they speak, he echoes Proust. But he differs in that the voice he uses to narrate the lives of Tomas, Sabina, Tereza, and Franz has reconciled itself, more fully, to the idea of uncertainty. The narrator neither despairs over the opaque quality of words, nor laments the impossibility of recording his impressions; rather, contingency is a *given*, and the narrator is interested in exploring the so-called existential dilemmas of the characters who recognize its role in making them who they are.

Like Rorty, Milan Kundera sees an integral connection between autonomy and the idea of giving up on the search for time-honored truths. In *The Art of the Novel* , he argues that ". . . it is precisely in losing the certainty of truth and the unanimous agreement of others that man becomes an individual" (159). He believes that the tendency of people to judge before they understand, to "require that someone be right" (159) (or wrong for that matter) is the result of ". . . an inability to tolerate the essential relativity of things human, an inability to look squarely at the absence of the Supreme Judge" (7). This, coupled with what he calls man's desire for ". . . a world where good and evil can be clearly distinguished" (7) is the driving force behind religions and ideologies (7).

The Russian invasion turned Prague into a Kafkaesque nightmare which denied in principle those things which threw into question the absolute authority of the regime. In Kundera's novel, historical events—such as the Russian invasion in August 1968; the public humiliation of Alexander Dubcek; the smear campaign directed at Prochazka; the attempts by the Czechs to confuse Russian soldiers by removing street signs—are run together with the private and erotic stories of the individuals who are affected by these events. We perceive the story in fragments : situations are told from shifting points of view; characters are abandoned and picked up in different episodes in the novel; flashbacks, memories, and dreams are woven in and around the terrible events which followed the Prague Spring.

In *The Art of the Novel* , Kundera says that he uses historical events to create what he terms "revelatory existential situations for his characters" (42), situations that represent his attempt to "grasp the self" (42). Each character has what he calls an "existential code"(42) or a personal vocabulary which slowly and progressively reveals itself over the course of the novel. Political events trigger these revelatory existential situations. The word "grasp" is somewhat misleading here implying, as it does, that he

is trying to gain mastery over characters existing outside of himself. But perhaps he is suggesting that the process of grasping his characters (their existential codes and their essence [42]) can be understood as the process through which the self is constructed through language. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Kundera inscribes his imaginary essences with language and plays them off one another against a highly charged political backdrop. The complex dilemmas that result suggest that Kundera sees the process of constructing a self as one which is always subject to contingencies and often threatened by "the certainties and simple truths" (254) espoused by the ubiquitous collective.

Like Kundera, Kundera's characters are certain of only one thing—ambiguity. "Was he correct or not?" asks the narrator of Parmenides. "That is the question. The only certainty is : the lightness / weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all " (96). Kundera explores the impossibility of knowing the best way to act in a given situation. "The answer may seem simple; it is not" (223). "Our fateful inexperience" (223) makes the "borders between good and evil terribly fuzzy" (218). Like Rorty, Kundera shies away from all moral imperatives, all "certainties and simple truths" (254). Both writers value solitude and see an essential incompatibility between Rorty's private language of self-perfection and public language of social hope. But where Rorty argues that we can keep one foot in each camp, Kundera is not so sure. Typically, Kundera phrases the dilemma as a question: is it better to ". . . shout and thereby hasten the end or to keep silent and thereby gain a slower death?" (222). Kundera's characters all choose the latter (as Kundera did himself when he fled Czechoslovakia in the early seventies). Though Kundera is less optimistic than is Rorty about the possibility for "freely arrived at agreement. . . on how to accomplish common purposes. . . against the background of an increasing sense of the radical diversity of private purposes" (68), both writers worry about the silencing effects of the public sphere on the individual. Rorty identifies the enemy as the final vocabulary; Kundera fears *kitsch.*

Kundera defines kitsch as the "need to gaze into the mirror of the beautifying lie and be moved to tears of gratification at one's own reflection" (AN 135). In other words, it is the trivializing and insidious set of lies and illusions that infect and inform the public realm. Kitsch employs the kind of final vocabulary of which Rorty is so critical. When Rorty says of a final vocabulary that ". . . it is final in the sense that if doubt is cast on the worth of these words, their user has no noncircular argumentative

recourse. Those words are as far as he can go with language; beyond them there is only helpless passivity or a resort to force" (73), he echoes Sabina, who flees Czechoslovakia to escape the final vocabulary (or kitsch) of the Communist regime. Kundera sees kitsch, and thus, final vocabularies, as the phenomenon which gives momentum to our moral crisis, "our dictatorship of the heart" (250). But for all the horrors he associates with kitsch, he sees it as inevitable:
". . . none of us is superhuman enough to escape *kitsch* completely. No matter how we scorn it, *kitsch* is an integral part of the human condition" (256).

On one level Kundera suggests that the public realm has been poisoned by kitsch and that attempts to operate within its infected structures either backfire or result in the individual being co-opted by it. Tereza and Tomas move to the country, which "offered them nothing in the way of even a minimally interesting life" (283). Sabina flees the country. Franz dies an ignoble death. Yet, on another level, it could be argued that their awareness of contingency is the very faculty which permits them the ironic detachment to see kitsch for what it is. Each of these characters resist kitsch. Though the choices available are limited, they all make the best of a lousy situation : they are able to carve out for themselves a measure of freedom ("Tomas could not save political prisoners but he could make Tereza happy" [219]). In the no-win situation imposed by the kitschified apparatus of a totalitarian regime, freedom is achieved in the private realm where it is possible to be the master of one's own privacy (167).

*

*I was desperate to hear that note of authority in my voice*
Alex, *Prague Summer*

To examine Proust and Kundera in a Rortyian light is to foreground the contingency of language and selfhood. Proust, with his concern to redescribe himself—to arrange the little mortal things into patterns of his own making— is a writer for the private realm. By re-making himself, he shows us that self-redescription is possible. Kundera, too, is a writer more concerned with private aesthetic values. Both show that constructing a self is an ongoing and neverending process which is acted

upon by chance and coincidence and which we are often in a better position to evaluate in retrospect.

Like Proust, Johnson is concerned to redescribe herself; to use time and memory as an instrument to retrieve the selves she was, is, and will become. Like Kundera, she recognizes the role that chance and coincidence play in her life. She is aware of the impossibility of knowing the best way to act in a given situation. The narrator, Alex, recognizes that she must break free of other peoples' vocabularies if she is to achieve personal and artistic autonomy. She must stop being seduced by the final vocabulary of her conservative mother, Katherine; by the idealized vocabulary of Ben; and by the platitudes and aphorisms offered up to her by the her culture. Rorty says the best of the liberal ironists are able to create the taste by which they end up judging themselves (99). In *Prague Summer*, the narrator begins this process and discovers along the way, that it is a journey that will never end.

Near the end of the novel, the narrator stands before a Daumier at the National Gallery in Prague:

> *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*. The old man on his gaunt horse, his head capped by a bucket galloping off on another adventure. Staggering after him, his loyal, fat, uncomprehending side-kick. I don't know for sure which one I identify with or whether I have to choose. Maybe it's both. Standing there in the silent room I see the whole of my life in the energy and looseness of Daumier's lines. I see myself galloping into the night on a bony charger, while my other self watches and waits to rescue me from the dung heap. I think of myself in the attic room, on the stage playing mother, at the cottage with my half-sisters, in the snowbank in Innsbruck. I see myself on the plane, suspended between my mother and the oval; my mother and Ben. I think of Ben rolling off my bed with a gasp, of Mikel's coffee-colored arms. I think of myself chasing myself across a lumpy plane whose frontier ends only where the earth and sky join on the beautiful bonded pages of my journal. I could see that I had quite a bit of work to do (119).

Though she feels that she has not truly begun, she has, in fact, already arrived; at least at the end of this particular journey (though, paradoxically, as the author, she had

already arrived at a certain point before the book was even started) she ambiguously recalls reading the book to her mother at the end of the work :

> I sat down on the bed, beside her and adjusted the lamp until a little spot of light fell onto the smooth bonded pages of my journal, and then, a little shyly, I began to read (123)

The book is a description of the processes by which the character, Alex, *comes* to write. In a Proustian sense, she must go back in time in order to move forward. She has learned that she can use time as a kind of creative instrument to retrieve, create, and move beyond the selves she has been, is, and will become in time.

In a discussion of Johnson's "selves," it is helpful to identify the variety of identities attached to the narrative voices. The *I* has two main identities : that of the questing young girl, Alexandra, whose longing has not yet manifested itself as the need to write, and the *I* of the older narrator, the writer, who is selecting, describing, analyzing, and assigning value to the events of her past. In addition to the double identity of Alex and narrator, there is the *I* of the book's omniscient creator, the author, who invents the novel's language, and to who I have been referring as "Johnson." Through these narrators, the writer records a succession of selves : her longing self "who hungered for something she could never really identify" (42) and her other self who channelled that hunger into a desire to beat Mary-Anne Morrison on the speed skating rink (44). She writes of the person she was when she loved Ben (18) and the person she wanted to be when her love ceased (98). She remembers the child who needed a complete costume to perform; the adolescent who told lies to get what she wanted (92); the young adult who resists recreational skating and has given up certainties (121). She is daughter, lover, half-sister, skater, student, teacher, and traveller, and in each of these shifting contexts, the selves are constituted differently—they become, as poststructuralist critics might say, the subject of a particular discourse (Weedon 97).[4]

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[4] In *Feminist Practice & Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon provides a feminist overview of poststructualist theories of language and subjectivity. Poststructualist theory seems to overlap with Rorty on the issue of subjectivity—the idea that language creates selves. However, Poststructualist theory and feminism in general focus more heavily on the social, economic, and political forces shaping the individual.

The *I* 's give the work a kind of double identity as both autobiography and fiction. Though it takes the raw materials from the writer's life, the selves produced in the course of the narrative are fictions. The succession of selves are necessary to realize and convey a self becoming in time. By distancing the narrator from her younger self, the writer is better equipped to explore the past. As she describes who she was, so she becomes someone new, for the very act of self-redescription is akin to metaphor making. By creating narrative out of the events of the distant and recent past, the writer creates metaphors of the selves she contains. To reiterate an earlier point, she tries to do what Proust does so successfully: to use time as an instrument of creativity and control.

The autobiographical impulse is also a kind of metaphor for a writer's conception of the artistic process. Whether the events and materials depicted are drawn from her own life is of less importance than the fact that the selves exist as separate entities. In the act of writing, the selves are in process. Paradoxically, the subject can't be fixed. By the time we reach the end of the text, there exists a series of selves which have the illusion of solidity and unity. The word "illusion" is crucial here, for the selves can never be fixed, can never truly convey the self in time, or reflect the radically unstable nature of subjective reality. In his article "Autobiography as De-Facement," Paul DeMan contends that "[t]he interest in autobiography. . . is not that it reveals reliable self knowledge—it does not—but that it demonstrates in a striking way the impossibility of closure and totalization (that is, the impossibility of coming into being) of all textual systems" (71). The goal is not to achieve a stable, absolute self, or to weave out of the myriad of selves, one omniscient self whose subjectivity is fixed and absolute, though the character Alex, may at times feels that this is what drives her. Rather, the goal is the process of creation itself, the production of imagined selves who are embedded in the contingency of language which acknowledges that truth is not discovered but created through language by its user.

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While there are many interesting and worthwhile points to make, this is not the place). As the older narrator struggles to reconcile these different subject positions, so she must abandon the selves which hinder her development as a person and a writer.

Johnson resists total closure when near the end of the novel the narrator claims that she has "quite a bit of work to do" (28). She repeats this sentiment in the closing chapter when she meditates on the differences between the Olympic athlete and the recreational skater and aligns herself, in spite of the pain it has caused, with the Olympic athlete:

> But for all my recently acquired ease, I'll never really be a recreational skater. There's no urgency or drama in recreational skating, no lines to mark the start and finish, only nice, boring, common sense stretches of ice that are all carved up by the blades of the other recreational skaters. Olympic athletes avoid family skating. We don't want to dull our blades on the ruts. But sometimes you can see us out there, searching for a straightaway to sprint, inscribing the surface with long white lines that extend forever. When the ice is clear and hard and smooth and stretches ahead of you like a beautiful clean page of bonded paper, you know that it's worth every stroke; that it will hurt, but that it's worth it (123).

The narrator sees her work, like her skating, as the place in which new beginnings are always possible—where she can go to avoid the ruts of the recreational skaters or that part of her culture that dulls her senses and encourages her to accept its platitudes. The narrator understands that her work involves a kind of toil and the task of the work is to give shape and meaning to a life that resists the stasis and linearity of narrative by taking for her *subject* and her *object*, the process of self-transformation. As Jean Starobinski writes,

> One would hardly have sufficient motive to write an autobiography had not some radical changes occurred in [her] life. . . If such a change had not affected the life of the narrator, [s]he could merely depict herself once and for all, and the new developments would be treated as external (historical) events : we would then be in the presence of history, and a narrator in the first person would hardly continue to be necessary. It is the internal transformation of the individual — and the exemplary character of this transformation — *that furnishes a subject for narrative discourse in which the I is both subject and object* (Lecker, 88).

Part of what drives the narrator is, as I have demonstrated, the need to begin again as well as the desire to close the gap between what she is and what she wants to be. Though I have stated that her goal is not so much to arrive at some whole self (beyond which writing would cease to exist), the younger Alex does not see this yet. She is frightened by the idea that she may never be bigger than the sum of her present occupations. She needs illusions. She wants to believe that there is something big, waiting to receive her off in the unimaginable future. And she is disturbed by the possibility that it was simply a series of coincidences which led her to Prague:

> I thought about the series of random events which had led me to him: a swim-suit post card; an early morning phone call; a skeptically raised eye-brow at the Chateau dining room; the word "bitch" tossed out so casually; a bean sprout on the principal's lip. Could it have just as well been otherwise? *I decided not* (68).

However, the Alex we encounter at the end of the novel *does* acknowledge that her transcriptions carry the signature of her own idiosyncratic distortions and illusions; her admission, "I don't lie around anymore longing for unfathomable somethings. I'm teaching for now and that's what I'm doing" (123), casts a different light on the younger Alex's longing for certainties. She comes to realize that her goal is not to uncover the blue print, and reveal to herself some previously existing truth, but to situate herself in the world. Situating herself in the world involves coming to terms with the role that language plays in articulating a self.

Most modern theories of language assume that language is not a transparent medium. This awareness led the Modernists to take a radically reflexive turn, in which, as Charles Taylor says in *Sources of the Self*, "poetry, or literature tends to focus on the poet, the writer, or on what is to transfigure through writing" (481). And reflexivity doesn't have to mean "rampant subjectivity" (481). As Taylor argues,". . . it probably contains the key to what it is to be human" (481).

Though the language in *Prague Summer* is not highly self-reflexive (as Proust's text is, for example), Johnson understands that the creative process is integrally related to self-consciousness. Her reflexivity is, necessarily, embedded in her language and expresses itself as the narrator s awareness of awareness, or consciousness of consciousness. For reflexivity *is* a kind of self-consciousness. Harry Frankfurt discusses this notion in his essay, "Identification and Whole Heartedness," when he

says that reflexivity is the *same thing* as self-consciousness. In Frankfurt's mind, consciousness does not proceed in a linear sequence, in which the individual distinguishes between a primary awareness and then responds to that awareness:

> For that would threaten an intolerably infinite proliferation of instances of consciousness. Rather . . . self-consciousness. . . is a sort of imminent reflexivity by virtue of which every instance of being conscious grasps not only that of which it is an awareness but also the awareness of it. It is like the source of light which in addition to illuminating whatever other things fall within its scope, renders itself visible as well (162).

Language cannot manifest, as Frankfurt puts it, "every instance of being." In Frankfurt's estimation, the human mind can accomplish imminent reflexivity in a way that language can only approximate (162). Charles Taylor concurs : "there is always a gap between language and what is evoked" (479). Reflexivity involves, among other things, acknowledging this gap — the inadequacy of language itself. Even before Heisenberg observed that the behavior of sub-atomic particles cannot be accurately predicted or observed, writers have been acutely aware of the impossibility of recording their own and others consciousness without in some way provoking a disturbance which is "sufficient enough to vitiate the observation" (Shattuck 104). Heisenberg explained the bind using what he called the "indeterminacy principle" which states that "all matter at the atomic level is modified simply by the act of observing" (104).

Alex and the narrator manifest to some extent the "indeterminacy principle" in their observations ("If Ben would only stop munching our sex life could return to normal. . . I wasn't so sure about this. What had our sex life been like before? [Johnson 175]) which, in Rortyian terms, is the same as understanding the contingency of language. Alex is aware of the gap between what she feels and what she thinks she should be discerning. And it is an anxiety based on her sense of the inadequacy of her own perceptions : "I didn't write about the events leading up to my departure, about quitting my job, or about the tensions with my mother. I felt that I had sealed them with a letter to the principal, finished them off with a smart 'bye' on the phone. . . " (51). The older narrator describes the disgust Alex feels for herself when she records her honest impressions of her relationship with Ben (". . . so I began a new page and turned my mind to higher things" [72]). And she laments the difficulty in registering her emotions

in the parting notes she writes to Ben before she leaves for Prague : "That wouldn't do. Too cold. . . Too arty. . . It would have to do. I was getting late" (4).

Interestingly, Alex and the narrator both express the tension less in terms of language and what it evokes than in terms of the *gap* they sense between their perceptions and what they feel they ought to be perceiving. And it is the body, almost more so than language, through which this discovery is made. Alex experiences this gap as a kind of physical longing that is powerful enough at times, to cause her body to "seize up" (93). And in trying to understand why her body fails to perform for her at crucial moments, she is forced to explore the ways in which, as an athlete, she learned to ignore the messages her body sends :

> I ignored the warnings : athletes do that a lot. You hear about these runners who pride themselves on finishing marathons with stress fractures. Runners who hit the wall at mile twenty but run through it to the other side to tell the tale to other athletes who admire that sort of thing. But everyone knows you can only push the body so far. Not even *will* can see you through the last hundred meters of a race if you pushed too hard at the beginning and your blood is burning up the muscle in your legs for oxygen and catabolizing tissue for fuel. At some point, the body seizes up. As mine did on the stage playing mother, on the last corner of a three-thousand meter race in Innsbruck, and then again in bed with Ben (93).

An athlete must be able to "run through the wall to the other side" (93) if they are to achieve the kind of excellence which will distinguish them from the recreational athlete. But, as the narrator suggests, Alex has assimilated the ethos of the Olympian all too well. When her body sends her signals, she mis-reads them:

> It received Ben into it with a warning which I, amazed that such a wondrous creature could be interested in me, mistook for fear. . . My body was confused by the new sensations, the exotic foods with their fish sauce and green pepper paste, the drunken dancing, the puffs it took of his cigarettes and hash (18).

In short, her younger self mistrusts the signals her body issues. Love is a skill involving labour and perseverance. Though she claims it is her body that she is training for her relationship with Ben, "body" could be substituted with the word "soul," or "heart" or even "self" for that matter:

> . . . I persevered because I thought it was fear that held me back and as Ben and I agreed, I had to learn how to love. I trained [my body] as I had trained it on the oval—taught it to sit when it wanted to stand, smile when it wanted to scream, understand its pain as pleasure and when it cried and protested I took it home to my mother's bed and nursed it back to health with a hot-water bottle (93).

I am blurring the notion of body and vocabulary (or language) here to raise the point that Alex experiences in her body what the narrator (or more so, Johnson) projects into *language*. Part of Alex's problem is, indeed, associated with her deliberate mis-reading of her body. But the narrator, grasping for clarity, and still longing for the kind of grounding that she feels is missing from her life, grants the body a kind of supreme wisdom, the ability to speak *for* her:

> The body is slower than the tongue to act, but it contains more wisdom, carries more knowledge around in its vaults, cannot be convinced by the mind to re-arrange itself without some violence. Look at a strand of DNA, the way it builds your chromosomes rung by rung, look at the the complexity of information that makes one eyelash (93).

She longs for others to read her body as she has failed to:

> Read my body Ben. Follow the narrative of my eyes, my arms, my ass, the space between my thighs that refuses your tongue. Listen to the muscles that welcome you as they welcome a masseuse's hands, but don't mistake that for desire. Understand that the bones you touch with your fingertips are hard. The tongue must learn to speak the body (93).

Part of Alex's goal, as the narrator sees it, is to reclaim her body. Johnson tries to exemplify this by shifting to a first person narrative. Here, Alex's physicality is expressed with more immediacy than in the pages preceding it. She records her responses to her surroundings with a new emphasis on sensation : tastes, textures, images. Where she had felt before that the only passages in her journal that were worthy of discussing were the passages in which she'd had Ben in mind, "the verbatim quotes from the students; the election details; the excerpts from books and museum pamphlets. . . " (73), she is finally free enough to question Ben's ways of seeing :

> And Ben can call me on it if he wants, but it's nonetheless true. White ankle socks are big. I think about this for a moment, wonder if he thinks you can climb onto some neutral shoal and observe the other without attaching value. Wonder if my observation is a put-down. . . I think of Ben and his copious notes, and wonder where Ben is in all of that, what Ben feels when he looks out upon a crowd of people he doesn't know, if he always feels as happy and free in his anonymity as he says (104).

Finally free enough to stand back and regard her surroundings with her own eyes, she delights in the rush of bodies around her (104); the smell of schnitzel and beer (104), the taste of greasy sausage (105), and Mikel's body — his height, his back, and arms (106). But the narrator wants to believe that the greatest break-through for Alex, comes when she experiences her desire as an affirmation of appetite. A yes, so to speak, to lust:

> Then I do something that shocks me, that my body's been saying all along. I am relieved to have unburdened myself of those words, words I've never felt in my mouth. The words are so sweet, I repeat them, I pass them from my mouth into his, like a sweet, cool liquid. "I want you Mikel" (113).

Though she experiences shame over her un-selfconscious desire for Mikel ("I feel ashamed because my body said yes and made its claim, and there it was for everybody to see, like a menstrual spot on a chair slip" [116]), her body is "humming and warm" (115) with the memory of his body and his smell. Ruefully, she examines her impulses: "I feel ashamed but I understand that I would do it all again, even if it ended up the way it did, even if it meant hurting Ben" (116). She is amazed that she did not even reflect upon her desire at the time:

> I wanted it so badly, I didn't even think about it. There were no alarms or warnings sounding in my body. No urge to flee and hide. No desire to dissemble. It was just there and I couldn't have hidden it if I had wanted to (115).

While this representation of Alex's desire suggests a kind of liberation, it also suggests that the narrator trusts the body to speak to Alex, and applauds Alex for obeying it. But

can the body be relied upon to speak the truth? No, it cannot. The body is not, as Foucault says, "a touchstone of archaic truth. . . " (Riley, 104).

Denise Riley, a pragmatic feminist who examines the shifting historical constructions of the category of "women" in relation to other concepts of personhood, is critical of attempts to invest the body with the power to speak truths. In *"'Am I That Name?': Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History*, she suggests that philosophical writings which make the case for the truth-speaking female body, run the risk of resurrecting damaging forms of essentialism :

> I would not seek the freshly conceived creature, the revelatory woman we have not yet heard. She is an old enough project, whose repeated failures testify to the impossibility of carving out a truly radical space; the damage flows from the very categorization 'woman' which is and has always been circumscribed in advance from some quarter or other, rendering the ideal of a purely self-representing "femininity" implausible (107).

The narrator suggests for Alex almost a Foucauldian reading of the body—as a "touchstone of archaic truth, innocent brute clarities. . . " (Riley 104). But Foucault's notion of body is a shifting one; he also argues that the body is inscribed by historical contingencies :

> The body is the inscribed surface of events (traced by language and dissolved by ideas), the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity), and a volume in perpetual disintegration. Genealogy['s]. . . task is to expose the body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body (qtd. in Riley, 105).

Alex makes recourse to her body during times of emotional stress but she is unlikely to find in it the kind of grounding she seeks. For as these writers suggest, Alex's body is implicated in the same kinds of codifications as her language. The wisdom it contains and the so-called secret knowledge it carries about in its "vaults" (93) is, as Denise Riley suggests, not neutral. As a "concept," says Riley, the body "is barely intelligible unless it is read in relation to whatever else support it and surrounds it" (104). When the narrator meditates on the body, she echoes the sentiments of many of the French Feminists whose goal, suggests Riley, is to create a "fresh and autonomous

femininity, voiced in a revolutionary new language, to speak a non-alienated woman" (107). Consider the words of Luce Irigaray:

> But woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere. Even without speaking of the hystericization of her entire body, one can say that the geography of her pleasure is much more diversified, more multiple in its difference, more complex, more subtle, than is imagined. . " (Marks and de Courtivron 103).

or Hélène Cixous:

> By writing herself, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated by her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display.
>
> Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time . . . Write yourself. Your body must be heard (250).

and:

> . . . Why so few texts? Because so few women have as yet, won back their body. Women must write through their bodies. . . (256).
>
> . . . Women are body. More body [than men], hence more writing (257).

French feminists might want to tell Alex to wake up and appropriate her female body, to sing its distinctions. Denise Riley, on the other hand, would suggest that Alex remember the "temporality and malleability of gendered existence" (103) for the body is "constantly altering as a concept":

> . . . we must back off from the supposition that women's bodies are systematically and exhaustively different, that they are unified in an integral otherness. Instead we [should] maintain that women only sometimes live in the flesh distinctively as women, as it were, and this is a function of historical categorizations as well as of an individual daily phenomenology (105).

The difference between Alex and these feminists is that the narrator's understanding of her body is not centered around her gender. This is not to say that it has not been inscribed by the "impress of history" (103) for as a woman, Riley would argue, Alex's body is necessarily gendered. It is just that she does not experience and celebrate her body as an "eternally sexed" (103) and "heavily gendered"(103) thing. The narrator's awareness of the contingency of her language and perceptions (expressed through her body as longing) aligns her more closely with Riley and Rorty.

Furthermore, though Alex speaks of her "body's will" (116), the body on its own, cannot possess the kind of will required to accomplish long-term projects such as making the Olympics or writing a novel. The body's will is really the narrator's metaphor for appetite or desire for sensation whose significance may be felt but not articulated without self-consciousness and, necessarily, language.

Poststructuralist Chris Weedon argues that individuals are constituted by the discourses into which they enter and those discourses can calcify if they are not questioned:

> Insertion into language begins at an early age and always happens in the context of specific discourses governing family life and childhood more generally. Moreover, it is a consistent feature of most forms of discourse that they deny their own partiality. They fail to acknowledge that they are but possible versions of meaning rather than truth itself and that they represent particular interests. Moreover discourse constitutes ways of being a subject, modes of subjectivity which imply specific organization of the emotional as well as the mental and physical capacities of the individual (97).

Rorty's theories about the contingency of language and selfhood allow for more agency than the poststructualist theories of subjectivity described above by Weedon, where the subject is presented as an almost witless prisoner of the language patterns into which they insert themselves, and from which they can depart only with the greatest amount of toil. Poststructuralist theory suggests that vocabularies deny their own partiality. Rorty's account of the liberal ironist suggests that with an awareness of this partiality and a liberal sprinkling of irony, this trap can be overcome. The younger Alex does not understand this though the older narrator and Johnson do.

The problematics of these suppositions cast doubts on the narrator's assumption that Alex's body contains the kind of wisdom that will guide her through her more difficult passages. For as a discourse, skating denies its own partiality. It is the individual who must negotiate the terms (and the extent) to which she will assimilate its ethos. And if she is to bypass the impoverishment resulting from the exclusion of other discourses, she must remain, as Rorty suggests, sufficiently detached and ironical to see it as just one of a number of discourses into which she might enter. But as I have also pointed out, the narrator *does* acknowledge the impact of contingency—the circumstances that inscribed Alex's body with the athlete's discourse (the "rhythms of the rink,"[51]) in the first place. Had she been been codified by another discourse, say that of mathematics, dance, chess, or photography, she may have evolved a very different conception of her body. But it was the straight-a-ways, the pivots, the corners, the speed, the thrill of accelerating out of a corner into two long strides whose power was absorbed in the pivot and released again in [her] accelerating body as [she] rounded another corner (49).that constituted the younger Alex and that the narrator attempts to *reconstitute* through narrative.

As a child, Alex felt an indefinable longing (42). She experienced her longing as almost a physical pain. And there was Mary-Anne Morrison:

> Desire is usually expressed as desire for something. I desire X. I hunger for Y. When a state of consciousness is deprived of its object, it will begin to approach the neighborhood of pain. Prolonged, objectless longing is pain. Mary-Anne was the first speedskater I ever saw—she was whipping around a corner at family skating—and I took her for the object of my longing (44).

That she took Mary-Anne for the object of her longing was the function of chance. She was not born destined to become a skater. Rather, she made herself into one. Alex's longing is not assuaged through skating. When she gets to Germany her longing to go to the Olympics transforms into a longing to return home (47). Ironically, Alex's difficulty in grasping the source of her longing is the very thing which impels her to keep on trying.[5] The tension between Alex's *attempt* to find an outlet for her

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[5] Alex thinks there exists some Truth out there and she experiences anxiety over her perceived failure to *embody* it. Rorty's liberal ironist, on the other hand, is comfortable with the realization that her vocabulary is just one of many. Alex is not by definition a

longing and the *product* she craves, drives the text forward. It fuels the narrator's artistic journey. It also raises the paradoxes inherent in time and creation.

I say paradoxes in time and creation for writing a life into a text has a strong temporal dimension. Instances of consciousness must be sorted, selected, and incorporated over time into a narrative without which they would have no meaning. Without a temporal dimension, they would be, to borrow Frankfurt's term, an "intolerable proliferation of instances" (162) whose meaning would have to be inferred both by the reader and the individual experiencing them. Charles Taylor argues that the individual can only know herself through what he calls the "history of [her] maturations and regressions, overcomings and defeats (Taylor 50). "... [S]elf-understanding necessarily has temporal depth and incorporates narrative" (50). Taylor believes that human beings are driven by an impulse towards "fullness," "depth," "meaning," "substance," and he claims that we need much time and many experiences in order to be able to discern patterns that are meaningful in the sequence of events that collectively form a life (50). By cutting across time and joining divergent moments of consciousness through narrative memory, the narrator redescribes herself and the people in her life, and she gains an autonomy (however fleeting) over the longing which, until then, directed her actions unthinkingly. She situates and records her memories so that she may not have to "lie around longing for unfathomable somethings" (122).

Johnson's recovery of time may be examined more fully in the context of the skating episodes. Memory, here, is both an act of will and a process, and both are activities in time. All records of memory presuppose an act of will, but in willing a submission to memory, she is able to enter into contact with the person she remembers she was at the time and, in the process, create new selves.

In the first skating section at the end of Part 1, the narrator recalls her older self repeating her mother's words as she falls off to sleep the night before she leaves for Prague: "'Go for it. . . Be Careful.' The same words my mother had said five years earlier, when I was heading to Germany to train for the Olympics." Though she felt that

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liberal ironist. However, Johnson and, to a lesser extent the narrator *are*, for they take for the subject of their novel the impossibility of arriving at the kind of grounded Truth that the younger Alex craves.

she had "no choice" (42), the narrator recognizes that she was driven by a powerful longing which needed an outlet. In her journal, the younger Alex writes that she was driven by a desire to win. But the narrator undercuts this by suggesting that Alex's involvement in the sport was a function of contingent circumstances:

> Mary-Anne was the first speedskater I ever saw — she was whipping around a corner at family skating —and I took her for the object of my longing. I objectified my physical pain in the image of Mary-Anne whipping around a corner of the speedskating rink (48).

Mary-Anne gives Alex's victories "meaning" (45), but unlike Mary-Anne, Alex doesn't quit. She begins to sense that many decisions (to skate or not to skate for example), cannot be evaluated in terms of their truth factor:

> 'Be true to yourself,' my mother said, when she came across me weeping into the sheepskin rug in my bedroom after winning a meet in Moose Jaw. Was it truer to skate or quit? I had no idea (45).

Only in retrospect can the narrator begin to understand what drove her. That is, the passage of time gives her an ironic perspective on her younger selves and allows her to see the role that contingency played in making her who she was. Her older self recalls then that it was her "longing —pure and insatiable" (44) that drove her, that gave her the sense that she was "preparing herself to be received by something large and unfathomable" (45). But the older narrator notes that her decisions had a contingent element when she writes that upon arriving in Germany with the team, her ". . . longing to go to the Olympics transformed into a longing to go home." (2). The narrator realizes that she invested her mother and home with the same power she had previously awarded skating, namely, the power to provide for herself an object for her longing. And making it more alluring, is, of course, the nostalgic lens through which she regards what she left behind:

> My room, with the polka dot curtains, became a sanctuary, the new object of my longing. Thinking of my mother and her rituals brought tears to my eyes. It would be months before I could steal moments behind the bedroom door, bury my face in my mother's scented pillows, inhale the odor of my sweet, sweet dog (2).

It is with the vague and somewhat troubling sense that she might not find what she is looking for in Prague that she dismisses Kundera ("[w]e can never know what we want because living only one life, we can neither compare it with our previous lives nor perfect it in our lives to come"[5]) in favor of her mother's common sense pronouncements about love ("[Ben] is a practice man" [30]; pithy aphorisms which imply that there is some practical, functional form of truth towards which we should strive. In fact, Alex is torn between her mother's final vocabulary (and the kitschified world of politics her mother inhabits) and a more porous, self-reflexive vocabulary (and a world of uncertainty) as she states at the end. However, this tension is present throughout the text and can be demonstrated by comparing the vocabularies they speak.

Contingency surfaces again a few pages later when the narrator acknowledges that her younger self was not able to face up to the forces driving her back into the arms of Ben : "I could not afford to see my actions as reactions, would not have been able to begin again had I understood my impulse to re-make myself as a reaction against something or as the realizing of a random longing" (51). Her younger self "didn't have the power to observe" (51) why she was heading for Prague, but the narrator makes the attempt to record her earlier illusions and self-deception : ". . . in our year apart, my longing had branched into a thousand possibilities, over which my mother invisibly presided and from which Ben would save me" (54). The younger self, observes the narrator, needed to see herself as "the omniscient traveller, the all-seeing eye, the roving recorder of adventure" (51). Distanced by time from her younger self, she is able to infuse her impressions with a kind of irony that suggests that the answers that Alex is looking for are contained not in the history book about the Austro-Hungarian Empire she has brought with her

> As the big IF of history passed through my brain, down my arm and onto the beautiful bonded pages of my new journal, I felt my spirits soar. I gripped the arm-rests and inhaled. Once, twice, three-times — I couldn't get enough oxygen into my lungs. My life was about to begin. Prague, Dvorak, secret police, dissident politicians, Karlo-Vivary! (8).

The disillusionment she experiences in Czechoslovakia ("I thought it would be different in a foreign country" [94]) echoes the disillusionment she felt in Germany. The narrator tentatively explores the notion that the events which led Alex to Prague

were the result of chance: "I thought about the series of random events which had led me to him" (63). Not until her body seizes up does she address the fact that Ben cannot save her from her mother. Moreover, he cannot supply her with the material to re-make herself. The only answers are the answers in her own mind; the ones she *makes*. Only Alex can re-make Alex.

At the pool, the narrator acknowledges the gap between her expectations and the reality:

> This was supposed to be the best time of my life and I felt miserable. This was my big adventure and I was swimming laps.
> I could have been anywhere. . . (94).

While the younger self thinks it is the weight of the love that Ben has bestowed upon her that drags her towards the cement floor of the swimming pool, the older narrator suggests that she was crying for herself and her inability to love. The fact that her younger self is not seeing her motivations clearly is emphasized by the suggestion that her vision is impaired: "My goggles fogged up so badly I couldn't see anything at all" (95).

On the train for Prague, she reasserts her illusions :

> I began to think of all that I would do and see. That first night with Ben seemed very far away. I felt like I was arriving in a city for the first time. And this time I would do it right! (5).

The idea that there is a "right way" to do Prague is alluring to her, perhaps because she has not felt that she has, up to that point, been speaking the truth of her impressions. She has been so busy travelling through Ben, learning the quirky dips and turns of his mind (74), that she has not registered the country as she thinks a good traveller should. The incident at the hostel, however, triggers a shift to first person and the section which follows records the epiphanic moment in which Alex experiences and expresses her desire for Mikel—the incident which the narrator suggests, has important consequences for her future relations.

I use Taylor's term "epiphanic moment," for it is here that the narrator experiences joy, heightened consciousness, and even a sense of her creative capacity, although it does not result in an immediate realization of the narrator's artistic goals. In addition, the object here, (Mikel) is not constituative itself, of her heightened consciousness. Charles Taylor discusses the indirect nature of the epiphany in Modernist literature and I refer to his definition to shed light on Alex's own : "The epiphany is of something only indirectly available, something the visible object can't say itself but only nudges us towards" (469). For Johnson, the Mikel incident nudges her towards an understanding of her powers, even though this sense of herself does not emerge directly from the original experience but later on, when the narrator returns home and resumes her job as a high-school teacher. Taylor suggests the narrator can only understand the meaning of her illumined state after many years have passed (479).

Taylor also discusses the "framing function"(27) of epiphanies in Modernist writing. For Taylor, frames are devices which individuals construct — not to uncover previously existent truths but to confer meaning on their lives (27). A frame is, after all, a construction which is devised, contrived, invented, composed. It is used to enclose a picture, to establish borders, to express limits. Taylor argues that it is impossible to live in the world without a framework (27). Identity is defined by

> . . . commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which individuals can determine from case to case what is good. . . what ought to be done. . . or opposed. . . it is the the horizon within which an individual can take a stand (27).

Taylor says that because we construct our own frameworks, not in accordance with a previously existing truth or something grounded in a universal nature of being, but on the basis of changeable, "qualitative discriminations" (26), frameworks may appear "problematical" (26). There is no single framework through which we can understand ourselves or the world. And according to Taylor, modernist writers express in their work ". . . an awareness of living on a duality or plurality of levels, not totally compatible but which can't be reduced to unity. There is no single construal of experience which one can cleave to exclusively without disaster or impoverishment" (480). Rorty says much the same thing when he critiques the metaphysicians' drive toward a final vocabulary. In Rorty's liberal utopia, living on a plurality of levels

means that individuals would have to abandon the "impoverishing attempt to combine all of life into a single vocabulary" (xvi).

Taylor goes on to argue that while we cannot reduce the many levels on which we live to a unity, we can supply the "feeling of unity" (479) with "framing epiphanies" (479). ". . . [T]he epiphany . . . has to be framed between an event and its recurrence, through memory" (479). And this is what Johnson's narrator tries to do when she recalls how her desire for Mikel (a situation which was the result of chance) releases the words which have been burdening her: "I want you Mikel." (20). And the moment in which she unburdens herself of those words is linked to her growing awareness of herself as an autonomous body with independent desires. The joy she analyzes a few pages later as she recalls the image of Don Quixote and Sancha Panza extends backwards and forwards in time : she reflects on the past, and contemplates the future. Though her younger self has not quite discovered why the image made her feel so happy, the narrator's analysis reveals to the readers that her joy was the product of her recognition of her own creative capacity.

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In *Prague Summer*, the writer records her memory of her relations with her mother, her father, her step-mother, her half-sisters, and her colleagues. She links together the small incidents of her life and the lives she lives concurrently in her mind in an effort to discern the hidden message contained in the "blue print" (11) of the "grand scheme" (63). She records and believes in the significance of her experiences which have enabled her to become the author of the book. Finally, she discovers, as she writes, that there *is* no scheme to "save her from the impress of time, from the classroom or from [her]self" (122).

For Rorty, Proust ,and Kundera, the self is generated by the use of a vocabulary. To reject the vocabularies offered up by dead poets and philosophers is to describe the self anew. Johnson's text simultaneously explores the paradoxes inherent in time and

creation and the necessity of self-consciousness. It goes backward in time and yet refers to itself in the process, a reminder that the process of self-redescription is ongoing, that the terms one uses to redescribe oneself and the world are always subject to change, and that as long as one's vocabulary remains porous enough to absorb these changes, one is capable of transformation.

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