

SAUNTER

Saunter (a novella) and *Girl on the City Streets* (an essay)
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I, Angela Argent, declare that this thesis and novella is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Creative Arts in the School of Communication, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This work is wholly my own unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated within the essay.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Angela Argent
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ABSTRACT

***Saunter* (a novella) and *Girl on The City Streets* (an essay)**

Pavla moves uncertainly through Prague, a city on the brink of revolution in 1989. On November 17, she is on the streets with her lover Charlie and best friend Milena, along with tens of thousands of students, demanding freedom. That night, as the protest reaches fever pitch, Pavla and Charlie are cornered in a narrow side street and truncheoned. Pavla is taken to hospital where she gives birth to a baby daughter and sleeps for weeks. When she wakes, she has missed seeing the revolution unfold and Charlie has disappeared. Eleven years later, Pavla returns to Prague and needs to relearn how to move through the city in order to make sense of it.

The theoretical essay mirrors the novella by examining questions of mobility and *flânerie/flâneuserie*, understood as a 'way of reading the street.' *Flâneuserie* is invoked as a literary metaphor for the mobile urban observer that is also connected with the influence of surrealism and questions of gender difference. The term has been used in a range of literatures to signify issues of changing city life, irrespective of time and place.

Together, the novella and essay suggest that the protagonist/*flâneuse*, while sauntering through the flux of bodies, encountering the vitality of the city, as well as the exclusionary and disorienting practices enacted within it, grows and accumulates the power to transgress and re/write her own city narrative.

SAUNTER

*'...Beauty, neither static nor dynamic. The human heart,
beautiful as a seismograph...'*

André Breton, *Nadja*

'The ones we love are enemies of the State...'

Socrates, *Antigone*

Prague, November 17, 2000

Pavla jostled her way over the teeming embankment, following close at the heels of a man with a mane of chocolate shoulder-length hair. Was it Charlie?

He cut a seam through the crowds, striding more nimbly over slushy cobblestones than she was expecting. Tourists and stragglers ricocheted out of his way. With each step his corkscrew curls flew at her face, bouncing closer and closer. She reached out with one hand, wanting to knot her fingers through them. But she fought off the urge by wedging her fingertips into the seams of her pockets, down to where the stitching was giving way.

I don't have time for this, she scolded herself. The cold was biting and her London jacket too thin. In a couple of hours she had a lecture to give; she needed to teach if they intended to eat. But even doing her job amounted to just more time wasted. Her semester would involve eccentric meanderings, useless things, with no one intending to listen, not ever, irrespective of what gems she might find to talk about.

Reticence, that old new feeling, accompanied by the soundtrack of her empty stomach churning. Was this Charlie obsession just today's mode of procrastination? He couldn't be Charlie, not after all this time. It was utterly pointless, she had no excuse to be here at all and less reason still to be following him.

Then why did she feel she was coming undone? This man was no stranger. He moved through her every dream. Apparition. Shade. Wraith. Walking just inches from her. He was unforgotten. She could reach up and touch the nape of his neck. Warm her hands, bury them deep within that snake's nest of tangles.

Keeping up with him through the lurching crowd was a challenge, but the effort let her stamp out the misery of the rain stained day. She had so many questions, smouldering coals, only he could extinguish.

She needed to ask him: Where did you end up, day one, Black Friday, post-massacre, Charlie? Eleven years ago, exactly. That day, our last together. Which parts of 'forever' collapsed for you then? A future for us? Is that where your dreaming ended?

Pavla had missed it all. She needed Charlie to fill in the detail. Haste? Chaos? Improvisation? Euphoria? Theatre? How would he describe it to her? A carnival, with not a single window broken? He would need to render images carefully for her. His word pictures, she needed them, those missing shards of jagged fragments.

Charlie, Charlie? How long after did you stick around? What was it about the revolution that failed your test? Almost, but not quite the cover version you spin-doctored? Not the blueprint for the better world that you demanded?

I just don't understand. Why, when, how? Your vanishing act needs explaining.

His gait was Charlie's, his form lanky, legs bowed. He slowed, then stopped suddenly at the curb. Pavla stopped quickly too.

It all boiled down to just one question really; Charlie, what the fuck happened to you?

They waited, together but not, for a tram to shunt by. His fingerless gloves only inches away. His bitten fingernails, raw to the quick. Long neck, broad shoulders, a blue denim jacket. Was it the one she remembered? She willed him to turn back to face her. Could she make him feel the weight of her stare? Just turn around, Charlie. Look at me! For fucks sake, look at me, will you?

He carried his head tilted to the left, like he was thinking hard. He'd always spent his days looking pensive and defiant. That contemplative tilt. The perfect father for her child. A waft of scent. It smelled of Charlie, citrus, the bitter tang of orange rind. She hated this untethered feeling; speeding thoughts, chaos, the seedy blur of memory taking flight.

Sun-tanned skin hidden beneath jacket and jumper. Fresh oranges. An artist's palette for springtime. A tree on an island, growing sideways like a hammock for them to lie against together. She painted on broad shoulders, imposing, outlined in dappled light.

The tram took forever. Finally, it lurched forward, leaving sparks in its wake.

The man stopped at the curb. It *was* Charlie. It wasn't not him. So it had to be.

Part i

ONE

December 1988

Pavla swung on her chair, frittering away another lunchtime, half-listening to an insufferable bunch of fellow students rambling on and on, as they did most days, in a room stuffed full with thieves of oxygen.

It was much too hot in the university canteen. She felt contained, like she'd been bottled. A layer of grease covered her table, tacky, like the film lining the roof of her mouth. The potted plants by the window were far too many. They were limp and should have been binned. But like the wilted students around her, they stayed in situ. Only the air had gone missing.

She was pressed up against colleagues, not friends. Their game was odious. Their bravado, like hers, transparent and thin. They had each taken their turn in the stupid game. Everyone but her. She was next and there was no way out of it.

Each of the students who had proceeded her had added their jibe, cataloguing the obstacles that thwarted their daily existence. Their veiled grievances listed the ways in which the state 'protected' them, preventing daylight, real or metaphorical, from ever reaching them. Their reticence made them the antithesis of the rebels she hoped they might be.

Letting the conversation limp forward conferred no freedom. Her turn had come around. The thoughts in her head were spiralling fast. Too late now, there was no leaving.

A stuttering boy to her left was describing the anaemic quality of the ray of sunlight creeping through the gauze-curtained windows to their left.

'D-d-devious and p-p-persistent right? For n-n-now folks, that d-d-d-dirty g-g-g-reat g-g-g-g-g-gravy s-s-s-s-stain on the w-w-window is wwwwhat's sh-sh-shielding us.'

He cracked himself up, but no one else laughed. Given his struggle for words, why not leave all the unnecessary ones out? Pavla looked at him and did her best to smile. She felt his shame, the pure embarrassment of it, the hopelessness of not wanting, but being coerced to engage.

Most days felt stretched long like this; slow and relentless. The game was pathetic, but the stuttering boy had killed off a good couple of minutes.

They all ought to feel grateful. Each of the students at the table understood the rules. None of them could openly criticise anything. Only oblique dissent was not yet off limits.

The women in the canteen kitchen wore thick brown stockings and their cork-heeled shoes popped, sticky against the floor tiles. Pavla could see two of the women clearly through the open doorway, one hefting her weight forwards as she sneezed directly into the washing up bucket. The woman's colleague grimaced.

Pavla had seen the second woman somewhere before. She knew her, she was certain if it. She looked at her even more closely. It took a few seconds, and then she remembered. Eight, maybe ten years earlier, that grimacing woman had been her paediatrician. She'd been kind when Pavla suffered winter earaches, or had said she did. Braving the tyranny of Pavla's work-obsessed mother, the doctor had been diligent and big-hearted, writing sick notes to let her stay home, sensing that what Pavla needed most were lashings of time, ice cream and love.

She caught the woman's eye and grinned big, genuinely delighted to see her. If only the whole world could be populated with such awesome creatures. She felt like running into the filthy kitchen, just to put her arms around the stocky waist of the woman.

The former doctor nodded warmly in recognition and flicked her tea towel in Pavla's direction. She was good looking, in her late forties, not so very ancient. Pavla wondered what the woman had done to end up exiled to the university canteen. Maybe she'd refused to join the Party, or had some crisis of conscience, somewhere between Pavla's eighth birthday and now? Or maybe someone in her family had emigrated to some place better, dug their way out of landlocked Czechoslovakia and scampered? Pavla understood this recalibration of the doctor's life for exactly what it was: the politics of retribution, a kind of punishment achieved through status diminishment and employment limitation.

Pavla gestured for the doctor to leave the kitchen and come to her table, longing for the chance to talk to someone with whom she actually felt some connection. Maybe she would even discover the real story as to what had

happened. But the doctor gestured towards her colleague, held her nose, shook her head, winked at Pavla and kept on working, wiping dry each plate from her enormous pile of dishes. It was such a pity to have missed out on the possibility of just one normal conversation.

The mood in the canteen felt thick with worry, oozy and uncontainable. Oral exams were looming, and the muffled conversations in every direction sounded nervous. Pavla understood the collective terror: those geriatric professors would be wielding their out of left-field questions all too soon. Just the very idea of being stuck in a room with the wrinkly old turds was so scary.

And for now, what could she contribute to the game the students were playing? A warm welcome to the Garden of Earthly Delights; triptych three, the age of really existing sociopathy? An analysis of downward drift; compassionate, skilled doctor, once venerated, recently demoted to canteen assistant, outfitted in shit brown stockings and hideous cork heeled slippers. The nightmare inversion; the possible, deformed into the everyday terrible.

Pavla had eaten her chips and drunk her milk, watery and thin. She remembered the doctor's description of milk from all those years ago. 'Slow death for two crowns,' she'd once said. The milk hadn't improved in the time since then.

The plight of her former doctor was completely unsayable, even if it was the only thing she could think of. Tight-lipped was what she was required to be now. But like someone with Tourette's, she knew she couldn't trust her mouth once it got moving.

Everyone at the table was watching her, the weight of expectation crashing in. She had no other choice, she'd have to get up and leave now, even though she had nowhere to be. She pulled on her beanie. It was freezing outside. Getting cold was safer than staying.

Eyelids lifted around the table as she retrieved her jacket from the hook and went about gathering up the rest of her things.

Just as she did this and was about to dash, the door from the hallway flew open wide. A big gust of wind swept in, fresh and cold. Everyone in the crowded room looked over at once, wondering why the hanging blankets and multiple doors had failed to contain the blast. Pavla felt that strange intrusion of

cold air as a kind of miracle, so fresh and welcome it might have been stagecraft timed.

The blast ushered in a man, more a boy, a stranger to her eyes. He breezed in, grinning like a madman, threw his beanie onto the table and swept a mop of long curly hair from his eyes. Without asking permission, he seated himself at the far end of her table, a mere two seats away.

He was ludicrous, freakishly smiling, laughing almost through those big, vacant cornflour blue eyes. And deliberately outlandish, with what looked for all the world like real Levis and a tan. He didn't wear elasticated plastic covers over his shoes. He didn't seem to understand what the coat-rack was about. What a lunatic! Hadn't he even noticed the radiators pumping out way too much heat?

The six students nearest him looked over suspiciously and stood up. They collected their plates and cups and moved to the opposite side of the room. Pavla felt her mouth morph into something happy. She felt thrilled to be able to skip her turn in the game they'd been playing, and still remain warm. She could stay right where she was, now that the herd was leaving. She placed her gloves inside her beanie and shoved them back into her jacket pocket, hung the jacket up and sat back down gladly.

Unperturbed by everyone but Pavla leaving, the strange boy smiled wide at her on his way to join the queue for food. When he returned minutes later, with his tray, he looked across the empty seats, still smiling, but less abundantly. He'd seen the food. As if the smell weren't enough to put him off sooner. She felt like laughing but made it her business to look away quickly.

'Hello there, beautiful. *Jak se máš?* My Czech is terrible, I'm afraid. Do you speak English?' he asked, too loud. He sat down again without asking.

'Some. Not enough. What it is you are wanting?' she said, quietly.

'Awesome. You do!' he said, sliding towards her, deserting his untouched plate of pork gulaš, insipid greens and rubbery potato dumplings.

'So far this little experiment with state socialism seems way lamer than I expected. A tragicomedy really. Everything looks so dated, so out of time. Even this place. But I couldn't be sure of anything much, I'm so bloody tired. Trip from Sydney was a long one. Arrived yesterday. Late afternoon. But you're just as gorgeous as my dad said Czech girls would be. Even more so.'

You are loud, with your long vowels, sun-sweetened boy, Pavla thought. 'Here you must speak quiet. And for me, you must slow down.'

'The cabbage smell of this place is hideous,' he grinned, and began rifling through his bag. Pavla looked straight ahead. 'Name's Karel, by the way. Charlie to friends.'

He began devouring the perfect orange he retrieved from his bag, ripping it open with his thumb. He shoved three segments in his mouth at once and she watched how the tears of juice trickled down the cleft of his chin.

Orange was all Pavla could smell. Orange was all she could see. She craved that orange more than she'd ever wanted anything. Juice dribbled onto his pristine denim jacket. How could he waste something so precious, letting all those luscious drips get away?

'You are exchange student from where?' she asked, disapproving of his animal way of eating, but unable to look away.

'Sydney,' he said, offering her a piece with grubby fingers. She shook her head to refuse his offering but watched longingly as he wolfed the final segment down.

Here was this Karel, from the far end of the universe. She'd seen maps. Wasteful with fresh fruit, uncaring in relation to his jacket and much too free with his opinions. He hadn't even bothered to learn Czech. He probably understood next to nothing about living, except maybe how to sleep in the sun. Why are you here, she wondered? To witness our farce? When you've had your fill, there's always the option of leaving. Go home now, she wanted to tell him. There's nothing to see here. Go bask in your long, blissful days of sunshine, where you can grin, grin, grin, grin. Here, as you must have noticed already, the days are truncated and lightless. Go, go, go, go. We have nothing for you to see here.

'You can find some place better for your studies?' Her head was a storm of unsaid things. The regime was limping along: not going anywhere quickly. It would continue, lame and doddering into forever. He was irritatingly happy. There was absolutely nothing in this place to be smiling about.

But she said nothing. She knew how to pretend, to play the game, at least on the surface. All her life, she had swallowed what she wanted to say, without any outward display of contempt. Even her perspectives on art, the one thing in the world that really mattered, were predetermined for her. And those

ideologues who decided everything, they were aesthetically retarded. The perspectives she regurgitated in class were never her own.

'Prague is the place my parents call 'home.' I've never lived anywhere but Sydney, but I grew up in a family who seemed to have never lived there. But anyway, I talk too much. Tell me about you? Who are you, gorgeous?

'Pavla.' Her voice came out raspy and thin.

This boy. This Karel. He didn't stop to think. His lips dripped words as liquid as the orange tears that trickled down the cleft of his bum-like chin. He was from a place that was unknowable.

From the tight ball forming in the pit of her stomach, she was fairly certain she disliked him.

Three days later, very early in the morning, Pavla noticed Karel exiting a shop across the street from the apartment where she lived. It was much too early for her first class, but she had been eager to escape the risk of conversation with her mother, who would be burning their breakfast soon. Her mother, for the first time in months, had time on her hands. It was risky to spend too long at home.

On maudlin days like these, apart from university, she had nowhere in particular to be. Her mother was at home on sick leave, irritable with her ulcers, groaning and cursing. Her illness would run to timetable; two full weeks, state-determined. It was only sensible to keep out of her way. Leaving home early was a good decision.

She hurried from the apartment block and followed him. Charlie carried bread rolls and yogurt in a clear plastic bag, his head stuck in a book. He didn't look up or around, a foreigner on a slippery street.

At this time of the morning, lightless, the winding laneways of the Malá Strana were mostly empty, with just a few loners out with their dogs. Empty was how Pavla liked the city most. She could move efficiently. But today she followed and moved slowly. A piano competed with a flute from apartments on facing sides of the narrow street. Happily, the cheeky flute was winning out. She followed Karel a few blocks, walking in the direction of the university, circling as inconspicuously as she could and avoiding trails of dog shit, freshly laid, steam spiralling.

He slipped and faltered over uneven cobblestones, round as cats' heads. The ground was newly frozen and he didn't apprehend the risk. So out of place, so helpless. He was attempting to read his book when he could barely walk. He really shouldn't attempt any two things at once, she thought. She considered approaching him, maybe with a warning. Offer him a gloved hand, maybe? But the pleasure of expecting his legs to slide out from under him was too great. The sight of him was hysterical. Karel, her very own ice-skating clown.

Fascinated, she followed him on to Charles Bridge and waited a few metres back until he suddenly skidded to a halt on the salt-gravelled surface. He put his book into his bag. Finally, he recognised he didn't possess the coordination to read and walk.

He paused to look across the water and at the same time fumbled with a box of matches. His face looked wonder-struck. At least he could be enthralled by beauty, so he wasn't limited, not entirely. But he wasn't so nimble with matches while wearing gloves. He struggled a lot. He lit a cigarette with a third match, took a puff, coughed a bit, looked briefly at the glowing tip, then threw the thing over the stone ledge and into the river. The whole lighting ritual seemed like a lot of trouble for something disposed of so quickly. Maybe he should just have accepted the beauty of the view itself, if it was simply the postcard version he had wanted. People from the greedy West always took so much more of everything than they actually needed. But then she wondered why this should have mattered to her in the least.

He searched through his plastic bag, then retrieved the yogurt, shook his head and shrugged. He peeled off the lid, drank what he could from the container, then gave up and reached for the rolls instead. He stuffed the second roll in to the yogurt to sop the rest up. He shoved half in his mouth, looking thoroughly thrilled, like he'd excelled himself.

At the library entrance, Karel threw open the wooden door, then the dusty drapes, wide. It was as though he couldn't bring himself to touch them, like he was offended by their existence. Everyone in the foyer looked up. His out of place presence. Pavla knew the shock they felt in that moment. The cold had arrived.

Once inside, he shrugged off his jacket and gloves and retrieved a notebook and pen from his bag. He smiled easily at the cloakroom attendant, who scowled as she took his things, slung them on a hook, throwing a numbered tag on a string on the counter, letting it slide in his general direction. He looked a bit stunned. Pavla almost felt sorry for him.

Pavla handed her possessions over to a second cloakroom assistant, avoiding eye contact. She followed as Karel wandered into the study hall with its lovely baroque ceilings, painted to look like light pouring in over cherubs, She saw the familiar desks and the ornate tiled stove. She was utterly besotted with this place and had been for as long as she could remember.

Apparently Karel was impressed too. He was gawking before he shuffled into a seat, fumbling around and finally managing to switch on the green desk lamp. His eyes were milking it all in, the high vaulted ceilings, the ornate stove, the exquisite detail of everything.

Heavy footsteps followed him and then a hand tapped at his shoulder. It was the librarian, wanting to inspect his entry pass.

Karel spun around in his chair, bumping the desk behind him, the one next to Pavla's. Didn't he understand he was unknown here, a commodity untried? Terse words followed from the librarian and then an awkward giggle from Karel. Soon he was dragged to a counter, asked loudly for ID and handed a stack of forms to complete.

The attendant stood over him as he sat filling out the papers. Pavla was feeling nervous for him and sat fidgeting in her seat. Karel was scratching his head, some questions stumping him. Pavla moved to a desk nearer the counter. As she leaned in to view the form, she saw huge white voids left blank. Before she could say anything, Karel moved from the counter to the queue, the attendant still watching him intently.

As he reached first place in the line, and even before he had spoken, a second librarian subjected him to stern inspection and suddenly disappeared from view. The move was undertaken with precision, a graceful movement downwards, obviously well practiced. A third librarian approached from behind the counter, shook his head at Karel, then nodded in approbation at his colleagues who stayed conveniently hidden.

What gave these old men the right to waste Karel's time when he was evidently here to study? Given half a chance, he might even learn some basic Czech. She put her notebook down at the table, took a deep breath, walked purposefully over to the counter and formed clear Czech sentences in her mind, then spoke them bravely.

'He's travelled a very long way. Don't you have family living somewhere else? It can't be easy. Now get up off the floor, won't you, Comrade? Make him a reader's card? We wouldn't want the cleaners lodging a complaint that you had taken over their floor polishing job.'

Obediently, the old xenophobe rolled himself into crawling position, pulled himself up to standing supported by the counter and slowly began to do precisely as Pavla had instructed.

Karel looked at her, clearly relieved. 'What did that last thing you said to him mean exactly? Was it rude?' he asked.

The librarian muttered something Karel didn't understand.

'God, you're pretty, with those big hazel doe eyes,' Karel said, not taking his eyes off Pavla.

'It means, get forms stamped and get out quickly. Tomorrow you will collect reader's card. Not today. Nothing happens here in a fast way. And God is not a concept we talk about.'

Karel followed her obediently down the grim corridor. They collected their bags from the cloakroom attendants, wordlessly handing their tokens over. Pavla shook her head and pursed her lips when Karel threatened to smile or let his lips pucker into a thank you.

On the street he said, 'Thanks for helping me out back there. This insane language does my head in. And I'm not great with social cues. Every small thing here seems so much more complicated than it needs to be. These people are brutal.'

'What, you mean in Sydney people don't disappear, to be avoiding of strangers?' Pavla asked, giggling.

'Not often. But then the girls at home are not as feisty either. Or as fearless. Or beautiful. They don't come with ridiculously high cheek bones. Or long legs. Or eyes that are teal coloured one day and hazel the next. Can I buy you a coffee maybe? Just to say thank you?'

'I know not this 'feisty.' I am not without fear. You have already thanked me. So enough. No! You can walk me to class. And maybe you can get me one day the perfect orange from Sydney. The smell is so good.' She suddenly sounded less in control of herself than was wise. She reminded herself that she much preferred not wanting anything.

He promised that the next box sent by his family would contain an orange with her name on it. She interpreted this visually, imagining a box of fragrant luxuries, her name etched into the rind of one.

As Pavla and Karel walked towards her faculty, she rediscovered her composure and began relating the story of having seen her paediatrician in the canteen, and with it the pent-up suspicions she had carried around for days like a grenade. She felt her skin burning, finally able to put into words the chaotic thoughts in her head. Her limited English slowed her down and it was annoying. But this difficulty of flow also provided the safety of not saying everything. And given Karel came from a universe of oranges, far away, he was different. When he stopped talking, he knew how to listen.

She wondered in that instant if he might be the one person in her world, who might actually be able see and comprehend her fundamental disappointment in everything.

TWO

Pavla sought Karel out more often over the next weeks to show him her favourite places around the city. It was stupid and dangerous to be seen with him, but that didn't stop her. Partly she had begun to enjoy moving at his dithering pace. Together they were skimming thin ice. With him by her side, she felt much less awkward than she had ever been.

Today they meandered the length of Kampa Park and back again. He talked and talked, by the river, in childlike sentences, small fragments of staccato grammarless Czech. *Ducks dive. Swans swan. Children play. The sun is faking it. Where are the vegetables?* Nouns and verbs, endless lists of them. More often than not, Pavla had very little idea what he was actually attempting to say. And when she responded to what she thought he'd said, as slowly and simply as she could, Karel looked baffled. How could he pour out words in a language he couldn't even understand properly yet? And why was it that when all attempts at communication between them failed, he just smiled like a madman? She was almost never absolutely certain of what he meant.

And words were merely the over-stretched balloon membrane of their complicated communication problems. Karel seemed not to understand that, for her, having anything at all to do with him, involved stepping into a murky world. No privacy, more surveillance. It never occurred to him to consider just who might be watching.

He didn't notice the fake parents out scouring the park, pushing gruesome dolls in baby carriages.

'Watch out! Those baby carriages have been decorated with buttons that trigger hidden cameras. Look! There is a lens,' she hissed at him.

'No way. Are you sure that's how it is? That's so nasty.' He stuck his face inside the next pram to see for himself, only to find a small baby chewing on a rattle. He looked up at the startled mother, who slapped his head with her gloved hand. He remained oblivious to the two members of the *Státní bezpečnost*, the secret policemen who were now trailing them.

'Didn't you see those men in bad clothes, one with his finger on that remote-control gadget, one scrawling in his notebook?' she whispered. 'You need to use your eyes and ears. Listen for click-click-clicking of cameras. You

must be cautious. Here, you need to be watching out. Here, nothing goes unnoticed.'

Karel nodded and smiled. That grin made him a liability; it left every onlooker wondering what there could possibly be to feel so cheerful about.

He was vocal and uncontainable: like a child. She felt petrified by his lack of caution, or perhaps it was his blind expectation of freedom. Whatever it was, he left her winded, rasping for air. Any time spent with Karel felt very much like asthma season.

With time, Karel's innocence began to intrigue her. Even before the first spring flowers broke the winter gloom, she began to crave the uncomplicatedness of him, in spite of the danger. He was naïve and fearless, here to wrestle out his own interpretation of a slipping-sand world that had once belonged to his family.

Sitting in a café one day, seemingly alone together, drinking grainy Turkish coffee and devouring the 'little coffin cakes' of which he had grown so fond, he showed her time-yellowed Polaroids retrieved from his wallet. His mum and waist-high brother, both with long caramel hair, were holding hands as they squinted into the camera. They wore striped turtlenecks and Levis with flares, a riot of colour, muted only by the fading Polaroids. Pavla was surprised that his mum looked so timid. The only women she knew were strong. Czech women 'turned the necks of their families,' so the local aphorism went. And no family member dared look sideways until they did. Her own mother had always claimed that men were terrible wimps and that women, to make up for men's numerous deficiencies, had to be iron-willed and tenacious just to keep society moving in a forward direction.

Karel's dad was a giant Moses in a white kaftan. He didn't look anything like the tyrant Karel described him as. He held a chubby baby with corkscrew curls away from his body like he was scared of it, the baby flailing in his arms.

'Wasn't I a drop-dead gorgeous baby? A Botticelli?' Karel said in English, straining the last of the bitter coffee through his teeth.

'Your dad holds you like that chicken in Eraserhead,' Pavla said.

'You've seen that film? But how? Your knowledge of popular culture is surprising. How do you know this stuff? In this photo here, you can see the sun

hovering over Bondi Beach. Some days, the rising sun reflecting on the water looks like a freshly minted coin. It's so beautiful, right? Don't you think, gorgeous?'

'I thought you were detesting of capitalism?'

'Sydney, *je daleko*. So *very far*,' Karel mused. But he didn't seem the least bit wistful or homesick. He grinned that Harbour Bridge grin again.

'I can't tell you how fucking delighted I am to be such a long way from them,' he said.

Suddenly for Pavla it all made sense. Karel hated the father who hated him.

'And why not? Here you say first thing as it enters your empty big head.'

To Pavla, the parents looked the way she always imagined dissidents must look: mangy and tired. His dad wore socks with his sandals, so you could tell that he really was Czech.

Karel said he didn't like anything about his dad, not the way he behaved or how he thought. He described him as a sleazy, sexist shit. His mum, he claimed, was worth at least ten of him.

'When they didn't get their *Socialism with a Human Face* in '68, they voted with their feet. I was their escape-hatch baby, made on the run, probably in Vienna. They hate life in Sydney most days, but they can't return here now without being locked up, so they're biding their time in the sun.'

Pavla struggled to conjure an image of his parents. She saw them as part of a huge oddball phalanx of displaced Europeans, mostly unreconstructed Marxist hangers-on.

'They get to write whatever they want in Sydney, reared us kids from home. Far better than gaol-time for a philosopher and a poet who won't toe the line. They're very protective of their temporary toehold at the arse-end of the universe. But Dad would have been a rabid dog wherever he lived. He's mad and he drives mum insane.'

Karel was raving. Pavla had so many questions. His story was riddled with inconsistency. Perhaps his simple Czech and her limited understanding of his idioms were to blame? But then, really, why bother pestering him further with more questions? The apprehensive look on his parents' young faces said it all. They looked not much more than twenty years old in that photo, her own

age maybe. They were doing their best, discomfited by exile and the glare of the blinding light. They seemed to be suspending disbelief in a wasteland, waiting for the end, one way or another, hanging around, seeing it out. But was this boy who was Karol's dad really as dreadful as Karel said? She felt a bit jealous. A dad was a luxury she'd never had.

Karel said his parents had always told him to do something practical. He liked to imitate his dad, 'Tink big Charlie-Brrrown. Make goot money. It vill be your vun friend, only if you lucky!'

Karel said their advice was pretty rich, given his dad's choice of career and the fact that they had only ever just scraped a crust together. Pavla confused by this, had to ask him what he meant.

'I spent my teenage years in just one pair of daggy jeans, apart from the two uniforms I had for school. Mum was always doing what she could, always scraping together something out of nothing. There certainly wasn't ever anything to spare.'

'What is this 'daggy'?'

'Unfashionable. A dag is the stuck-on shit in the wool around the sheep's arse that keeps flies swarming and infects the flesh until it decays.'

Pavla didn't understand, but there was no point asking for clarification, not every time. 'So you did had some little friends in Sydney after all?' She liked picking on him even if her grammar left her vulnerable. He was annoying. The imperfect childhood he described in Sydney was not the paradise she knew it must really have been.

'I decided to become a lifelong student in my early teens. Because I could. It's not like there was any real competition from the other idiots at school, and also because I wanted to mess with Dad.'

The way he explained it to Pavla, he hated the gaping silences, the pauses, the holes in conversations, with what his family chose to leave out.

'They won't discuss what matters, like inequality and exclusion: the deaf Aboriginal kids in a suburb called La Perouse where I delivered pizzas. Kids who won't reach middle age. Old people camped out on the streets in the rain in Bondi with their dogs, a shopping trolley, plastic bags, their cardboard-box blankets soaking. Or the once decent kids without work or hope, breaking into houses to steal enough to shoot up in gutters. That's what comes of theft. We

stole that country. Inter-generational trauma and exclusion, in every fucking direction. Those people didn't rate a mention. Living in freedom doesn't mean silence. Yet my parents choose to omit the ugly bits from conversation, like frightened children. I'm beginning to wonder if they're not deaf and blind.'

None of what Karel said made the slightest bit of sense. And when he got going, there were just so many words.

'Fucking Dad,' Karel said, 'needing to name my particular perversion, he disparagingly called my interest 'Red Science.'"

Pavla had no idea what 'disparagingly' meant, but it was hard not to accept his Dad's logic on this one. Karel had taken subjects called Political Economy and Government at Sydney University. In Prague, he studied at the university with his very own name. He was a PhD student, writing a dissertation about the joys of really existing socialism that he paraded as 'economics.'

His thesis, Pavla noted, seemed to be this: 'Capitalism doesn't give you anything for free. Thatcher and Reagan killed off the arts, healthcare and education. Derided them as luxuries. Do you really want to obliterate little spaces for creativity, social justice and replace it with 'Get stuffed little sister, I'm the only one on the planet here?'"

The odd thing was, the injustices he raved on about were not so different from the Dialectical Materialism Pavla had been force-fed from early childhood. A dubious undertaking. So much crap had been rammed down her throat. The names Karel used were different, but it was all the same in the end: boorish anti-Bourgeois cant. And there was simply no way in the world that life in sun-drenched Sydney could possibly be as terrible as he said.

It was thrilling though. His defiant streak. Strange Karel looked at the whole world like a mechanic, as though there was something he could do to fix it, a little boy soldier carrying a toolbox for universal improvement. An electrician, or engineer, waiting for that spark of ignition, or a magic wand. Abracadabra, sparks flying, the world set right. So simple and improbable.

And He seemed genuinely undone by his family's hunger for a Bohemia of the soul, the 'motherland' he'd never even visited, until now.

'They're from Prague. But I'm from Sydney. The Prague they think they remember, it's an invention, of course. But poets and philosophers are good at keeping their fictions lucid. I'm excluded from all that. I've no place in their

collective memory. And I know for sure there'll be no place for me in any future homecoming back here ...'

'Maybe there will be...'

Pavla was pleased that Karel had come to this city to see for himself, rather than rely on second-hand memories. He had never even been to Europe before. He showed the linguistic dexterity of a five-year-old. He'd also arrived completely ill-equipped for a European winter. He wore just tee-shirts and a denim jacket, piling on every stitch he'd brought, even as the days plummeted to below minus twenty. It was as though he relied on a tropical ocean current to move freely and a burning sun to warm him. Landlocked and sun starved, he was utterly useless and shockingly green.

Pavla had never felt so conflicted before, so she kept bum-face at arm's length. His enthusiasm for politics made her feel seedy. He was the exuberant adolescent she had never been.

But the antipathy for the world of his father, his rejection of all that he stood for; it thrilled her. The effect was visceral. The distance he took for himself, from him, made her tingle with pleasure.

Karel became a role model, a soul mate, a brother, her someone to open up to. She too came as a complete disappointment to the parent who had reared her. Like Karel, she wasn't the golden child she might have been, had she 'just tried harder.' It was like the two of them had fallen from the sky, uneasy and flightless, but with one intention; extricating themselves from unhomey nests that felt bereft of love.

At the same time, she was at war with herself around him. Karel was far too free speaking for her liking. Spending time with him left her queasy with worry.

But when he wasn't around, she felt empty and lonely. And when at night she dreamed of him, her hand steadied and righted him. She was practical. He was silent. They strolled in synch with each other. When she woke from those dreams, she craved his presence. But of course she would never tell him about any of these stupid feelings.

Her sisterly view of him changed at a party one night. That night in mid-January, when Karel became Charlie. Her Charlie.

She walked into the dorm building, dressed in her best sack from her pile of ugly things, ready for a night of revelry. She'd borrowed make-up from a friend, intended for corpses, but washed it all off at the last minute because it looked so awful.

Karel was sitting on the corridor bench, well entrenched in a soliloquy of broken bits of Czech. He had friends now, lots of them. He was regarded as the eccentric philosopher king, mostly because no one had ever met anyone quite as strange as him. He had put his beer down and was telling one of his stories built of nouns and hands, apparently a funny one. He was laughing harder than anyone else, his words swallowed up. Everyone was chanting 'English Charlie, English!' to shake the story from him. They understood him less well than Pavla did. They didn't know he rarely made much sense in any language.

His story was set in Sydney. His family assembled at a pizza restaurant against their better judgement, one around the corner from their cottage by the beach. They had finished dinner and were eating the last of their gelato. Charlie was looking forward to getting home to talk over his day with his mum and brother. They all liked it best when his dad went to his study and hid himself away, removed from humanity.

His dad had decided finally to ask for the bill. As was his custom, he looked for the prettiest waitress in the restaurant. According to Karel, his dad had roving eyes and a mortifying directness. He selected his girl victim and hunted her down. Karel went red with embarrassment and shame, just remembering. He was laughing so hard he was spitting.

He put on the sleazy smirk he always deployed to invoke his father. Pavla could tell he was about to mimic his dad's booming voice, greasy leer, thick accent and lazy English. He'd done it before, but not like this. He raised one arm in the air, like a child in a classroom desperate for the toilet.

'I want to play!' he blurted at the imaginary waitress. Karel's delivery for once, was ridiculously funny.

At the punch line, a gooey-eyed-girl slipped and spilled her drink all over him. There was no accident about it.

From the doorway, Pavla watched as Charlie leant forward on the bench. Next, she saw his shirtless back as he peeled his wet sweater from his sides. He lifted it off with two strong arms, up and over his head. She had never seen

anyone with muscles that rippled through suntanned skin. Nor apparently had anyone else. The room fell silent. Charlie's back was a golden triangle, exotic and magnificent.

She thought of oranges, fragrant and intoxicating. She was drunk on Charlie. It had taken just one look.

THREE

Springtime had arrived. The sun was higher in the sky, the shadows stretched, the city transformed by buds and light. Or maybe it was simply that cornflower blue had won the year-long battle over skies of concrete. The day felt new. It wasn't the day to sit through a humdrum art history lecture or attending to the rituals of pretending to listen.

A whole hour free of classes and Charlie. An hour to read on the island. Střelecký Island, her favourite playground. Just the words on the page. The luxury of thoughts given freedom to unravel. No conversation to distract her, no interruptions, no guessing at what he meant. She found herself feeling almost elated. What was that strange song she was humming?

She'd always loved the island. As she approached the embankment to the river her pace quickened. She raced down the stairs and to the narrow island's far end. She sat down on the ground and ran her fingers through the grass. The ground felt sodden, but she couldn't care less. She lay on her stomach, looking up at the embankment, perched on an elbow. Water lapped at the fingertips of her outstretched hand. From here, she could watch tribes and loners rushing around the riverbanks, while she remained still. Here was a wonderful in-between place, neither fully in the world, nor removed from it.

She liked that the river wrapped itself around the city like a question mark. She liked the jumble of tram wires, sending off sparks in their wake. The trails of orange as the trams shunted by. The view was utter chaos, but it all existed in a parallel universe, a river's width away from meaning. She wouldn't allow her thoughts to drift to Charlie.

By skipping her noon class, she'd managed to delay seeing him, just for a while. As much as she missed him, she had no intention of being predictable or available. And she needn't feel bad. He was much less dependent now that the ice had melted. He could walk unaided most of the time. He still shivered in the shadows, but when sometimes she let his fingers link through hers, they no longer felt stone cold. He was also getting better at accepting the need for public silence, such a huge improvement. But when, occasionally, they were alone together somewhere secluded, it meant even more pent up words kept

tumbling out. His voice was dulcet. But there was still such a lot of listening expected of her.

The speed of his talking was quickening. It was as though he had been recharged by light. In English, his strange intonation gave no clue of speech cessation; there was a relentlessness about it. Maybe he took it for granted that she understood him now? At his speed, that was impossible. In Czech, he was gaining confidence, but still lacking fundamentals. She wasn't being pedantic but wanted quite badly to understand what he really meant. All in all, he just never stopped. He reminded her of the best line from Apollinaire, 'You look like Lazarus frantic in the daylight.' She said it aloud in English and then French, because no one could hear her, or interrupt. Particularly in English, she liked the sound of it. But the more she tried not to think about Charlie, the more she recognised that there was something florid about his communication. Charlie's principal contribution to the universe: word salad, in two languages, for any occasion.

She looked up at Mánes Gallery, the functionalist cuboid spanning the river channel, her favourite building in the whole city. She revered its clean lines, shiny glass and even more than anything else about it, that it faced West. The first surrealist exhibition in Prague had been held there, gathering bigger and more enraptured crowds than Paris. Breton's lecture had been delivered from Rieger Embankment during his two-week visit in 1935, when he'd called Prague 'the magic capital of old Europe.' Life in Prague mustn't have been at all bad during the interwar First Republic, a secluded island of democracy in a region of festering hate. Shutting the noise of the world out, just for a while, as a strategy for living had plenty to recommend it.

She was humming Depeche Mode's 'To Have and to Hold.' It was the song that Charlie had played for her over and over, through rasping headphones. She loved the song itself, but not the Russian newsreader droning on and on about the arms race at the start. Why did everything beautiful have to come polluted by some rabid message? Regardless of how hard she tried to concentrate on unworldly things, there was just no filtering Charlie out.

Behind Mánes, was the bulbous Slavonic onion-dome of the sixteenth century water tower. So out-of-time, still hanging around like some long-forgotten Byzantine great-uncle. From among the windows of the column that

supported the monstrosity, she located the lit panes of glass in the rooms from where the secret police would probably be watching. Soon Charlie would lob down the embankment from that direction to meet her, drenched in daylight and oblivious to everything. He wouldn't think about what he was seeing, or who might be keeping an eye on him. But this hour was her hour of freedom. There would be no Charlie-sitting.

Her gaze returned to Mánes. She was already in a kind of prone prayer position, on two elbows now. How would this view have looked fifty years earlier? Looking along the embankment from Mánes, in the other direction, the National Theatre, then Kavarna Slavia, a dissident coffee heaven. All permanent. All of her century. All stationary. Even the winged horses on the gaudy wedding-cake theatre weren't getting away. Her eye lids felt heavy, weighty, like the head minutes after it lands on the pillow, when thoughts become fuzzy and images drunken, in the long slow seconds just before sleep.

Swans bobbed on the surface of the river, carried along by a lazy tide. She rolled over, head supported by her other elbow. Now she faced the narrow winding laneways and lampposts of the Malá Stana. This side of the river was so much quieter. Where were the medieval washerwomen of centuries past, carrying heavy baskets and drenched to the elbows in soap suds?

Now the streets were inhabited by shapeshifters on their way to work, their lack of hurry making it apparent that they had no compulsion to be anywhere anytime soon. This was a city of directionless people shuffling, without conviction. She thought of the joke she'd heard at university, just that morning. Prague, illustrious golden city. The place where today had become yesterday already. The joke reinforced the view of things that Charlie took.

On a stretch of cobblestoned ramp leading down to the water, a young mother distractedly handed bread rolls to her toddler. So miserable. Silly woman. The toddler didn't want lunch, she wanted what any self-respecting toddler would want; hungry swans to feed, and pigeons to chase after. The little girl pitched the roll into the water, overarm, with great gusto, her mouth wide open with delight. An enormous triumph achieved in the fraction of a second. Pavla grinned and cheered for her out loud.

And then, without missing a beat, the mother slapped her. Pavla flinched. She was reminded again why she loved this island so much. Here was a place that her own mother wasn't.

She understood the toddler's need. She was here in solidarity with the little stranger, just across the ribbon of river, with her in the spirit of freedom seeking.

The novel, *Nadja*, sat tucked away inside her bag. She loved the luxury of reading what was forbidden, sprawled out on the grass, where no one was watching. She couldn't give up her alone time on the island, not for anyone. She'd never really had anyone to spend time with before. And today she felt so happy and lazy. She might well have preferred not to see him, at least for a while.

She was here to pore over the chocolate-fingerprinted pages of her favourite surrealist novel. She kept *Nadja* wrapped in the safe Čapek binding she used as a decoy. Čapek had hidden many banned books over the years, small treasures smuggled in the suitcase of a cousin from London.

But right now, both the island and Breton's novel, read for the first time when she was sixteen and suggestible, and yearly thereafter, seemed new. She wasn't big on romance, but quirky *Nadja* was such a good source of torment, and by walking in her imagination alongside her protagonist, shoulder to shoulder, she sometimes caught sideways glimpses of Paris. It might just be the best view she'd ever get, given the impossibility of travel. She thought about crepes and snails. Is that what André and *Nadja* had eaten for lunch?

She was annoyed with herself for having read so little, and yet here she was, struggling through the same paragraph. Her record was stuck on one track. Why was she forever beginning a paragraph, forgetting and starting it over? She needed to use her time so much better. For weeks now she had been dithering away afternoons, trying out her English, in whispers, all the while relishing the strangeness of Charlie. His voice, his smell, ideas transported from a parallel universe so far from here. Her days were full to the brim with him. Every waking moment felt like it was saturated. Every day was Charlie, Charlie, Charlie.

She liked reading Breton. Or rather, she liked bits of him. She loved the lyricism of meandering walks and the noises he gave to soundless things. 'I

have seen her fern-coloured eyes *open* mornings on a world where the beating of hope's great wings is scarcely distinct from the other sounds, which are those of terror...' Her own eyes were green. But were they fern-coloured? She would need to ask Charlie, although he wouldn't be able to answer, not concisely. There would be no simple yes or no, but five minutes of rambling. She wondered what sound hope's great wings might make. Rustling, thudding, thrashing, beating? How would Breton describe Charlie? Flappy, but flightless? A marvellous, dithering Icarus?

She loved the free genius of the protagonist, Nadja. Her eccentricity, as much as her disintegration. 'I still cannot see why a human being should be deprived of freedom,' she read out loud and grinned. Breton seemed to comprehend the claustrophobic head-space of incarceration. If literature could be freely shared, she would consider lending her copy of *Nadja* to the toddler hinderer. And her own mother might do well to read it. She would be breathing fire, like a dragon. No, better yet, spitting up ulcers in disapproval.

She read on and grimaced, 'On certain days she seemed to live only by my presence.' Sexist old turd Breton! As if woman exists only when a man decides to write her into being! She dug her toes into the soft earth. There were bits of this creepy novella that made her feel queasy and angry.

Blades of grass shifted near her toes as someone crept nearer. She dropped her book to the grass and tried to slide it under her chest so the words on the page couldn't be seen. She smelled something fetid and really awful. Dog shit?

'We have said nothing about Chirico until we take into account his most personal views about the artichoke, the glove, the cookie, or the spool...' The shadow was reciting aloud in a ridiculous piss-taking French accent, just inches away, bent over her shoulder. Charlie. He was speaking nasally. 'How can you read this Surrealist waffle?'

She looked at his shoes. She disapproved strongly of people who crept up on other people like that.

'Why are you talking about Belgian breakfast now? You complicate everything too much. You know, De Chirico could paint only when surprised.'

And this explains why never I'll paint you. Like weeds wandering across the springtime, your arrival I predict. And again you've walked through dog shit.'

As he knelt over her to kiss her, a mop of coffee curls cascaded forward, obscuring eyes wide with hurt. Thinking about what she'd just said, she felt slightly bad about the cold reception she'd provided.

His top lip sported peach fuzz. He seemed to have grown even more lanky, or maybe it was just that he looked taller from where she was lying. Charlie, here again to deliver sweet offerings in exchange for furtive gropes and kisses. That she enjoyed thinking of him as her Neanderthal, uncultivated, all rough edges, was true enough. But there was much more than that to him. He was funny. His outsider's take on her world challenged everything she thought she knew. She had come to lust after him, especially as he appeared before her now, all dreamy and attentive.

'Surrealism is a way of seeing,' continued Pavla. 'More than your Holy Trinity. Marx-Engels-Lenin for every meal and occasion. A limited menu. You sound like a Party billboard when you talk about your PhD thesis. Mine's a considered proposition. Hope-filled and not made yet. Inchoate. Is that how you pronounce that word? I read it and like it. If what we see is all there is, better reimagine or improve it, don't you think?' In her head she dreamed of revolution, but had trouble imagining the smell of it. It was Charlie's fault. Oblivious to everything. Always walking through dog shit.

'I couldn't agree more,' Charlie said and tried to nuzzle in, his mouth warm on her neck. He kicked off his shoes and the smell went away. She kissed him and felt tingly all over. The kiss lasted a long time.

She snatched his shirt, pulling it over his shoulders and dangled it over the edge of the river. She didn't like the sensation in her belly. It made her wonder if she might be succumbing to unmanageable feelings. That would be unacceptably pedestrian. When characters in surrealist novels take a stroll, their stomachs don't gurgle.

'Race you to the hammock tree,' she said. She rolled sideways and used her arms to launch herself to her feet and race off, leaving Charlie on all fours, scrambling for his shirt. He would collect her precious book and bag for her. She could rely on that.

The tree leaned horizontally over the river, as if in search of light. She loved this tree, her recoiling place, her runaway outpost since childhood. She rolled Charlie's shirt into a pillow for her head and rested comfortably, balanced against the familiar bark. She looked up at the shards of blue dancing through the glittery leaves. Charlie stood by her, sundrenched. The tree on the island existed in that moment as a palace for her and Charlie. Seclusion under a canopy of foliage, strong bark to bear the weight of skin. Charlie's amphitheatre to talk and talk, uninterrupted, in warmth and dappled light.

It no longer seemed like such an exorbitant gift, this sharing of her place with him. This was their palace of becoming, she was sure of it. When she was ready, she would remake it all. Not just a girl and the foreigner she could never know. In the blink of an eye, the world made new, one way or another. She would do it either by rolling him into the freezing river, or by kissing him into silence.

The swans appeared at once, seemingly hundreds. They skimmed the water surface, wings outstretched, raucous and demanding. Pavla took their piercing cries and Charlie's wide-eyed rapture as an omen. She was decided. It was now or not.

But he took her hand and helped her to her feet. 'Let's walk,' he said. 'I need you to explain the graffiti on the Wall of Grievances to me. Near the watermill. I need you to translate what it's all about. I don't understand what the students here are all complaining about.'

Pavla looked around and saw that she and Charlie appeared to be of particular interest to a crumpled man scribbling into a notebook, standing just ten metres away, under the shade of a nearby tree. Was he recording every exchange that passed between them?

'My main grievance is that you don't kiss enough. I have no idea what anyone in their right mind could possibly be worried about,' she said in Czech, slowly enough for him to understand.

She pulled Charlie to her and kissed him, lowering herself back into the wide branch of her tree, suspended over the water like a hammock. The kissing tree. He tasted orangey and fantastic. They kissed, harder and more bravely, as the man watched on and scribbled away.

Charlie was getting the message. His hand caressed her breasts and he seemed more confident than she'd known him to be. No one had ever made her feel frantic like this. He was good at this. She guided his hand down to under her dress. She felt pleased she hadn't felt like wearing undies.

'It's broad daylight, Pavla. Let's go somewhere private? My place? Yours? Isn't your mother at work today? The old guy watching us gives me the creeps.'

'No. Here and now. When he hears no words, he will soon leave. Public affection is not forbidden in this country. On the contrary, the regime wants us to stay within our vortex of intimate distraction. While we're an island, we pose no treat. Isn't it what you say in English, that actions speak louder?

'So show me how this works. In daylight. The leaves make it as private as it can get. In this place, you will never go unseen.' She instructed him in Czech and then more quietly in English, to remove any doubt about what she expected.

She wanted proximity, the honesty of feeling. Charlie she anticipated would know what he was doing for the first time ever. He felt warm, not clammy. He smelled amazing, close up. He tasted salty. He was the best kisser ever. She could feel his heart beat fast against her. He was teasing. He made her ache. She wanted to know Charlie, feel what he was made of, not just sit around marvelling at his strange beauty. She unbuttoned his jeans. His cheeks flushed red.

'Let's go somewhere else?' When she didn't respond, he asked, 'Are you really sure about this? What's the hurry? Do you even have a condom? I only have cash and my dorm key with me. Can't we wait?'

'What, no ID card, Comrade?' she whispered.

Thrusting inside her, gently, then harder. The minutes sped by. It felt incredible, rhythmical and animal. She gasped first, surprised by the shock of it, delighted but unsure of what precisely had just transpired between them. She'd never done anything anywhere near as wonderful as this.

They held each other, still suspended on the sturdy branch. She felt immediately that she could breathe, as if for the first time ever.

'I think I love you, Pavla,' he stammered, as he caught his breath.

She wanted to say she loved him too but feared that this would complicate things unnecessarily between them. Anyway, it wasn't as though he'd sounded like he was decided. All the same, he looked at her expectantly.

After a few seconds, she looked around to see who might be watching. There was no one in the vicinity. Notebook man had given up on his writing and gone away. He would have lost interest when Charlie stopped talking. Charlie cuddled her like the teddy bear he was, pulled her dress down to her knees and did up the buttons of his jeans. He was delicious. And best of all, through all of it, apart from that one stammer, he had remained totally silent.

When they left the island hand-in-hand, cold and hungry, her bum cheeks bark-chaffed and stinging, Pavla knew that lust and longing were sensations that existed in real time, that they had a life outside of French and Russian novels. That empty feeling she'd carried all her life felt over and done with, like a balloon floated away. That space had been replaced with desire, both craven and needy. She liked this new understanding, this new reading of the world, raw with want and possibility.

'Well, that was unexpected,' Charlie said.

'How so?'

'Girls are much harder work in Sydney. And considerably more private. I love it that you always know exactly what you want.'

She turned towards him and placed her finger against his lips. 'Don't ruin today, Karel,' she said, grinning. 'I love you most when you're silent.'

He grabbed her and tried to kiss her, but they were both laughing.

She couldn't wait until the next time Charlie set about burying himself in words that floundered. She knew now. Charlie, rabid socialist, visiting loop from the far end of the universe. He was translucent. In the truth of sunlight, he was beautiful. And she had some power over him now. At any time she chose, she could render him wordless.

FOUR

At the mention of Charlie's Anglo name, her mother's jaw dropped and she stopped hard in her tracks.

'Who gives you license to choose this foreign boy, entirely by yourself?' Lada was almost out the door for her morning hospital shift, handbag over her shoulder, bread roll half eaten, caraway seeds licked away. She took aim and threw her broken stethoscope at Pavla. She was a poor shot and missed, but that wasn't her intention.

'My only child. Cavorting with a capitalist. A class enemy. For no good reason other than to mess with my ulcers!' The door slammed, the locks turned. Finally, Lada was off to work. Soon she would be on the tram, delighted it was Monday, an important day like all work days on the tram timetable, highlighted with the small stencilled image of the hammer and sickle.

Pavla sat alone at the table, imagining the stethoscope slithering across the floor. Her bond with her mother had always been tenuous. Lada was a woman in a hurry; her only big love, the unemotional rhythm of surgical precision. As Lada's angry boots clattered down the hall, *The Ride of the Valkyries* looped over and over in Pavla's head. She had wondered since the age six if all parents came with their very own anthem. Eight long minutes *The Ride* generally took.

Brezhnev, Pavla's fat grey tabby kitten, all whiskers, had leapt onto her lap. With Lada gone, he sat purring like the Hoover. He was Pavla's only real companion, apart from Charlie.

With Brezhnev vibrating so loudly, she felt ten again. His solidarity reminded her of childhood days. Her first great escape from her mother into a fantasy existence. Cartoon images. Running, fast, then faster, fastest, but never keeping up. She felt the imaginary pain of feet worn off, reduced to stumps. She grew wheels, at least in her head. Try as she might, there was just no keeping pace with maternal ambivalence, with its breakneck speed and persistent unfurling. Uncomfortable thoughts raced through her head, but Brezho purred on and on.

To be fair, Lada had not been inconsistent. She had openly shared her unapologetic dislike of parenthood with complete strangers, or anyone in fact.

She'd said it loudly on the tram or the metro, anywhere at all, so long as what she'd said was well within range of Pavla's hearing. Pavla had heard it all repeated so often that she remembered her mother's spiel verbatim:

'I was a single parent from the outset, a very reluctant one. It hasn't been easy. I had to leave the Sorbonne where I'd been studying for three years. Had to abandon the man I might have grown to accept, had my French language, already extraordinarily advanced, had adequate time to blossom. But I got pregnant. That was it! And he expected me to stay in Paris, cut off from civilization. From that very moment, I was utterly without options.

'In the end, it was purely a lifestyle decision. Back in Prague, I committed myself to *building socialism*. I was still a young woman, diligent and indispensable. I had so much to give. That much is undeniable.

'For my daughter, I made all the arrangements that could possibly have been necessary. Fed and burped her, found a crèche, returned to full-time study at the university within a fortnight of the birth.'

Lada hadn't bothered to justify her absence as she sprinted through Pavla's early teens. For her fourteenth birthday, Lada handed Pavla a copy of Alexandra Kollontai's *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, in Russian, before disappearing for a whole week. Eyeing up her gift, Pavla recognised her mother's love for what it was; fierce and as eccentric and cold as her mother's aloofness. As her mother was almost out the door, Lada leaned against the doorframe as she elaborated on the key themes of her favourite book.

'I hate the petty bourgeois fetish of the 'double standard' just as much as those irreproachable Madonnas with two perfect kids. You'll do yourself the greatest of favours Pavla, if you grapple with the scientific literature on the emancipation of women and the abundance of sexual opportunity under socialism. It will bring your life's path into focus. That's if you have any intention of becoming a strong, determined woman of substance.'

Pavla had spent a lonely week back then. Her homework done, Brezho fed and cared for, she had read that dreadful book. She diligently asterisked the parts where Kollontai wrote that woman wasn't man's echo, and that she should refuse outright to be silenced by any husband. The essay where Kollontai claimed that the new woman, 'liberated... from love's servitude, stretches to her

full height, proudly and joyfully,' was dog-eared and underlined. Surely her mother would be pleased with her efforts?

Pavla got it. She read joyless old Kollontai cover to cover. Brezhnev, still a kitten then, had grown bored and sharpened his teeth on the corners. Pavla had been delighted to learn later that Stalin had sent that the mad thing Kollontai to Norway in the end. But what she couldn't ever get her head around, was her mother's ongoing loyalty to a regime that had excised her heart. In her dreams she saw a patchwork of blood, lacerations and dissected pieces. She hated dreaming in red.

Once returned from the unpleasant vortex of childhood recollection, Pavla felt compelled to make sense of the current conundrum. Brezhnev, as always, listened intently.

'You see Brezho, your grandma has no time for aesthetics, much less for art. She detests art school and 'the ridiculous reactionary crap' on which my days at the university are spent. My 'obsession with Surrealism, a depressive ideal, an adolescent tantrum, is an unnecessary detour on the tried and tested path to socialism.' Or so grandma says.

'Who needs French perversion when there is Czech civilisation? You Pavla, my beautiful darling girl, have been seduced by foreign decadent images: led astray somewhere along the unthinking path you walk, just waiting to derail.'

The cat thumped her face with his tail, and looked around the room, agitated. He was always nervous at the sound of Lada's voice. Pavla must have really nailed it. Brezho slunk off, ears pushed back.

Looking around the room, she understood more about her mother than she ever wanted to. While many daughters suspect it to be the case with their own mothers, Pavla knew with absolute conviction that although well-intentioned, her mother had no imagination, no style and no taste. Lada was missing the neural pathways that enabled normal people to know what was ugly.

The open display cabinet held a whole shelf of East German plastic spoons of such poor quality that they melted in hot water. But they were East German and therefore, in her mother's eyes, as valuable as diamonds. Behind the cabinet, hideous tan textured wallpaper, like at the cinema or a chocolate

box, drowned everything else out. There was the Tesla TV set, bought in hard currency. With her connections, Lada could get almost anything. And yet there were too few books, and in their place a vast collection of some of the most useless hideous objects on the planet. Though they lived in a beautiful decaying seventeenth-century building, her mother would have preferred a prefab made of panels. Lada's colour palette, like her credulity, was mustard on brown. She dressed and decorated the apartment as badly as she lived. She was relentless, a tasteless open sandwich, dogma-topped.

Pavla picked up the stethoscope and listened for a heartbeat in her textureless bread roll. Brezho scampered across the room, not trusting the implement that carried the ear wax scent of Pavla's mother.

'The patient is dead, Brezho. Time of death five-thirty a.m. An advanced case of dogmatic infarction. So ugly. There was nothing more we could have done.'

By mid-summer, hormones raging, tearful and scared, Pavla waited at that same kitchen table inside the brown apartment for her mother to return from work. It was early morning, after Lada's night shift. Pavla rapped her fingers on the table, from pinkie to thumb, over and over until they were numb. After an age, she heard keys jangling. Three locks turned, two revolutions each and then the door opened. Pavla's stomach somersaulted and she wanted to get up and run. Too late, the intro to *The Ride* had begun. Lada, strained, gaunt, her face slightly blood-flecked, strode in. Pavla hoped she would be too exhausted for a showdown. But, even before Pavla had spoken, the invested look on Lada's face said she was ready for anything.

'Mother, I need to tell you something. You're not going to like it and really I'm sorry for that. But you'll like it less if you find out from someone else. So I'm just going to say it. So here goes. I'm pregnant. I'll be having the baby sometime around Christmas. The paediatrician, now the canteen assistant at the university, is taking excellent care of us. You know, the lovely one who looked after me when I was little. The baby. It's Charlie's. We're so happy. We want this baby. I love Charlie. I love this baby of ours. We'll make it work. There is nothing you can do or say to get in my way. Please don't make this hard for

me. Someone to love is what I've always wanted. This baby will be my everything. Please help me love her properly. Please help me do this right.'

Lada looked like she'd been slapped. Clearly she hadn't noticed that Pavla was pregnant, life-giving not being to her liking. She paused a beat before the tirade began.

'A baby! Like hell you will! I don't do excitement, Pavla. I detest surprises. Haven't I made this much abundantly clear throughout the years!'

The fight continued, both women spitting up bile. Lada was still ranting mid-afternoon. Pavla felt wrung out and miserable.

'I will not be a grandmother to anyone, let alone an outsider.' Pavla noticed with some amusement that Lada was waving her pointer finger.

'Only lazy, uncommitted people have time for romance! Babies are time-sucking thieves! I won't sit around and watch you throw your life into the gutter, Pavla. I simply won't. I love you much too much. We've gone through more than enough together. Far too much to stomach this.'

'I love Charlie. You wouldn't understand, but it's like this. With him, I set the pace. He comes from the world, an open-minded place that's big and awesome. He grew up on fresh air and oranges. He's had choices. I've spent my life doing as you said. But then I chose him. And he chooses me. Our baby is wanted. She will be amazing.'

'Foreign and strange are one and the same word in our language! That silly Western boy has landed you with his alien!'

'I'll love this baby, love her completely. I'll see she grows up slowly. And I won't ever make her run. She can take all the time she likes. And unlike me, she'll have a father.'

Lada looked as though she'd been stabbed in the guts.

'I brought you up to take on the world, not be a mother at twenty-two. And you do have a father, in Paris. An artist. Quite talented. But like most men, he's useless. Jesus and Maria, it was terrible enough at twenty-seven! A stupid man and a crying baby are the last things you need. You don't need two imbeciles in your way. Now let me think. Shut up a minute and let me work out a solution, a way out of this conundrum...'

Lada rubbed her eyes and continued. She looked haggard.

‘There’s someone at the hospital. She’s discreet and owes me a favour. She, I believe, can be relied upon to organise the termination quickly. If we don’t tell anyone, if I can slip some stockings and cigarettes to the nurse, I’m sure I can make it happen. With a few phone calls I can probably get the whole thing organised today.’ Lada reached her hand out towards her daughter’s hand, just as Pavla moved away.

Pavla looked at the person who had neglected her creativity and stolen her childhood. She looked hard, as if for the first time. Her mother seemed ancient, tragic and quite probably insane.

‘You are toxic,’ Pavla said, as her mother cowered. She noticed Lada’s chin quivered a bit, like she might cry. So she’s actually alive after all, Pavla thought.

Pavla had classes at the university later that day, or she might never have summoned the bravery to leave. She gathered her shoes and gloves very slowly and with conviction. She could see her slowness was causing her mother considerable anguish, so she moved even less quickly.

‘Enjoy the camaraderie of your ulcers, Muminko,’ she said over her shoulder as she dawdled down the stairs. Just seven minutes after the outside door slammed shut, she was seated on the tram and rattling along. When the Wagner soundtrack finally stalled, the silence that replaced it was terrible. She missed Brezho, the vibrating warmth of him.

Minutes later she sat on the tram sobbing. She didn’t have a handkerchief and was soon snot covered. She couldn’t breathe properly, and it was impossible to choke the tears down. People were turning around in their seats to stare at her. People didn’t cry in public, not here.

Pavla had never felt more alone or unsure of anything. Her tenacious mother was who she needed most. She thought of returning home, briefly. And then she remembered, her mother was the least emotionally available person on the planet, not her someone to share tiny beads of hope and snowballing insecurities with.

FIVE

Pavla arrived late and red-eyed to her life-drawing lesson. She scanned the dark room for signs of life. She had no idea why she'd bothered to come. Now she was here, she wished she could leave. The smell of fixative spray made her feel nauseous.

She scanned the faces in the room. The male life model had the only face she recognised. Oh no! It was elf-man, one of Lada's more recently discarded lovers. He was ugly with clothes on, but to walk into a room and see him naked! That was hideous. And today of all days. She hated the idea of having to render up a version of Lada's little potato dumpling.

She decided she would have to sketch him with her eyes closed. She tried and it felt strange. The very thought of trying to commit something so dreadful to the page made her giggle. She felt hysterical. It was a shame she'd have to wait until after class to paint the potato whiteness of him into words for Charlie.

They'd been drawing fruit and women in this class for weeks. Until today, Charlie was the only man she'd ever seen naked. If she'd seen elf-man first, she might have thought better of ever looking at any man. Just think, had she not drunk in Charlie's wide shoulders, everything might have been so very different.

By the end of the first hour, Pavla's paper was soggy with tears. She was giggling so badly she choked. The marks on her page were ill formed and wobbly, where the pencil kept catching. The instructor told her to get a grip of herself, but then looked carefully at her drawing. He complimented her on capturing something of the quintessence of the grotesque and the raw fundamentals of the grimace. She spent another half hour trying to continue with her drawing. Thankfully the end of the class seemed to roll around quickly.

She watched as elf-man put a tiny towel around his waist and brought her a glass of water.

'My dear Pavlička,' he smirked. 'My most sincere regards to your lovely mother. Is she home today by any chance?'

Pavla shook her head and winced. She wasn't good at lying.

He inspected her drawing carefully as she drank her water quickly. He took up her Progresso pencil and corrected away emphatically, transforming her depiction. In his version, he was elasticised, like he'd been given a rack and stretched, less dumpling round and also considerably less underendowed. Pavla didn't know where to look as he marked up the page, so she stared down at the floor.

A first-year student she didn't know by name stood at the easel next to hers. What great shoes she wore. Imported, stylish; definitely not local. Yugoslav, maybe? She felt the girl's gaze settle on her, lingering. Their eyes met for a few seconds and their shoulders soon trembled with laughter. The girl's saucer blue eyes gleamed with mirth, and a single tear splattered down her cheek. Once they had found solidarity in each other's giggles, neither girl could look away. Elf-man shuffled back to his podium to undress for the next class, savage with wounded pride.

'I'm Milena,' the younger woman said, still spluttering, as she packed both their easels away.

'Pavla. And elf-man over there might well have been my next step-dad. I've had so many ring-ins. Mum's little elves chug through our house faster than trains.'

'Lucky then, eh? You wouldn't want elf-man wedged permanently at your station,' said Milena.

Their shared sense of the ridiculous bound them somehow. Milena was edgy and quick-witted. The genders of nouns were all wrong, she must be Slovak. Pavla immediately knew that she liked her.

'I've had a shocking day so far. Elf-man was the last straw. Do you have a class now, or are you free for the next hour?'

'I do have a class, but I've got the hiccups and my stomach hurts thanks to you, so I'll need to sit down for a while to pull myself together.'

Pavla and Milena walked a block from the studio and found a quiet corner in a shop that sold warm drinks, chocolate, and sugary cakes. They bought two teas, a chocolate bar and some sweets to share. They talked and talked.

'I'm heartsick for my family, the utter chaos of our house. I miss the young wine my family drinks, instead of beer. I even miss the happy sound of

Slovak. It's lilting. Czech sounds staccato.' Milena described each member of her huge family warmly, one by one. The list was long. It was clear to Pavla she loved them dearly. What must that feeling of connection be like?

Pavla did her best to listen but was overwhelmed with two thoughts of her own. She could have eaten a truckload of chocolate. That came first. And she couldn't ever face her mother again. She was eating so quickly she choked. Tears filled her eyes and sped down her cheeks. She was soon sobbing uncontrollably, like she had on the tram. She felt so embarrassed.

'You were teary when you walked into class. I've never seen anyone look so sad while laughing. What's this emotional rollercoaster you're riding all about?'

The words raced from her lips as she spoke of excitement over her baby and then recounted the worst bits of her dreadful stand-off with her mother. Milena listened closely and grew thoughtful.

'I haven't thought anything through at all. I'm excited. But I have no idea what I'm supposed to do. I don't know the first thing about having a baby,' Pavla said.

'But you love this Charlie and you want to have his baby? It that right?'

'Yes, but I don't know how I'll manage. I have no home, nowhere to live. No choices at all on my ridiculous student stipend.'

'You need to call Charlie. Where is he staying? Why did you come to class?' Milena stopped to devour the last bite of her coffin cake and wiped the crumbs from the corners of her lips. 'Why didn't you go to him straight from your mother's? Doesn't he want this baby? Will he even be allowed to stay here in Prague when the baby arrives?'

Milena was firing questions relentlessly. Pavla wanted to tell her to stop, until she realised that Milena was also crying.

'He does. He said he does. I know he does.' She wiped her face with her sleeve, but her nose still dribbled.

'I didn't know for sure what Mum would say. Half of me still hoped she might be, well not excited, but just there for me. But she isn't human. And then I didn't know where Charlie would be. He's always either teaching for his professor, or off meeting people at the pub. He's good to me, but I don't keep tabs on him. He doesn't like it when I do.'

Milena handed her an ironed handkerchief, printed with daisies.

'Babies are sacred wonders, you know. Get out of your mother's apartment. Do it now. You can always come and stay in our madhouse near Bratislava for the holidays, or for as long as you want. There's plenty of room. You'll love my family. And not the insane Catholic trip you'd expect. Well, not entirely. Mum and Gran can't ever get enough of babies. They'll drown you and your bubba with cake and kisses.

'In the meantime, take me to meet this Charlie of yours. I want to see him with my own eyes, this oddball, with oranges. I'll come with you. You have to tell him what's happened with your mother and you should do this immediately.'

Pavla called Charlie from a phone booth across the street and asked him to meet her. Milena stood gesticulating outside, drawing box and triangle houses, encouraging Pavla to spill the beans about needing to stay with him immediately. Pavla shook her head. She would ask him in person.

Pavla and Milena returned to the shop and wolfed down more chocolate as they waited for Charlie. Ravenous for real food, they went to a restaurant on the corner with red tablecloths and ordered three servings of fried cheese drenched in cranberry sauce, with fries.

When Charlie arrived, they had eaten everything on the table.

'Charlie, we got hungry, sorry. We can order more food. This is my new friend, Milena. Milena, I'm pleased to introduce you to Charlie. You'll need to speak slowly.'

'I speak English, but badly,' Milena said.

'I understand Czech fine. Just go easy on the Slovak. I'll answer in English, at least until I've had a few beers.'

Charlie ordered food and heard Pavla out, as he drank beer after beer. He seemed to be gathering courage slowly, with Milena egging him on. Milena watched on incredulously as he put each empty glass down hard on the table.

'Your mother is a piece of work. You'd better move in. For sure you can, gorgeous. But my room is an absolute misery. You've seen how nasty it is. It should be condemned. It is no place to be pregnant, and certainly no place for a

baby. And there are probably rules that we'll be breaking. But I couldn't care less. I'll have you to wake up with in the mornings.'

'You'll be together!' Milena said. 'A toast! To family. And to complete strangers brought together.'

Pavla read Milena's willingness to eat greasy cheese with her as an act of solidarity. Charlie said he would go with them to retrieve Pavla's things, but Pavla wouldn't let him. Not in this drunken, flaky state. He'd been drinking too fast. The girls sent Charlie home on the tram and counted down the long minutes until the time of Lada's next shift.

Near the flat, Pavla panicked.

'What if my mother's ulcers have bought her a night off work?'

But Lada's bleak shadow exited the building as she spoke. Pavla nodded. She and Milena waited until it sped around the corner and clipped the edge of the park.

'*La Madonna* has left the building,' Milena whispered. It was her attempt at silliness, but Pavla was sobbing again. For some strange reason, in her mother's absence this time, the *Valkyries* had stopped screeching.

So in they went.

'Why is almost everything putrid yellow?' asked Milena.

'Mustard on tan,' Pavla corrected her through her tears and giggled. She shoved a few items of clothing and her best books in her old school suitcase and slammed the lid closed. She took a minute to look around. Her days with Lada were over. She hated this hovel but felt sick with fear. There would be no turning back once the door to this life closed.

She saw Brezhnev slink out from under her bed. He sniffed at the bag and then at Milena.

'You'd better come with me, Brezho,' Pavla said. She put his mat in a netted shopping bag that smelt of him. Brezho climbed gingerly inside the bag and nestled in.

Milena dragged the heavy suitcase down the stairs and Pavla carried her cat carefully in the bag, making sure not to let it swing around. Brezho was purring so loudly, he seemed to be impersonating the vacuum cleaner. Perhaps he was glad to be leaving?

Milena waited for Pavla's tram and loaded her suitcase on after her. She scrawled her mother's phone number onto Pavla's hand and asked where Charlie was staying. She wrote the street name and number in the back of her drawing book.

Milena gave Pavla a bear hug. Brezho was squashed and growled. Pavla rubbed him under the chin and cuddled him close to her body.

'We only met today, but it feels like I've known you a long time. I wish it wasn't term break already. Take good care of that little bubba. Come visit me at home, any time you like. I'll see you and the belly either way, before the start of next semester.'

'Thank you for being there today!' was all Pavla could say.

Pavla's world that Indian summer was an old rusted bathtub and Charlie. She nestled right in at Charlie's dorm. It was rancid, but peaceful, emptied of students with holiday cottages and family to go to. Charlie slaved over his thesis, newly determined and driven. Too often he grew silent.

'No time to waste now I'm going to be a dad.'

He shared all the luscious fruit that arrived in cardboard boxes from Sydney. He said she needed vitamins more than he did. Hand-written notes under his door meant that a new box was awaiting pickup at the post office. He taught her to forge his signature and made her practice it often, until her impersonation was passable. The janitor who left the notes asked if Karel's parents would desist writing letters to him in English. Given his surname, he must read Czech? And if not, couldn't Pavla, a 'real' Czechoslovak, translate for him?

Charlie seemed quite excited to have the opportunity to mess with the janitor, the mendacious old bastard. When the janitor demanded to know what was in the boxes, Charlie replied loudly, 'Semtex!'

Milena's letters appeared almost daily. Brezho stole Charlie's dirty socks and carried them around the room. Boy bonding at its best. Pavla knew big love and best friends for the first time in her life. Charlie and Milena were the family for whom she'd always yearned, but never had.

There wasn't much for her to do with her time except paint, read, recover Charlie's lost socks and eat oranges, those luscious delights. Novels and

oranges both tasted even better in the tub. She asked Charlie daily to quit his desk. So much more could be learned in a bath. Who knew, for example, that a foetus would uncurl and luxuriate like a sunbaker, suspended in warm water? And who would have guessed that Charlie's flaccid penis would float?

With time on her hands and nowhere to run, Pavla slept, bathed and slept. Her dreams circled around her unborn baby.

On waking one morning she felt elated, having dreamed in sun-kissed orange, such a welcome change from shit brown or red. She lured Charlie back from his desk and told him about her dream.

'I love you, mad woman,' he said. He sat down on the bed, cradling her in his arms, belting out the Depeche Mode song 'Somebody,' their new favourite, until they both felt the baby waken.

'Well, she's a lively one. What should we name her? We can't very well go and call her *orangová*,' Charlie said. He scratched his bristly chin. 'But let's stay with the names given to someone on the move. Let's call her Nadja.'

Nadja was the perfect name for someone so wanted. Or at least that's what Pavla thought. There would finally be someone in her world to love and worry about. Nadja would grow inside her and pass without haste through her life. Charlie's baby. His defiance. A sense of slowly growing promise nestled safely within her. She felt intrepid, like Charlie was contagious. Charlie, Milena and Nadja. Suddenly, from nothing, Pavla felt she had been handed a tribe of her own choosing.

Little Nadja would provide the time to hide for years and write, free her of the need to turn somersaults at the university. That circus! She looked forward to three years of officially sanctioned solitude and seclusion. Her very own self-styled exile. Her own fragrant little orange blossom, to love and hold on to.

'OK, Nadja it is. Her name means the beginning of hope. And Simone de Beauvoir liked her freedom. That's if she's a girl. And I know she is. Otherwise, André, I guess, after Breton.'

SIX

Copper leaves arced and spiraled as Pavla waited in the frozen shadows. She moved from one foot to the other, until Milena ran up from behind and bear-hugged her, Milena's small arms barely able to reach around Pavla's enormous belly. Milena had on her favourite green beanie, with a pom-pom that wobbled. She wore ridiculous round glasses, the kind John Lennon wore in photos. She kissed Pavla warmly on the back of the head, Milena pulling her in to dance the tango. She moved like a tiny, lithe sprite, giggly with excitement. Pavla felt clumsy, like a whale in Charlie's pictures of cobalt ocean.

Had it been Milena or Charlie who had convinced her to meet them here, opposite the student dorms in Albertov, at three? The scheme seemed hare-brained now she was actually here, standing around. She felt tired. A lie down would be more sensible.

When Charlie arrived just minutes later, he conjured two small bunches of perfect carnations from behind his back, for her and Milena. He kissed her on the lips, while Milena lent in and kissed him on the cheek.

'Welcome to the National Day of Students, Comrades!' Milena broadcast in her best newsreader speak. 'November 17, the 50th anniversary of the 1939 clashes – Czech university students, powerless against the relentless Fascist machine. One of Europe's first and finest universities shut down, by barbarians! The young student, Jan Opletal, murdered! We repudiate fascism with every last breath! Comrades, thanks to generous fraternal Soviet assistance, we have been saved, yet again! We must always and forever reflect gratefully on the miracle of salvation!'

Charlie's eyes darted from face to face and then to the students in the crowd nearest them. Pavla noticed that the bristly space between his nose and lip glistened with sweat. Most days his skin looked parched, mauled by the cold. Today's thermal reaction seemed very odd.

Now she remembered. At the pub the night before, late in the evening, Milena and Charlie had extracted her agreement to be here. Pavla had been feeling sleepy and had intended on sharing just one sip of Charlie's black beer, and to then head home to bed. But the beer had tasted so good and it didn't smell like petrol. Charlie poured her a third of a glass and asked for lemonade

to add to it. It was a strange concoction, but she downed the whole glass of bubbles over the course of two hours. It was the first drink of her pregnancy, more than eight months in. Slow warmth travelling, and then an hour off thinking. She put her susceptibility down to the liminal state that she'd found herself suspended in.

Milena had talked about the huge student gatherings that she'd been part of earlier in the day, back in Bratislava. It was hyperbole probably, but according to Milena, the student tide was changing direction.

Charlie had pleaded with them both to include him in their annual pilgrimage to Vyšehrad today, the symbolic heart of the city, set up in the hills. It was his chance to be part of something that really mattered, he said, and not just read about it in newspapers after the event.

Now they were here in the bitter afternoon cold, standing on one foot and then the other. Pavla's ankles were swollen and every breath seemed to take a lifetime to find. She felt winded, with the baby inside her stretching her legs against her rib cage every now and then, like someone doing star-jumps on a trampoline, upside-down.

She imagined herself, not here, but sprawled out in the tub, where the baby could float around inside her, and where she would be so much more comfortable. She thought of being warm and the dog-eared pages of her novel. The tub was the only truly enjoyable context for a host organ of her current dimensions.

'You are cordially invited, Ladies and Gentleman, to a festive day of anti-Nazi propaganda. Complete bullshit, all of it. But that doesn't seem to matter, Little One,' Milena continued in a whisper, this time down on her knees to speak directly to Pavla's belly.

'It is important for us to be here, all four of us, Comrades, on this innocuous, but dud occasion. We find ourselves with an unprecedented opportunity to stand in a crowd of more than ten people and to do so legally. We do love to be part of a happening, given our regular habit of doing absolutely fucking nothing. Even if almost everyone gathered here today is secretly thinking of the other Jan, Jan Palach, our human torch of January '69. Jan, whose name is can't be spoken. For me however, today is all about my

personal hero, from '68, Alexander Dubček, the dancing legend. Slovakia's very own super groover, Saša.'

Charlie was staring down at his Doc Martens, transferring the weight from heel to toe and back again. He looked unwell.

'Now, Pavla tells me you're here on your best behaviour, Karel. No foreigner stupidity, or risk-taking. We speak Czech all day. Got it?' Milena continued, looking up directly at Charlie.

Charlie met her eyes slowly. He nodded obediently. He helped Milena to her feet.

'So why are you speaking Slovak then?' he asked her, recovering himself with a grin.

'You are less caveman and a little more European every day, Sunshine Boy. The ice agrees with you, no?' asked Milena.

'No, it really doesn't. Most days his teeth are chattering with his twenty layers on,' said Pavla.

Milena's exuberance was starting to win Pavla over. She wasn't sorry she'd come along, not now Milena was in such eccentric form.

Back as far as she could remember, she'd always attended the Student Day anniversary alone. Her mother had been at work every year and her friends few. Pavla grinned at the thought of it, of how far she'd come socially in less than a year. She was done with loneliness and isolation. This time Charlie, Milena and her baby were with her, making it all feel shared and new. It was a strange sensation, now she'd found her tribe. Was this feeling happiness, or was that going too far?

Then she thought some more about the long trek ahead, the hours of being on her feet. No, she wasn't good with the idea. The mad hippy hormones hadn't actually kicked in. Not enough, not yet anyway.

'Another day of pretending to be grateful for the freedom to commemorate something we don't understand and to invoke a memory we aren't nearly old enough to remember. Same old, same old. Passive and compliant. Forget about the drudgery of all of it,' Pavla said, giggling.

'Atmospheric pollution, malignant tumours and your life cut short. Welcome to the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic! Welcome to our homeland dystopia. We are the showcase of really existing psychopathy. Here we have

paradise on earth. How do you feel about taking two wives and a baby to Australia, Comrade Charlie?’ asked Milena.

After a short language processing delay, Charlie caught the sarcasm in her remark, and looked bemused.

‘Milena, I think we’ve discussed this already,’ he said, embarrassed. ‘One artistic girlfriend and a baby is plenty. And let’s keep our eyes on the prize here today, ladies. I understand our intrepid adventure will lead us to Petřín Hill, to the grave of Pavla’s favourite romantic poet, K. H. Mácha. In the spirit of love, we expect to see bunches of violets. I love flowers. I hope to see them blossoming in their millions,’ he said. ‘But it’s unlikely given the misery of this bloody cold winter.’

‘Violets are a cowardly expression of unsayable anti-government sentiment. There is no bravery. You’ll see. The regime will reassert its slowly creeping darkness over yet another pallid afternoon. You can rely on that,’ Pavla said, no longer laughing.

Nearer the river, a crowd of thousands swelled, anticipation spreading like winter sneezes. ‘Masaryk!’ ‘Dubček!’ ‘Freedom!’ a sea of voices chorused. Infected and jittery, Pavla walked with them, shoulder to shoulder, warmer now in spite of the ice-burn cold. Charlie and Milena each held her arm or hand, moving faster or slower, swept along in a chaotic tide. Together they ignored the roadblocks and wordlessly extended their course, the plotless script they’d been handed thrown away.

‘This crowd is bigger than the anniversary of Soviet Invasion Day, last August,’ whispered Pavla.

‘This crowd is bigger than a Leni Riefenstahl set,’ said Milena, loudly.

Charlie looked nervous. He was all for heading back. ‘How about a beer to warm up? Just one?’ he suggested. Both women pretended he hadn’t spoken.

‘A communist is someone who’s read Marx, an anticommunist is someone who’s understood him,’ taunted Milena.

Blocked at the arterial roads, the crowd streamed and slipped through the smaller streets to the waterfront embankment, then veered down the hill. They shuffled so much further than they had intended, heavy, footsore,

breathless, but euphoric too. Pavla wanted to sit down, but her need to stay part of it was absolute. Nadja's head rested heavily in her pelvis and she stopped to pee at various restaurants, pubs, libraries and public buildings along the way, every hour. She was so visibly pregnant that several of the attendants who dispensed toilet paper wrapped around their fingers, filthy nails extruded, waved her away when she went to pay.

Later that afternoon, the excitement on the streets still growing, Pavla lay back, her head resting on Charlie's cross-legged lap for a while, huge-bellied. They were huddled in her picnic blanket in a space carved out between a police cordon and the crowd on Národní, the National Boulevard. Daylight was fading fast and it was ridiculously cold.

A few hundred students had built candle-lit makeshift shrines in the mountains of cut flowers very near where they sat. Someone riffed on a guitar and the students nearest them were singing Bob Dylan anthems, with Czech lyrics. Some of the students she recognised from the university. She saw that Milena had walked over to join a group of them and felt pleased to see that she had. Milena and Charlie had both become much too serious throughout the course of the late afternoon. Both seemed stuck in their own heads and too distracted to enjoy the insanity of it all. A short break from Milly's newfound intensity felt like a good thing.

As she watched, Milena was on the move, her shoulders squared. She seemed taller than she'd ever seemed. She stopped abruptly and held out her flower to a policeman, one of the arsehole riot squad, part of the cordon sanitaire that kept the students pliable. Pavla was sitting close enough to see his face, his bulbous, alcoholic red nose and his dumb blank stare. What the hell was Milena doing so close to him?

His shoulders moved up to the height of his chin. The beginning of aggression? Game on! But then he put his head to the side and waited. It was more like a shrug. Milena stepped forward, reached up and dangled the bloom over the lip of his shield. She left it balanced there. She didn't step back.

The flower's redness was a thing of defiance, bright and shocking. It transformed the gruesome Perspex shield into a vase. It had become a stunning glimmering thing, utterly beautiful, eye candy.

The guitar player and singers halted. Thousands of eyes watched on, whispers piercing the seeping darkness, until silence descended.

The policeman was uniformed, riot squad shouldered, dour and oversized. Milena still wore her pom-pom beanie and John Lennon glasses. She looked comical standing there, a bag of bones, willowy and lithe. Pavla couldn't see her face, but she imagined her beaming expectantly, her grin cheeky and wide.

The policeman glanced around, weighing up his options. A twitching left eye suggested he was willing himself to do the job required of him. In the end, he shook off the lava-red bud and let it slide, but it lingered on his metal-toed boot for a while.

Pavla watched on, intrigued by the potential of the two incongruous objects. *As beautiful as the chance meeting on a dissecting-table of a sewing-machine and an umbrella*, she thought. She was terrified for her best friend, but Milena's casual foot tapping suggested she was having the time of her life.

It was incredible. From where Pavla sat, this silent collective holding of breath, stomach in mouth. With it, something shifted. The world around her took in air, like the difficult and irregular first breath of a newborn, rasping, but determined.

'Look at that,' Pavla whispered. She lifted Charlie's chin so he was looking in the direction of Milena and her flower. His face was downy, two days unshaven. He put his head on an angle, trying to make sense of what he was seeing.

'What's going on exactly?' he asked.

Pavla didn't respond.

They had walked for hours and she was too out of breath to explain. An explanation in English might still have landed them a meeting with an interrogator. The afternoon might still end in a kind of Chinese solution. *The end of the fucking farce*, Charlie, you dumb fuck. *Revolution*, she muttered. She choked down her words, sharing his body warmth in silence.

They watched on together to see what Milena had started. Charlie was looking around, his eyes scanning the crowd. His fingers, resting on her belly, were trembling.

For half an hour, hundreds of women and girls placed flower after flower on glistening shields. The crowd was singing *Where is My Homeland?* the National Anthem, the *Internationale* as a piss-take. A few hundred people wore glasses, like Milena, *lenonky* they called them, all laughing in the flickering candle-licked shadows.

By nightfall it was starting to feel for all the world like the beginning of a carnival.

'We have bare hands!'

'We don't want violence!' the surrounding crowds chanted. The solemnity had lifted. The streets were jovial. Thumbs and index fingers were forming 'Vs' on thousands of hands, lifted high above their heads.

'Truth Will Prevail!'

'Out With the Regime!' and 'We Will Overcome!' the students chorused. The singing had given way to a roar. Keys were jingling in every direction.

Through all of this, Charlie curled over Pavla, whispering to their unborn child. Like the floating man in *The Birthday*, Marc Chagall's painting. Weightless, ready to lift off, eyes closed, lips moving. He asked in whispers between giggles when his 'little Nadja' might decide to get moving.

'Your aunty Milena is incendiary today,' he said.

'Nadja? Is that the name you give to her? 'I know we already talked about it, but thought you weren't serious?'

'Of course it's her name. We decided already. There is no other name for this mad little piece of mischief,' said Charlie.

Russet leaves arced down onto icy cobblestones, then crunched and splintered underfoot like the moving shards in a kaleidoscope. There was all the colour and rhythm of larking. They sat among tens of thousands of students wielding flowers and candles, buried under a cacophony of voices.

'Down with communism!' the crowd and Pavla chorused.

Pavla felt inexplicably giggly. Everything was seamless. A future beckoned. It was so unexpected. A somewhere else for her and her baby? A life with Charlie in it?

Nadja kicked hard at Charlie's hand, resisting containment. Pavla knew exactly how she felt and threw her head back, laughing.

More and more flowers had been piled high on the street, whole gardens of them, interspersed with flags and candles. Pavla was looking around, mesmerised by the growing mountains of blooms, candles flickering in every direction. Thousands of keys jingled.

‘So, is it like this every year?’ asked Charlie, still cradling Pavla to him.

She bit her bottom lip and struggled to sit up. She thought long and hard about how to answer him in a way that wouldn’t sound angry. His question was odd given what they were seeing. Or was it? Did Charlie really imagine Czechoslovaks spent a day a year playing at freedom, coming up for air, a breather from their everyday drowning. The casual way he asked the question didn’t make it sound like his happiness depended on him knowing. They were back to where they started, his incomprehension and the distance he kept. He was utterly astounding.

To give him his due, Charlie’s knowledge of protest was limited. He had once told Pavla that he’d attended a rally against the introduction of student fees at home in Sydney. That was it. And just about money. He’d never needed to hit the streets like his life depended on it. Couldn’t he see for himself? Surely, he must understand that today something wild and new was unfurling.

She felt part of something uncontrollable. So many everyday coincidences synching in her head just then, a sixth sense telling her change was finally breaking through. It all made sense. Months before, ‘Today Peking, Tomorrow Prague!’ she had heard the dismayed June protesters chanting on Charles Bridge, through their tears. She had sat through Milena’s reports of weird ecological demos in the sleepy town of Teplice. Foreign students had turned up all year at the university from places with names she barely knew, even before Charlie had arrived last December. She’d read more and more about Gorby, the Russian with the birthmark on his forehead. The borders of neighbouring countries had become porous. She’d seen hundreds of East German refugees spilling into the streets of the Malá Strana, all hanging around outside the West German embassy, not far from Charlie’s. They abandoned their Trabants everywhere, like children’s toys. Poland and Hungary had buckled too, and people hauled each other the Berlin Wall and then started ripping it down. And during all those months, everyone she knew had been

planning adventures to far ends of the earth. Last month Milena had blown her entire art supply stipend on a backpack and camping mattress.

These were the telltale signs that the old world was crumbling, had she allowed herself to notice. She didn't know why she'd discounted it all as dreaming. Maybe she was trying not to allow herself to imagine any kind of future outside of her baby. A future with Charlie? A chance to roam the world freely? To live a life bigger than the one she knew?

Why didn't Charlie get it? There were tens of thousands of students out on the streets, all dreaming of miracles. Hadn't he seen the flowers as symbols, defiant and new? If they were lucky, those mountains of buds might just signal the end of the living nightmare. No more looking over their shoulders. No more ducking and weaving. No more saying one thing and meaning another.

In that moment she wondered if their freedom meant nothing to him. Did he prefer the idea of her vacuum-sealed in a locked-down country, for his convenience? With no life for their daughter? Well, she was no genie in a bottle and nor was Nadja. There was no chance that they would sit around forever marvelling at his freedom. She stood up, using his shoulder to lean on and began to walk forward. She was too incensed to speak.

Her doubts magnified even faster than her disappointment in him. Dark thoughts, overwhelming, had her wishing to wait, to put on hold the baby inside her. She was twenty-two. She knew deep down that she didn't have it in her to be responsible for anyone yet. It wasn't that she didn't want her baby. Only that she wouldn't mind postponing her for a bit. Who says she couldn't stay as she was, alone and free, just for a year or two? There would be so much to learn in this new changing world. Why did pregnancy have to run to program, even in the random course of revolutionary days? If Czechoslovakia had caught the European bug and was finally demanding freedom, why shouldn't she be part of that once-in-a-lifetime moment?

With a baby, she saw herself stuck inside an apartment on the outskirts of nowhere, in a rut, changing nappies and breast-feeding. No painting. No time for drawing. No miracles. No everyday Surrealism. She whipped herself into misery just contemplating the absence of dreaming. She resented Charlie. Nadja terrified her. What the hell did she know about being a mother? For

months, her private kicking, hiccupping and independently quickening side-kick had been scaring the life out of her. It was simply that she hadn't been able to admit any of it, not to herself, let alone to Charlie.

How could she reconcile the idea of a baby with wanting to remain alone, unburdened? Hadn't she learned anything from those German students waiting for asylum at the embassy up the road from Charlie's? *Gluck*, their word for luck, was also their word for happiness. She was no longer certain it was possible to have one without the other. She sensed that life was about to speed up. Keeping afloat on a rising tide would be tricky. Unlike Charlie, she wasn't a swimmer. She'd not once even been to the beach.

'No. It isn't like this every year, Karel. Not remotely,' Pavla said tersely. She wondered if he sensed her growing resentment towards him, and if he hated her for it.

SEVEN

In the half hour that Pavla spent apart from Charlie, she wandered Národní Boulevard. She bought some tea and a bread roll from a kiosk and managed to calm herself down a bit. She retraced her path back to where she'd left Charlie, still feeling famished. She felt emotionally wrung out and needed somewhere to sit down again. But she stayed standing, beginning to worry about not being able to find Charlie or Milena in the thickening mob. Eventually she spotted Charlie's unruly mane of curls weaving their way towards her, just above the crowd.

He kissed her lips, his eyes open and darting. This wasn't how Charlie kissed her. Something was wrong.

The crowd was tightening in around them. He took her hand and walked quickly towards a street corner and into a laneway. She struggled to keep up.

Within minutes they felt caged, unable to move, but desperate to leave the overcrowded streets. Police-cordons blocked their path in every direction. Extinguished candles fell to the ground and her hand clutched at a broken flower. Armoured cars pressed in on them. They saw batons raised and heard dogs snarling. Looking up to catch Charlie's gaze, Pavla saw instead a tear-gas haze of white helmets, glimmering shields, truncheons and fearsome red berets. Bodies compressed, crushed too tightly. There was no air, just the desperation of needing to find air to breathe.

'Let's get you and Nadja out of here,' said Charlie.

'DISPERSE!' the riot police ranted through booming speakers. Savage-looking dogs strained on their leashes, growling. Some of the dogs barked loudly. But there was nowhere to go. Pavla inched further into Mikulandská Street, the narrow laneway that might let them escape. She calculated its mean proportions. Red berets crowded three lines deep on either side. She and Charlie had no other choice: they had to try to keep moving.

Before they inched very far, a baton started its descent towards her face. Charlie lurched forward to put himself in the way of it. She heard a hollow crunch, his collarbone breaking? Within seconds someone in a uniform picked up Charlie from the ground, hauled him over his shoulders and carried him towards the embankment. She thumped and pounded at the arms that held

Charlie. The policeman ignored her blows and silent screaming. Her lips moved in protest, but her voice had gone missing.

The narrow laneway closed in. The riot police clubbed and pummelled each of the students as they tried to leave. They beat, and beat, and beat them. Blood splattered across the face of a little boy standing over his mother. She was lying on the ground, being kicked by some thug in a uniform. Someone screamed at the policeman, 'Do you feel like a big man yet, you fucking savage?'

Pavla held on tight to her bruised flower. The one Charlie had brought her, once fresh and new. She thought about Milena anointing the policeman. That other lifetime. Everywhere, there were fragments of torn clothing, shoes and underwear, cries for help, hysterical shrieks. She thought of the Marc Chagall moment, from just an hour ago, when she knew for certain that both she and Charlie dreamed of holding Nadja.

She pushed hard, her back against the crowd, huge, crab-like, almost making it to the tiny, crowded passage. Frantic, her heart pounding, she knew she needed to leave the street quickly to keep Nadja safe and to find Charlie.

Again, she saw the familiar face of the young shaven-headed man: no helmet, no beret, no uniform, just the truncheon. She had seen him talking to Charlie earlier. The same vulpine smile spread across his face. He had followed her carefully, had come for her now he was done with Charlie. He aimed his truncheon carefully, waist high.

There would be no more chances, no more streets to claim. Savage time wouldn't wait. Not for her: not for anyone.

The truncheon pounded. She doubled at the waist and felt an unplugging, a sickening gush trickling down her inner thighs and pooling at the cuffs of her jeans. She stood alone, nauseous with knowing. Nadja wasn't going to be OK. The guilt of it. She had put her baby at risk by imagining her gone. Now, she wished for that other reality, that other choice. She wished she had stayed in the bath in a lather of bubbles, warm and soapy. That abundance of air for easy breathing.

The truncheon came at her head. At last, the welcome end of thinking. She dreamed of holding Nadja, wailing and smelling brand new.

EIGHT

Startled by crying, Pavla awoke from her dream-pitted sleep. Where was this? It smelled of antiseptic. So it wasn't the bathtub. She looked out of the window. The sky was a great grey slab. The burnt orange leaves were gone, the trees skeletal. Fantastic images flashed through her head. Milena, armed with a flower. A bald man lurching forward. Charlie being carried off, writhing. The effort of trying to scream with her voice gone missing. Was this a hospital? She put a hand to her belly. The bulge was gone. Her breasts were leaking. She listened to the ravenous cry of a baby bird. Such a raw sound.

Milena stood with her back to the window, chatting away quietly. At last, something that made sense. Milena! But to whom was she speaking? She was cradling something swaddled, holding it tight, like a precious gift. The cry seemed to be coming from where Milena stood. Could it be Nadja? Pavla launched herself bolt upright to look properly. The baby tracked her movement with her eyes and was silent for a moment.

Hearing the bed creak, Milena turned around. Big sobs broke from her when she saw that Pavla was sitting up. Then she screamed with delight.

'Jesus and Maria! Finally, you're awake!'

Milena kissed Pavla's forehead and put the flailing baby in her arms.

'Nadja! You're here!' Pavla held her baby for the first time and burst into tears. Nadja smelled her mother's milky scent and cried even louder, her face pink and contorted.

'Is she OK? Is she hurt? Why is she crying so hard?'

'Nadja is a fighter. Completely healthy. Robust. Perfect. There's absolutely nothing for you to worry about with this little bruiser. But she's hungry. She wants you to feed her. Lift your gown. She knows exactly what to do. Your mother said we should keep trying all those weeks. The hospital said no, but your mother insisted. She held Nadja at your breast for hours in the beginning, her arms around you, until she learned to latch on properly. Said she wished she had persisted with you, when you were a baby, but you hadn't made it easy. It was tricky for Lada with all the tubes and wires, but both Nadja and Lada were super determined.'

Nadja nuzzled and gulped rhythmically. It was such a curious feeling, warm and animal. Eventually Nadja stopped, looked up drunkenly and sighed. Human recognition? Or maybe wind? That look! It lasted just a second, then Nadja returned to her greedy feeding.

The nurse rushed in, followed by a flurry of doctors. They prodded and poked, shone torches in Pavla's eyes, asked questions and scribbled on charts. They instructed Milena to take Nadja out into the corridor. But Pavla wouldn't let go of her baby. She kept on feeding her. Finally, when the staff was satisfied that she was stable, the last doctor scratched his head in annoyance and retreated.

'What time did Nadja arrive? I've been asleep a while I think.'

'She was born eleven minutes before midnight on the seventeenth of November. Weeks ago. It's almost Christmas now. There are tubs of carp lining the streets. You've been asleep alright. No one knew if you'd ever wake up. You were in terrible shape for a while. We were sick with worry,' Milena said.

'I met Nadja when she was just two hours old, in the early hours of the morning after you were hurt, when I came looking for you. Your mother was holding her, standing here singing to her. She had come to find you and had fallen under the spell of this little Missy.'

'Charlie? Where is he? Why isn't he here?'

'Haven't seen him. Not since the two of you on the blanket. I've asked everyone who knows him, all his friends. Your mother has contacted each of the hospitals a few times and has her colleagues on the lookout. I've been to Charlie's dorm over and over. The police. The university. We called the Australian embassy in London. The embassy contacted his family in Sydney a few times. They haven't seen him. No one knows anything. We keep calling. We can't understand what's happened to him.'

Pavla felt her stomach clench. She told Milena about their fight, how he hadn't understood anything. About the bald man and his truncheon. She was babbling so fast that Milena might not have made sense of anything. But Pavla knew that Milena understood what she intended to say; that she was finally holding her beautiful baby, but without Charlie there to share the magic. Not knowing what had happened to him. It was unfathomable.

'Be patient,' Milena soothed. 'Everything is still very chaotic. I never knew democracy could be such bedlam.'

'I want Charlie here. I want him to hold Nadja and tell her things. Not my mother. Wait! Democracy? What's happened? What are you talking about?'

'The regime is finished. That's what I'm trying to tell you. It keeled over in just over a week. There was no fight. There will be elections soon. Real ones. Our world's a blank canvas. We can do, say and go whatever and wherever we like now.'

In the hour that followed, Milena told Pavla how she'd missed the unfolding of days, the euphoria-fuelled weeks of general strikes, mass demonstrations and meetings that changed everything. The Magic Lantern Theatre, Manes Gallery, most of the theatres in the centre and Vinohrady, all the sites where the democratic future of the country unfolded.

'Pavla, you're free. We can go anywhere, do anything. Your mother was telling me about the wonderful bread they have in Paris. We can try everything, everywhere. The world's our playground.'

Pavla felt bewildered. But she also saw that Milena was entirely serious.

It was miraculous. But there would be no adventure worth having without Charlie in it. How could he have vanished in an instant? There was no way of knowing, no making sense of anything, no understanding where he went.

'Maybe Charlie opened his big mouth and wouldn't shut up. I always suspected it would catch up with him, one day.' Was his naivety his final undoing?

'The one and only report of police violence resulting in death has been fully rescinded. It was funny. The 'dead' student wandered home and sat down in the lounge room of his family abode. His grieving father fainted. Other than that, nothing has been reported. And the media is free now. Now there is no one left to censor what anyone says. No one could be bothered with that anymore.'

'There's such a lot for me to take in. I had a nap and now our world's changed. I'm so grateful to you for keeping Nadja safe. Thank you. You must be exhausted. It's been me doing all of the sleeping.'

In her head, this is what Pavla made of it. She and Charlie had had their chance. Her stupid tantrum meant they had gotten distracted and hadn't been concentrating closely enough. Because of her, they had missed their revolution. And their happy-ever-after had disappeared with it.

'Your mother and I have been taking turns. She said we needed to keep talking to you all the time, as if you were here. You grimaced when she read you Kollontai, so

I started to believe her. I've been reading us train timetables, baby guides, and *Nadja*, ridiculous and weird, but it was the book I found in your shoulder bag. I've been keeping you up to speed with everything in the newspapers. So much has been happening. I suppose you must only have been half listening...

'Your mother will be here within the hour. Her visits are like clockwork. She'll be thrilled to see you awake. It will be the best shock of her life. She loves you and Nadja to bits. We got her all wrong in the beginning, when you were first pregnant. She's a mother, a lioness when it comes to her cub, just like any other.'

'What I need right now is to find Charlie. Mum can wait. I need him. He hasn't met Nadja. Help me find my clothes. Where do they keep the baby blankets and nappies? You need to help me leave. I need to get out the hell of this place.'

Part ii

NINE

Just after midnight, November 17, 2000.

Pavla cradled her knees, her lower spine resting against the wall. She was taking in the hum of sleeping bodies scattered around the room. Writing while the world slept, those sleepy sounds were both comforting and human. Soon she could sleep too, she told herself, but she still needed to work a while longer.

Her resolve to commit words to the page was flagging. Her eyelids heavy, she wanted sleep more than she could remember wanting anything. So many sentences, all with lines stabbed through them. But tomorrow's fucking lecture still needed to be written.

She dozed a little, her head nodding sideways. Every few minutes she shook herself awake and held her whittled pencil between her thumb and middle finger, rotating it again and again, waiting for more of the few words on the page to give offence and need deleting. She had been sitting in this position for so long now that she could no longer feel her arse against the mattress. She ached to form a single sentence that would finally mean something.

As her head lolled sideways, dreams crawled in. She saw Charlie's corkscrew curls bouncing in synch with his gait. He was striding across the embankment. It seemed she had been following him forever. Her feet were sore, her legs worn to stumps. But those bouncing coils kept her moving. She was moving fast but couldn't keep up, struggling for air, heart pounding. When finally would these insane dreams stop?

She was woken by a sound; Nadja's voice. Thank God! She was delighted to no longer be half sleeping. She was sick to death of that same dream, looping. But where was she exactly? The smell was mouldy. She was sitting upright in a dark room, yellow lamplight seeping through the window, the blue of a television screen flickering in from across the street.

Nadja was chatting loudly, an arm's length away. Something about strawberries, Trafalgar Square, lion guards and homework. A school assignment overdue. Her face was etched in a thin film of street light, her long

eyelashes locked down, but fluttering like a bird in flight. In sleep she was still a little girl. Little Nadja.

Today her baby was eleven years old. Everything Nadja was saying was sleep-talk, every word of it. But something about her conversation surprised Pavla and pushed away the tug of sleep. What was it, exactly? She thought for a minute about what she was hearing. She grinned. Nadja dreamed in English and sounded English too. It was utterly wonderful. Her eleven-year-old spoke English more effortlessly, even in her sleep, than she herself had ever managed to. How excellent for Nadja. With this she held an entry ticket to the universe. Intelligibility, hers for a lifetime.

It was Milena who comforted Nadja, untangling her from her cocoon of duvet, patting her back, giving her water, saying that there would be strawberries at the markets, certainly there would be. Late homework was not something to be worried about. Not now, or ever for that matter. Everything would be alright. Her words were soothing. Milena slid under the duvet and cuddled Nadja, smoothing her matted hair away from her forehead. She held her safe until the murmuring stopped. Just listening to Milena's dulcet tones sounded comforting. But Pavla remained unconvinced by what she was hearing. How would everything be alright, when nothing could be? How would it ever be that? She watched as Milena stumbled back to her own mattress. It was freezing. How many pairs of socks was she wearing?

They were not OK. They were out of place. Would Nadja hold her own at school? How would she be treated? Was her Czech good enough to see her through? Would she ever belong in this ridiculous place? Was belonging even something she should want? They were adrift, flotsam. How had they landed in this unholy mess?

And then the question of questions. Charlie... Such a big if, but just say he was still on the planet? Would he find them? What would he make of Nadja if he were to see her, eleven today? Would he be bowled over by the magnificence of her? What would he say?

The questions swimming in her head were too many and too complex. It felt like drowning. What she needed was sleep. Eventually she began to drift off and for a short while her head was cleared entirely of the contents of

the squat. She walked strange streets filled with bodies, all of them relentlessly moving.

When the church bells could no longer be ignored, Pavla threw the sheets back. They sounded cantankerous. She winced and tried to sit up. It took a few seconds for her eyes to adjust to the seeping light. Her head hurt. She remembered last night, or bits of it. Becherovka might well be medicinal going down, but enough of it in one sitting had left her feeling rough as morning landed.

Sitting up, she moved her tatty piles of books and papers aside to peer through a small oval window. She saw terracotta rooftops, tall spires and domes, all almost close enough to touch with outstretched fingers. The gold-fingered clock on the belfry of St Mikolas' Church said it was almost ten already. Oriel windows and chimney stacks spilled smoke like cartoon captions. Satellite dishes collected rainbows. The birds had vanished and the sky was bleak. Shadowy laneways, lampposts and statues seemed to have been pasted haphazardly by cockeyed artists over narrow winding streets. She had secured this vantage point because the window was broken. It was freezing, but she loved the jagged break that ruptured the already hallucinogenic view.

Four bodies lay strewn around the room like last week's newspapers. Small flecks of sunlight sprouted through holey curtains, splashing over patches of wall and floor. Nadja rolled over and yawned, looked at her, smiled sleepily and unwound herself from her covers. She walked towards Pavla and climbed in next to her.

'Happy birthday, little one,' Pavla whispered. She cuddled Nadja tight, breathing in the smell of her, all freshly washed hair and talcum powder. She didn't want to go to work today. No parent wants to be anywhere but with their child on her birthday. Especially now they were untethered. This wasn't home, but some place else entirely. She didn't feel ready to leave her daughter in this madhouse, not today of all days. Their digs felt stuffy and ancient, like the natural history museum. What was the smell they were enveloped in? Formaldehyde?

Pavla pointed to the Malá Strana streets on display through the window. 'Look at those faded buildings in gelato colours and silly open-mouthed tourists.'

They're lost in a farce of pure Baroque. Here's my weird fact for today: see those buildings across the street? They each have insane pictures for names, Three Little Stars, the Golden Bell, the Green Crayfish, the White Eagle. How silly is that?' She wasn't being facetious. She resented the insanity of all of it.

'I wish all buildings were named like that,' said Nadja. 'It's way cooler than numbers.'

Back in London, the noisy streets filled with people hurrying because they had somewhere to be, was normal. She wished Nadja was spending her birthday back with the kids at Stockwell Primary, her school until a week ago. With her two best friends, Pippa and Ruby especially.

'It's Wednesday morning, Nadja, so your class in London is about to be tested on their spelling.'

'And soon everyone will be on the playground playing. The kids with red hair will be panting. They lose every game, you know Mum, it goes without saying. Do you think the rules here for games will be the same? At least now I won't have to deal with the chipbutty bullies. They were scary and Neanderthal.'

Who knew what school would be like here? They were unlikely to find a decent one anytime soon. Nadja would need to lower her expectations. She really would. She would need to forget about asking questions. Curiosity had no place now. Where were all the kids in this city, anyway? There didn't seem to be a single kid within the building for Nadja to go exploring with. That would be the best thing that could happen. She needed someone her own age to go interrogating the seven hundred-year-old ruin.

The crumpled bodies in the room lay face planted, arms bracing worn pillows over their heads, fingers interwoven, elbows parked sideways. Milena stretched, stood up and walked towards the kitchen to make tea, wrapped in a duvet.

'Happy birthday possum,' she whispered, blowing kisses at Nadja.

They watched Mily at the washing-up bucket as she half-filled a saucepan and waited at the stove, holding out cold hands over billowing steam. When the water was boiled, she removed the saucepan, but held her hands and face over the heat for a slow minute. With some luck, there would be enough tea for a strong brew.

In her hurry to grab the milk from the makeshift fridge, the six inches of space that trapped the cold between the inner and outer windows, Milena yanked the window opener from its hinges. The opener clattered to the floor. The milk didn't spill as the plastic bottle fell. It must have been frozen. Nadja, thrilled with the chaos, ran over to help Milena put the window latch back together.

Pavla thudded to the bathroom, or more accurately to the room with a hosepipe taped to the ceiling and a floor drain. Icy water spluttered out after a time, reluctant and cruel. She enjoyed the moment of travelling warmth. A few seconds spent grazed by the water and the freezing stream of air from the window was enough. When she was dried off, she poured herself into many skintight layers, all black, then her favourite dungarees of bottle green.

As she walked back to the main room, one of the sleepers threw off sheets, first revealing a hairy spider leg, then a crimson velour skirt and only then a puny naked torso. From under the pillow, an ashen face emerged. Āezary had been dressed as a man the night before, she was sure of it. He stumbled off warily in the direction of the toilet, sticking his pierced tongue out at Nadja as he went.

'Morning, princess,' he shouted out.

Nadja poked her tongue out too, until Milena told her to stop. Nearby, Vlasta raised her head and grimaced at the spear-shaped shards of light and yelled at Milena.

'Can't you all just shut the fuck up!'

Pavla had no idea what purpose Vlasta served in the scheme of things. She assumed she was simply the bulldog that kept the squat theirs. Vlasta, it seemed, never went out. She looked unhinged enough to scare off robbers. Maybe that was her line of work?

As Āez wandered back, a battered red toothbrush in his hand, he made hissing noises at Vlasta. Vlasta rolled herself more tightly into her covers and pretended to sleep. It was incredible that Milena had stayed in contact with this nasty piece of work since uni days.

'If everyone's awake now, then let's get started on the party,' Nadja demanded.

'But first, I hear there's a birthday to celebrate today,' Āez said.

Pavla knew Nadja had taken a real shine to this strange man in the two days they had been living in the squat. She listened to his rising intonation. Alarm bells sounded in her head. She'd seen him pottering around the place and playing UNO with Nadja but hadn't heard him speak before now. She didn't need to live in close proximity with another Australian. She'd experienced more than enough of his particular breed of beguiling conjurer for this lifetime.

Pavla felt distracted. She wasn't at all interested in the party the household had planned for the evening. She wished it to hell, in fact. There was far too much going on already. An old/new city to contend with, and her daughter's birthday. Those two things were more than enough to make sense of. For three days now, she had noticed she had been speaking in rambling, unfinished sentences. Czech for curses, the post office, instructions to Milena and shopping lists. And for the lecture she still hadn't written. English for bedtime stories and a world that made sense.

Friends from her old Prague life, the life before London, would be here for the party tonight. She felt no great need to see any of them. But then, maybe they could help her come to terms with aspects of it.

'We have cake for Madam's breakfast today,' said Pavla. She retrieved a cake box from between two more windows and rummaged for a knife and cleanish plates in the kitchen corner. She pushed candles into the cake and fished around for matches.

Milena handed Nadja a hand-painted card and a tiny box, wrapped carefully and tied with a blue ribbon.

'Open it,' she instructed.

Nadja had never been given a wrapped present like this. Most years she had chosen some books from Oxfam and started reading them on the Tube on her way back home. Inspecting the wrapping, she looked like she'd been handed the world. She gave a wide-eyed shriek and ripped the paper open. Inside, she found Milena's pendant, a treasured relic from childhood. Nadja had been fascinated with the little coin on a chain for years. She had always loved to finger it as it sat in the clavicle at the base of Milena's long neck.

'I'd love for you to have it. It was my Slovak grandmother's, from the time of the First Republic. When we were just one country. A true democracy. Wear

the pendant to remind you where your home is now. I'm trusting you with it, Nadja, so please take good care of it.'

Nadja held it in her hand. On the medallion was a lion with a shield, and around the beveled edge, it read *Republika Československa 1932*.

'Wow. Thanks Milly. That's where the kids in London said I came from. They hadn't heard of the Czech Republic. They were a bit medieval. It's beautiful. I love it. And I'll look after it, I promise.'

Milena wrapped the chain around Nadja's tiny neck and did up the clasp. The medallion must have felt icy as Nadja warmed it between her fingers. With the fingers of her other hand she picked at crumbs from her poppy seed cake. She looked elated.

Nadja hugged Milena like she was glued to her. She messed up Milena's hair so it stood on end. 'Thank you, Mily,' she said, beaming. 'Time to get moving then, Čez!' Nadja demanded.

Čez was sitting, leaning over the dinner table, his head cradled in his hands, his cake half eaten. He looked a bit fragile. But he was up and dressed and that made him fair game for Nadja.

Nadja kissed Milena, three kisses, another hug, and a head rub for good measure. 'We're off to the fruit shop. For strawberries,' Nadja said.

'Up and out!' She grabbed Čez's hand and tugged at his arm until he was standing. Pavla got a strangle hug.

Nadja said, 'Thanks for bringing us home for my birthday, Mummy.'

Pavla felt a lump form in her throat as Nadja collected her shoes from the doorway, her little fingers tying up four sets of laces, hers and Čez's. She was so tenacious and independent. She trusted strangers easily; like mother, like daughter. Thankfully, Milly looked panicked, dropped the duvet, pulled her coat over her pyjamas, put on her shoes and went with them. Pavla watched from the doorway as her daughter slid down the banister over the stretches where the stairs had gone missing.

Pavla finished dressing, drank her tea, cleaned her teeth, pulled on her shoes and jacket and stepped out the door. She knew she had to get moving.

She made it down three flights of stairs of the crumbling citadel. On the second-floor landing, the janitor eyed her suspiciously. Pavla patted the bag she carried and cradled it protectively.

‘Semtex!’ Pavla said, remembering how Charlie’s joke had always landed.

‘Be sure to tell your foreign friends to write only in German or Russian. It takes me too long to read your mail in other languages,’ the old man said in Czech.

‘Go bite your bum,’ said Pavla in English, as the door to the street slammed closed.

Out in the cold, Pavla heard a clucking sound. Two old grandmothers, *babičky*, were standing near the gutter gossiping, their heads bobbing in conversation. Steam hissed from their mouths. She imagined their arm blubber wobbling like jelly beneath their sacks as they opened their hands out wide in wonder.

‘I just don’t like the look of these new vagrants... All those young people holed up together. It’s so unnatural.’

‘They speak gibberish. Sometimes Slovak or Polish, sometimes Italian. Sometimes a language with too many vowels. Not even European.’

In spite of the cold, both women wore thin shapeless tents of a surprising number of browns. Each had the same cork heeled shoes and mustard stockings. Under their fawn scarves, hand-painted blue-green eye shadow bruises highlighted straight eyebrows, drawn on in a way that made them look surprised. In London, a grey city, old women wore happy colours. Here the only old and cheerful things were the gelato-coloured buildings. But even they were neglected and in varying states of disrepair.

The *babičky* had been tethered to the same place on the street for days. It could have been longer, Pavla had only been watching from her window since Sunday, the day they’d arrived. Her outings had been once daily, to visit her mother at the hospital.

‘A couple of times I’ve seen the little girl on the shoulders of that tall thug with bits of metal sticking out of him, and I don’t have a clue what they’re saying. I wonder how she doesn’t get spiked...’

'They don't know what they're doing. They're all so skinny. I bet they're those vegetarians.' Her face soured as though she'd been forced to swallow pumpkin, a food fit only for pigs and other barnyard animals.

Pavla turned and began to negotiate a path around the tourist hordes and cobblestones marbled with ice. Czech language had it right, traversing these slippery rounded stones was exactly like attempting to dance over cat's heads. Except it would take a sadist to know.

She waited as a group of tourists completely blocked her path. The group gawked stupidly at the poles and police tape protruding from the building on the street corner.

'Henny Penny, the sky is falling!' Pavla said, as she eyeballed a too loud bovine in an Akubra hat. She tried to look unfriendly as she pointed at the heavy block of ice poised to fall from the nearest rooftop. The tourist stared at the ice, then dawdled out of harm's way.

She sprinted across the street towards a waiting tram on Malostranská náměstí, still sensing the burning gaze of the old women on her. Just before she stepped up onto the tram, she glanced sideways at the timetable. Unbelievable! Eleven years post revolution and work days were still denoted with an image of the hammer and sickle. This place was so stuck in the 1980s. When would time begin to move forward?

Pavla watched the *babičky* from the tram, still parked outside the apartment building, their hands tightening protectively around the handles of plastic shopping bags that risked spilling open at their ankles. Pictured on each of the bags, a girl-woman straddled a gleaming motorbike, naked except for some serious stilettos. She seemed to have arrived recently from somewhere better. What was she selling? No one did anything in this place without flogging something.

Pavla wondered where the girl on the bike was heading, especially as she didn't wear a winter jacket, just leathers. She must be travelling to some place warmer, somewhere well outside of late November's icy cold. Sunny Sydney, maybe? The seductive image of the girl on her bike made Pavla wish that she too was leaving Prague by any means imaginable, rather than arriving.

TEN

Here she was, wasting the morning, pacing narrow laneways. The man who had been Charlie, or his latest incarnation, had dematerialised. She had searched and searched, but he was lost again. She was back in that slow distortion of space and time. Prague, the city of her childhood. Wintery. Bleak. Grey. The unhomely place where she was a stranger now. The place she was but would rather not be.

She couldn't take a connecting tram the last few blocks to work. Not looking as she did, tear-stained and edgy. Instead she took the stairs down from the bridge to the island, two at a time, just as sleet started to cut in sideways. She hurried down the stairs faster than was sensible.

The church clocks around the city began clamouring twelve noon. That meant she had been meandering like a sleepwalker, following Charlie, his doppelganger or just an apparition, panicking and wasting time, for the best part of an hour. And what was with Milena? Since they'd arrived back in Prague she had been defensive and edgy.

She hoped a lap around Střelecký Island, a place she once loved, would stop her head racing. The island had been their favourite haunt, secluded and out of time. Her panic space with a breathtaking view. She had fantasised about standing right here, her private oasis, on the most miserable days in London.

Charlie must have considered her a slow reader, the cover of the same safe Čapek novel in her hand for weeks. The cover had hidden banned books, smuggled in the suitcase of that excellent cousin in London. The luxury of reading what was explicitly forbidden, sprawled out on the grass, talking, trying out her English and studying the strangeness of him, for all of springtime. His utter confusion and reluctance are what she best remembered. The half grin breaking into something smitten. It was here she had come to love Charlie.

Without him here, the island felt empty. The last of the leaves had left their branches and the trees were gnarly silhouettes clawing down greedy handfuls of sky. Were she to draw today, she would render it in black charcoal: no *chiaroscuro*. The light had gone missing.

But the river held the island close as a lover. A bevy of white swans dived, spread their wings and took flight, heading somewhere warmer. She marvelled not at their beauty, but at their leaving. Why should humans have a less developed instinct for migration as a mode of survival?

She watched as a homeless man and his toothless companion nudged each other. They followed her too closely as she walked, abandoning the warmth of their smouldering fire beneath the stairs. They were burning a mattress, newspapers and lumps of coal, black smoke billowing, the sleet, heavier now, threatening to put an end to all of it.

They were talking about her as though she wasn't there, like she couldn't understand what they were saying. Did they see her as a foreigner? Is that what they made her out to be? They stood too close, demanding money. Well good luck with that, she thought. If it was cash they wanted, then they had chosen the wrong woman. Their breath reeked of petrol and their twitching suggested they were wanting more.

She wouldn't play victim to any bully, especially piss-stained cowards. Her anger stuck in her throat, but only for a second. Then the words started gushing out.

'He vanished in an instant, the father of my daughter. Without him here, there was no point staying. Not when the world was wide open. We made new lives in London. Then our English visas got cancelled. Eastern Europeans are seen as untrustworthy in London. Shady, like you pair here. Especially without tenured work. And Milena had no work at all most of the time, around caring for Nadja. So now we're stuck in this miserable place again. So just fuck off, why don't you? Our predicament is no less precarious than yours.'

She'd formed these words in her mother tongue, shocked at her newfound ability to intimidate. She understood those homeless men in their liminal state. Like them, she hungered for a time when things were certain, when they had stable lives and a roof over their heads. That time no longer existed for anyone she knew. Not in this city or anywhere.

They looked stunned, muttered a few choice words, then backed off. She watched them stumble backwards, to their depleted fire and home of cardboard.

As they retreated, she realised what she'd just done. She'd never seen homeless people here before, only in London. Czechs didn't live like this. She

walked over and handed them fifty crowns. It was almost the last of the money she carried with her. They looked like they'd won the lottery. They thanked her and apologised, talking over one another, like naughty children. Only then could she stop to breathe in the foul coal-choked air.

Finally, her thoughts were free to travel. Nadja, suddenly eleven. Today ought to be a celebration. She couldn't say what felt wrong, not exactly. Her difficulty wasn't with Nadja. She was utterly wonderful. The problem was that here was no place for them. The long years in London had been easier. A good safe distance from this place, with half of Europe separating them from memory. Even though Milena had demanded to return, now even she seemed caught up in some headspace that wasn't here.

Eleven was the number of years that Czechs had tried to live in freedom. Within hours, Prague would be dressed in party clothes, gaudy and rose-tinted. The anniversary of a revolution, the meaning of which was largely forgotten, now there were Armani suits, Pink Floyd concerts and Nokia phones. Looking across the river to the embankment, in all its faded pastel squalor, she saw no cause for revelry or celebration. She wished this day would pass quickly, unremarkable as any other.

Across the river, the glittery windows of her mother's favourite coffee haunt, Kavárna Slavia, taunted her like sirens from a forgotten city. She thought of her mother and wished she could see her, perched as she often had been at her regular seat by the window.

She hoped the winged goddess of victory above the National Theatre would drive her three-horse chariot right through them. The sound of shattering glass might wake her up. Looking at the streets of her student days, she felt done in by memory. She knew she lacked the courage to walk down Národní, the wide national boulevard, even in her head. She worried that the trepidation she felt might mean never getting on with living. Would she be stuck with this sensation of inertia forever? That street and her reticence felt weirdly connected.

The rumble of trams reminded her of where she was standing. She looked up to see Mánes Gallery, the functionalist white cuboid, her personal Colosseum. She liked its clean lines and glass, and the way it faced West. The decaying teeth, black voids at the base of it. She thought about the first

surrealist exhibition held there in 1935, the largest display of surrealist art the world had ever seen. During Breton's two-week visit, he had declared Prague 'the magic capital of old Europe.' From where she stood, she could see what he meant. Behind Mánes, the bulbous onion-dome of the sixteenth-century water tower brooded. From the dome, police secret agents had watched her watching and walking with Charlie.

At the edge of the island stood their bent-over tree, grown sideways across the river. The love seat where she and Charlie had kissed for hours and hours and made Nadja.

Across the road, the Dancing House, 'Fred and Ginger' the new crazy medusa of drunken towers, fractured planes and bent surfaces, with its tongue stuck out at the Castle. What would Charlie have thought of this mausoleum to the energy of the revolution? Had he seen it yet? Would he have described her as a post-communist porn queen, leggy, seven storeys tall? Or as belonging among the Socialist Realist icons he revered, with her high cornices and Corinthian columns. For Pavla, Fred and Ginger was a whirling dervish, pirouetting closer and closer to Europe. She was all new, untainted by the past; both shocking and amazing.

Behind her, less bustling, the Malá Stana, the hilly warren of crooked medieval houses signposted with pictures, not numbers, that Nadja so loved. The House of the Golden Bell, The House of the Three Stalks, Three Suns, Black Bear, Huge Whale, all peeling paint and stucco. The streets were almost deserted. She thought of the lantern-lit laneways of that oldest part of city where she'd lived with Charlie. She and Charlie had searched unsuccessfully for the Three Stalks while three parts pissed, circling the same laneways for hours and hours. Now she saw couples walking hand in hand, searching for apartments and lodgings. One couple could have been her and Charlie, except that these doppelgangers were better dressed and congruous, both seeming to have originated from the same cosmos.

Up on Letná Plain she saw that the tip of the huge Metronome carved a wide arc, red hands gesturing left to right: inexorable. Foucault's pendulum, his suspended oscillating heartbeat. Why did it tilt so noticeably to the right?

Milena claimed to have seen a thirty-three foot statue of Michael Jackson here just four years ago. But now the plain was flanked by two unlit giant

torches, a kind of sticky post-communist residue. A billboard with Civic Democratic Party Leader, Václav Klaus, was fighting against the wind, his face staring the city down. She couldn't ever fathom the arrogance of him. And come to think of it, why had Milena been back in Prague that trip at all, when she had lent her the money, limited as it always was, to visit ailing family in Bratislava?

Skateboarders and bladers gyrated with paint cans, leaving fluorescent pink graffiti. What would Lada make of this wonderful street art? 'Anarchist vandalism,' she'd call it. How exactly would she still remember the Stalin monument that once stood there, the largest Stalin in the world? Would she remember? It had taken 1650 detonators to decapitate him in 1953, his giant head rolling down the plain into the river, splashing loudly, his other remnants paraded triumphantly before a thunderous cheering crowd. Pavla wondered what her mother's toddler face had betrayed at the moment that had happened. Had she covered? Coincidence in this place made absolute sense: the eruption of the repressed, a miracle, within the context of the everyday unthinking.

She climbed the stairs leading back to the bridge and paused, waiting for a lull in the stream of human traffic. A huddle of bodies scattered as someone riding a bicycle with bright streamers sailed slowly through it. The rider was ancient and dressed like a rainbow. Like the winged goddess above the theatre, the old woman carried a garland in one hand. At the back of the bike, a rattan basket covered in fake roses held a bubble machine and a tape recorder. A wafting trail of bubbles took flight as the woman pedalled faster. She filled the intersection opposite Národní with floating orbs and the lingering sound of Martin Lee Gore singing 'Somebody.'

This was the song Charlie had sung to her all the time, both sober and legless. It had been his way of melting her bravado. The lure of connecting to his innermost thoughts. '*She will listen to me, but won't easily be converted,*' she sang along with the rasping player. She felt the lump thicken in her throat, that feeling of constricted breathing before the tears start tumbling out. So much for the rest of our lives. Apparently, you really couldn't be tied by anyone's strings. You'd always claimed that *in cases like this, we'd get away with it...*

She had never succumbed to the dubious power of any kind of talisman but was easily won over by the magic of eccentricity. The woman on the bike was sensational. But she just didn't need to hear this song. Why was 1980s

Depeche Mode still being played throughout the city, fifteen years too late? With Charlie in '88, the group had sounded novel and exotic. Her current experience was of time warp. She felt utterly pathetic, but grinned because of it.

She would be very late now and needed to get to work in a hurry. What was it that the bubble-woman had been sent to tell her? One euphoria-tinged floating shard of memory amid the debris wasn't much. But it must amount to something.

Today she would finally allow herself to remember something about this part of the city. She would admit, if only to herself, that she once earned her place here amid an expectant crowd. She had belonged to these streets on that miraculous November day, eleven years ago today. Her need to wander the city now was about regaining her balance. Maintaining a faster pace admitted the function of memory.

She did remember. She hadn't felt brave, just bored, whale-like and much too pregnant. She had taken to the streets on November 17 in 1989 with tens of thousands of students. Maybe she had attended simply because the faltering regime had not prevented it. But by the end of that day she had felt compelled to be there. She was present on the streets with friends and strangers when it mattered most. It was a kind of belonging. She had been there with Charlie, Nadja and the people who mattered most. Only today, standing here, had she finally understood the significance of that.

ELEVEN

A jarring tick tick tick was coming from somewhere above the creepy ferns by the window. The clock's hands colluded, stuck at eleven minutes to one, each ricochet more menacing than the last. Had time itself stopped moving? Pavla yawned and stretched. She would need to work through lunch to make up for her lost morning.

In spite of the cold, the cleaner had left the window open. But the communal staff room of the Philosophical Faculty reeked of mould and rancid old fucks. They were here today for no reason other than to mark out their territory and keep their pensions. Everyone and everything looked anaemic and dated. Paint peeled from the walls in dusty cocoons. Cobweb clumps tumbled as she slammed the window closed. Her nostrils twitched. She'd held on as long as she could. Dust covered everything. She sneezed helplessly, once, twice and then again.

Loud insistent talking continued around the room as though she wasn't there. Words spat, staccato. They kept time nicely with the atomic clock. No one said 'bless you,' or acknowledged her existence. She glanced around the room. There was absolutely no risk of accidental eye contact. They looked disgruntled and jaded. Where were the people her age, or even anyone under sixty? Pavla thought about her team of bright young things in London, all thrilled to be teaching ideas that excited them and moreover, still learning. A curious attitude that meant that, in all probability, what they taught actually mattered.

The talking was loud and inane. Sentences out of context, sometimes just words, lacking any thread of meaning or connection. This wasn't conversation. She was drowning in her mother tongue, that was the trouble. Here, she understood too much, more than she needed to. She longed for the feeling that came from having the world wash over her in London, English language in a variety of accents, dialects and speeds. She had loved that blissfully naive sensation that came of understanding only about eighty per cent of anything.

Keeping it together today was proving to be even more difficult than usual. Everything was such a huge effort, so much drama, everything upended

in preparation for the ridiculous happening that no one wanted, back at the squat tonight. A party was really the last thing she wanted.

What she craved was a night of dreamless sleep. A night when she didn't wake with Charlie's name caught on her lips. Being back in Prague was doing her in. She needed a night where she didn't greet his ghost walking the streets. At close range, he always morphed into someone else: just another imposter in a long line-up, each carrying the same shutdown look. Never that silly grin or nervous blink. No citrus scent. She longed for closure. Eleven years on, any kind of ending to the unresolved saga of him would be welcome.

For now, she needed to breathe. She would have to pull herself together and do her best to make sense. Coherence never came easily. Her very first seminar for the semester was at three o'clock, for faculty and graduate art history students. She rummaged through her bag. Damn. She'd left her notes from last night by the mattress. There wasn't time to go back to collect them now and they were rubbish anyway. She'd have to make do with what she could cobble together as props, piecing together the slides and photocopies from her research in London and Paris. It would be a lecture built of fragments.

The newspapers and memorabilia littering her desk only added to the sense of chaos and dread she was feeling. *Die unheimliche Frau* [Uncanny Woman] suggested one title. *Tajemství slečny Toyen* [Miss Toyen's Secret], another caption read. She wondered out loud how she would ever finish the lecture, let alone an entire biography of eccentricity, reclusiveness and unfathomability. What if her unknowable subject really was entirely nebulous?

Ambiguity and obscurity were legitimate subjects of discourse in London, but not here, where dispossessed citizens craved certainty. 'Evidence' in her current context meant pinning the butterfly thorax doused in insecticide to balsa wood, mounting the specimen, and then surrendering the long-dead thing to a tightly-closed box. Such a gruesome, dark process, all of it. She was all for thoughts living. But why was it precisely that Charlie, like all her best ideas, continually flitted in and then darted out?

A colleague seated at the next desk stopped talking to curse at Pavla, insisting that she shut up or leave. Six other cretins nodded conspiratorially. Pavla hadn't realised that she'd been speaking her thoughts out aloud. The

upside to the reprimand, of course, was the new knowledge that she wasn't invisible.

'Maybe we should all remain silent,' Pavla said. She had been wishing they would shut up since she arrived ten minutes earlier.

A few people relocated away from her. Now everyone in the room but Pavla sat around a large wooden communal table, huddled around the one light globe suspended from the ceiling. They were squinting into their books. They looked as though they belonged to a peasant scene, plucked directly from the canvas of Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*. Would these people be her only co-workers for the rest of the semester? Surely there must be younger, livelier people? She just needed to find them. They must exist.

She could stay quiet among these people for now, but what would she say in her lecture? That her favourite artist, Toyen, had managed to become one of surrealism's central women and perhaps the most enigmatic of them all? That she was uncontainable, over the course of six decades, several periods and styles, witness to the end of an Empire, the birth of national independence, Nazi rule, state socialism and exile in France? Had Toyen managed through it all to remain no man's woman? Or was this just wishful thinking?

At the start of her lecture, she planned to locate Marie Čermínová (Toyen's name at birth), the quirky, gifted sex-obsessed young painter and book illustrator, squarely within the zany clutches of the Prague avant-garde of the 1920s. Literary luminaries Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hasek would serve to centre Prague as a vital nerve cell of cultural innovation. But these and other examples were all male, so she would need to rethink their appearance. Prague would have been in party mode, Austro-Hungarian rule a legacy, game over. Toyen, like other young women, would have experienced the halcyon days of the newly invented inter-war Czechoslovak First Republic as a time of political and artistic blossoming, economic certainty, optimism and, most importantly, increased opportunity. Like the 1990s? No, so much better. Then, in a democracy born of centuries of dreaming of freedom, people weren't living at their wits' end. Česko and Slovakia were one country then, not divided. A new president had taken his American feminist wife's name as his own. Women had a place in the remaking of democracy then. The disappearing age hadn't

begun. It was a good time for the arts in Czechoslovakia. Prague and Paris were sister cities. That was back when people hadn't even begun to go missing.

She would show pictures of the rebellious Toyen, her hair bobbed when she studied at UMPRUM (The School of Applied Arts) in Prague. Toyen had steered clear of the more conventional repository for ladies, the School of Fine Arts. Her cool answer to the increasingly paranoid and hysterical fears about the imaginary threat to the gender order and of the risks of degeneration itself, was to begin to speak of herself in her mother tongue only in the masculine gender. She had begun to paint graphic orgy scenes, and then illustrated Sade's *Justine*.

By this point of the lecture, hopefully it might have become clear to the younger elements of the crowd in the room, the ones who mattered, that Toyen was both eccentric and refused to live according to outmoded customs. No family, no need of hetero economic union, only her tribe. There was that delicious audacity and salaciousness about her. Everybody loves a rebel.

Pavla was new to her students and would need to work hard to win them over. These were a new generation of critical thinkers and deserved to be given the best and most curious ideas she could put to them. She was far less concerned with appealing to the cadaverous crowd assembled at the table now. Her heart wasn't in it.

In London, Pavla had written freely and published widely, pushed herself to land journal articles and book chapters in places that counted. These were her armour, her battle protection. Her publication record preceded her; a young Czech writing widely, for diverse audiences, about a significant but forgotten Czech/French surrealist, in a variety of languages, in black and white, for the world to see. She reminded herself of this firmly now: regardless of what she did or said, and as little as they liked her, it wasn't like the university could afford to dispense with her now or anytime soon.

Also, what she was doing was genuinely novel and significant. The art world and Czechs everywhere needed to understand that Prague between the two 'World Wars' hadn't been locked away, it was at the epicentre of modernism. That shouldn't ever be forgotten.

Czech art historians hadn't written much about Toyen during state socialism. For them, Toyen had 'defected' and become an un-person. French

art historians had regarded her as too Czech (not French enough) to warrant serious attention. They thought surrealism died with World War Two, or with Breton. Where was the matrilineage in all of it? Pavla's research was her way of unraveling just one thread of the Cold War knot of tangled memory and its intricately matted web of selective forgetting. Couldn't she suture the rupture? Wasn't it de Beauvoir who had insisted that 'made' reality could always be revised, altered and improved, even if just a bit?

Pavla looked around her. The fogies in the staffroom were years away from being publishable outside this fledgling hatchery, with so little English, their reluctance for German, and their French archaic. And given their questionable alliances and complicity with the old regime, they might never be read anywhere outside of the room. It wasn't as though anyone was likely to read them in Russian.

These people had spent the last decade trying to prove they hadn't been complicit in having sold their souls to the old regime. Even the less compromised among them were hamstrung by red tape, utterly useless without *lustration* papers to say that they hadn't been doing anything evil before '89, except hiding out quietly within their own little islands of freedom. Least compromised were the dissident intellectuals, relegated to shitty jobs as window washers, trolley-car drivers and boiler room janitors. They were decent enough, even ethically driven, but their moral intactness had left them intellectually stranded. They had been sacked from their university posts in the late 1960s or 70s and the books they needed weren't in Czech yet. They had missed a generation of thinking. These days, how did these people manage to teach anything in the absence of reading? What did they do with their time? They certainly weren't spending their days publishing. She noticed her thoughts had drifted off task again. She needed to focus on the pointless bloody lecture she needed to give.

During the lecture, she would need to remember to share the dubious insights of contemporary international feminist art historians. They were important people, if largely off-target in their thinking. One writer had noted that Toyen had a 'fantastically naughty sense of humour' and 'outshone' her male counterparts in the explicitness of her depictions and examination of sex and

desire. She would omit the part about how some foreign academics with their big words were to a large extent bogus and frequently missed all that mattered.

Once Pavla had her audience in the palm of her hand, then she would be free to mess with them. In *Young Girl Who Dreams*, the female subject dreams of disembodied penises that float like insipid butterflies. The penises, she would add, are playthings, overabundant and divested of symbolic power. She thought of Charlie's penis, floating like a tiny boat in a rusty bathtub. This cynical rendering of the penis, cartoonish and silly, offers an alternative iconography of the body, a different take on the notions of desire and fetish. Erotic muse and object have shifted. The male gaze is recognised and dismissed as comic. If only it were this simple to dispense permanently with all things phallic.

But would she be able to explain this image, or would those conservative pedants miss Toyen's joke? The mostly male faculty wouldn't get her for sure. And the room attendant, wouldn't he behave like a newly castrated bull as the image of a reclining girl, dreaming of penises, was projected across the room, dust motes dancing suggestively? Predicting audience reactions was difficult. She wasn't ready to give this lecture, not here, not now. The way she was feeling at the moment, she might never be.

But she needed this work. This work, and the snack bar gig, where she put in a few nights a week for better wages than at the university, were her only chances of keeping Nadja and Milly fed. The drunks who frequented the snack bar across the road from the squat often grabbed her arse. They were harmless enough. But she knew already that she detested this rancid university pit. Maybe today's self-sacrifice was the karma card that might launch them out of the hideous squat? There was always the possibility that with some money, they might even stretch to finding a cheap apartment, just for the three of them, to rent. Containment in this room, like the overcrowded squat, was impossible. Pavla needed very badly to get the hell out.

Maybe a ten-minute nap would help her recover some distance and perspective? Lectures were always best delivered as spontaneous hallucinations. She yawned loudly, lay her head down on her desk and thought of Nadja. It felt so good to close her eyes and let her imagination take over. And yet, in the back of her mind was the thought that Toyen didn't have to contend

with the uncertainty or the irrational complexities of bottomless love that went with having a child.

She was exhausted. Sleep came quickly, greeted like a friend, long-lost, but fondly remembered.

She dreamed a bit. Getting here today had been so difficult. She'd dragged herself along the deserted corridor and slid down a banister, over the stretches where the stairs no longer existed. At the university she'd passed by ringing telephones, unlit computer screens, columns of long dead pot plants and dirty windows, noting the vacant face of the assistant to the Dean. Why had the assistant been so preoccupied reapplying iridescent cobalt blue eye shadow and teasing her permed peroxidized hair? Couldn't she just answer the ringing telephone?

In the dream landscape her lecture was starting. Ensnared behind a lectern inside a tiny, claustrophobic room, stuffed with bodies, before she had spoken, she read and registered the disinterest in their eyes. But she summoned every ounce of courage, calming the tremor in her voice. She would say everything she'd intended to say, leave only when she'd convinced herself. At other universities, this daunting seminar experience would have generated a few questions, suggestions for further reading or thinking, productive discussion followed by convivial tête-à-tête. At some point, someone might even have engaged with the ideas she was putting out.

But not here. The people in the room detested the feminist subject of her analysis even more than they disliked her androgynous appearance. No one made eye contact. Not one person seemed to have listened. A few people burped. One hid under a desk.

And yet here she was, alive. Not dismembered. She had finished speaking. The shouting and table thumping should have begun. But nothing was happening.

Something was wrong. The response had been half-hearted. Lips had barely curled in disapproval. The spirit of zealous barbarism was lacking. It was like a Sunday stroll through the local housing estate. Come to think of it, she could smell booze in the room, in addition to the stench of animals marking their territory. Desks were littered with empty glasses and bottles. Had she succeeded in flying below the radar?

To her left, she saw the Dean contentedly ogling his shimmering, clown-eyed administrative assistant, the one person who had no reason to be in the room at all. Drool was dripping from the corners of his mouth and nestling in his jowls. She wondered if he would lick the face of his assistant.

She watched as the Dean groped persistently under the table, in search of the assistant's knee. He had notes scribbled untidily across brutish knuckles. He didn't succeed in finding the knee he sought, but the assistant flinched and repositioned her chair further away from him. He looked distraught, his face taking on a hangdog look.

His wife, the Head of School, was stationed down on the floor to better observe her husband's playboy antics. She was grinning like a maniac. Her upper lip was weirdly hairy.

Pavla grinned too. The Dean was finally in trouble.

Shaken to life by the ringing phone right next to her ear, Pavla knocked the phone off the cradle and heard Milly giggling. She felt the indentions of the phone chord bevelled into her face. She listened to her good luck message, and some ridiculous story about the foreigner antics of their silly squat-mate, Čez.

She glanced up at the hammering clock. Fuck. It was three o'clock already. She grabbed her slides and props and shoved them into a paper folder, told Milly she had fallen asleep and was now screwed. She thanked her for spending the day with Nadja and said she'd be home soon. She bolted down the corridor as fast as she could and slid into a lifeless lecture theatre. It was ridiculously overcrowded. The air had gone missing.

TWELVE

From the lectern, she could see rows and rows of slouching shoulders, like thin walls of stone arranged symmetrically; her very own Stonehenge moment. There were students assembled, but also people from the faculty. They must have had reason to be here too. Pavla suspected that they must be camping out en masse here in the lecture hall to avoid having to engage with undergrad students.

She began speaking, out of breath, like she'd been thumped. Her tongue felt thick and the corner of her lip quivered a bit. The lectern felt grainy and splintered. She remembered to thank the students in the room for intending to listen. No one returned her grin. Then she remembered. In Czech language, the young people sitting here now were auditors, not students. That distinction meant a lot. No one was about to engage with her now, precisely because as students, they had never been allowed to interact with any of their teachers.

She continued. She said that Breton had once claimed that 'surrealism was born to affirm the unlimited faith in the genius of youth.' Maybe he hadn't been speaking precisely about this crew.

Of the hundred or so people in the room, only two were looking at her now. She'd been right. This wasn't going to be an easy crowd. How was it that it had felt entirely manageable teaching in London with substandard English, but here the words got stuck even though they formed so easily in her mother tongue?

She fidgeted with the button on the slide carousel. The first image: a faded version of *Spící [The Sleeper]*, 1937, the image that she loved best but suspected she understood least, came into view. A young girl holding a butterfly net, seen from behind, is gazing at an abstract landscape and into the horizon. She is faceless and the tunic she wears is hollow and brittle, ready to disintegrate. The landscape is isolated, desolate. If she is dreaming, it is a dream of emptiness and bewilderment. Pavla corrected herself. It is more nightmare than dream. If the subject is sleepwalking, she seems likely to dissolve at the edges, evaporate, or crumble at the seams. Incomplete of body, *the sleeper* is no seductress, no femme fatale, or sexy *femme enfant*. She is

ghostly, spectral, fragmented. Her trauma is visceral. Her presence is absence. She just isn't there.

She told her audience that if Toyen was intending to depict femininity, it was of the haunted and vanishing kind. If she was imagining the New Woman, she showed only her hollowness, the absent self, integrity of body fractured and gone. Perhaps the painting was self-referential after all? Pavla thought she was doing well in painting a mood. But when she looked up from the image again, she noticed that the crowd looked elsewhere. Some of them were yawning, some looked positively and bored.

Her voice faltered. If the art world sustained its interest in disintegration and disappearance long enough, she continued, Toyen's other paintings and drawings, *En Lambeaux* [In Shreds], *Dépeuplé* [Depopulated], *Poussière* [Dust], *Évanouis* [Vanished] and *Se Dispersent* [Dispersed], would be tomorrow's goldmine. Letting the words slide from her lips made her feel better. At least they were no longer locked inside. But as the implication of her words hit home, Pavla suddenly felt sick at heart. What was she doing condoning disappearance? Disappearance could never be good.

She was clammy. This wasn't the feminist politics she espoused. She noticed that she was sweating. Even her palms and top lip were moist. At least most of the people in the room were now gaping at the screen. Their discomfort was palpable. She looked into the eyes of the one student who was watching her. The student nodded nervously and tried her best to smile.

She felt braver and moved on to the next image. Toyen, androgynous and pouting, aged in her mid-twenties, clad in paint-splattered dungarees. She stands unsmiling, her hands thrust deep inside pockets, feet apart, her right shoulder propped against a wall. In the background, an open door, also covered in paint, invites the viewer to imagine the space occupied by someone enigmatic. Toyen looks pensive, uncomfortable, as if waiting for the photo to be taken, so she can get on with her life's work. She really was private. Pavla explained that the photo was taken outside Toyen's Paris studio in 1926, the year the artist visited Paris, but at a time when she still preferred to view Paris as a temporary alternative universe, rather than a home. Gradations of ephemerality are terribly important. She knew that much on a personal level.

Pavla shared her long-held suspicion, like a gift, that this image might just be the first photographic representation of Toyen in her new guise. Some time prior to 1926, the artist had discarded her birth name, Marie Čermínová, replacing it with a preferred gender-neutral pseudonym. She walked away from her old self like a snake shedding its skin.

Toyen's contemporaries had tried to decipher the circumstances of her reinvention and to claim it for themselves. The poet Jaroslav Seifert claimed to have penned her new identity on a serviette in a café, but this version of events was highly unlikely. Pavla knew that Toyen would never have accepted a soiled napkin from the hand of any man.

Pavla glanced down at the old men in the crowd. The Dean and his pack were looking explosive. The Dean's eyes flitted from the image to Pavla's short, cropped green-blue hair, or maybe her eyebrow piercing, and grimaced. Pavla noticed that some of the women of his pack were pouting.

Toyen didn't bother to explain her reasons or allow herself to be pinned down by interpretation. There was a lesson here for any ambitious, creative young Bohemian. Toyen preferred to draw and paint sexy, unnerving, haunted things. She captured the quintessence of anxiety. She left the manifestos and games to enamoured male poets and their exquisite corpses. She thought in English, *dead white men*.

Pavla showed slides of Toyen wearing men's hats and elegant suits. She quoted male Czech art historians who said that she had a strange swagger to her walk. And then she added the cool titbits. She told the story of Toyen courageously offering refuge to her second art partner, Jindřich Heisler, a non-Aryan, at large in the Nazi Protectorate. Toyen was careful to put it on the public record, that although he may have shared her apartment and creative life, he slept always in the bathtub. Pavla started to feel that she had pulled herself together. That she was doing an excellent job of describing an almost perfect trajectory of freedom. The words came fast and flowing.

After that year in Paris, when Toyen had returned to Prague, with Štýrský, the theorist Karel Teige, the poet Vítězslav Nezval, Konstantin Biebl and others, in 1934 she helped form a group of Czech surrealists, a group closely allied with the French Surrealist movement. A former anarcho-communist, Toyen recognised the revolutionary power of sex, art and dreams.

She liked to think that surrealism was key to highlighting the absurdity of bourgeois morality.

But over time, Toyen came to realise that her saucy dreams stood a better chance of survival outside of the vice-like grip of Communist dictatorship. Pavla could see that some of her audience were shaking their heads. She continued regardless. Toyen departed again for Paris in 1947, became a political refugee in 1948, and stayed.

Pavla thought some more about this as the words came out. No one can live where their dreams are unsayable. Exile is far better than accepting that your ideals just don't matter. Perhaps this last comment was pushing some buttons, but Pavla no longer cared about offending these people. They had sold out to the old régime. It was their moral compass, not hers, that was fucked.

Beneath her outward composure, Pavla was still sweating, her armpits dripping into her clothes. Could she really say that the women in Toyen's drawings and paintings were anything other than another projection of male desire, albeit a projection made by an eccentric female?

She blurted her questions at her audience. Didn't surrealism idealise 'woman' while marginalising all the real women they came across? Wasn't it indifferent to female artists and writers? With all their talk of the importance of sexual freedom, weren't they also reactionaries with misogynistic tendencies? Didn't they celebrate heterosexual love at the expense of other choices? What could be said of the apparent violence done to the female body? Didn't they negate their want of 'marvellous' muses, all those mistresses, wives and mothers, with their unrelenting predilection for the profoundly passive and insipid? Which women hadn't slept their way to the top? Didn't Breton justify his divorce to his second wife Jacqueline Lamba as entirely reasonable, on the basis that she had insisted on becoming that least womanly of creatures, an artist? Were there actually any women who didn't operate on surrealism's peripheries and fringes?

Well, there was Toyen. But as soon as Pavla had fired these questions out and tried to answer, her voice sounded weak and thin. She was done. She just couldn't crack this crowd. They weren't even interested. The only thing she had in common with her audience was a deeply held desire to get out of the room.

At this point, just as she was beginning to feel angst-ridden and furious, Pavla decided to calm herself again, by attempting to explain Toyen's legendary sex appeal. It wasn't simply that Toyen rejected marriage and reproduction more strenuously and charismatically than male surrealists. Certainly, by claiming an attraction to women, she situated herself on an imaginary altar and became the inaccessible beloved of the men who worshipped her, but who treated her like a brother. Pavla knew, but wouldn't say, that if Seifert and Nezval recalled being in love with Toyen, Paul Eluard upstaged them both by sending her love letters covered in his semen. An ancient woman in the front row was snoring. Ruminating about the politics of desire was challenging in the company of dinosaurs.

She fought hard to retain control of her lips. There must be lessons for emerging artists and students that could be learned from Toyen's success? She knew she was babbling. Maybe Toyen really did have an unusual ability to collaborate with other writers and artists. Certainly, she didn't conflate sexual availability with advantage. Maybe surrealism really was the warm and unconventional extended 'family' that approved of atypical women? Could it have been that her success came down to living outside the suffocating bounds of the conventional morality? Was it through the playful spirit of self-styled androgyny that Toyen evaded the self-alienation that came, all too often, of being female?

After her lecture, and a sprinkle of half-hearted applause from a few of the young things, an enthusiastic student zealot emerged from the dispersing throng. He held in his hands a copy of André Breton's *Toyen*, the book published in 1953 that Pavla had waited her whole life to get her hands on. It was out of print and not available in Paris or London. She reached for it and took it from him. Her fingers and eyes raced through the time-yellowed pages, savouring the chocolate-box red foil frontispiece, noting at once the thankfully transparent poem by Breton:

'...Prague, sung by Apollinaire, Prague, with the magnificent bridge flanked by statues, leading out of yesterday into always, the sign-boards, lit up from within - At the Black sun, At the Golden tree, and a host of others - the

clock whose hands, cast in the metal of desire, turns ever backwards; the street of the Alchemists; and above all else, the ferment of ideas and hopes, more intense there than anywhere else, the passionate attempt to forge poetry and revolution into one same ideal; Prague, where the gulls used to churn the waters of the Moldova to bring forth stars from the depths...what have we left of all this now? We have Toyen...'

Pavla was feeling disappointed. Breton's rant was utter bullshit. Maybe his drugs were better than hers.

But as she kept reading, she also saw this:

'...Toyen, whose noble features, reflecting both profound sensibility and adamant resistance... I never can recall without deep feeling; Toyen, with eyes like pools of light...'

In those few words, Pavla saw that her central supposition was entirely grounded. At least for Breton, the great Surrealist wizard poet, Toyen remained a foreign city, marvellous and exotic.

And that just proved what she knew. Nothing and no one was ever knowable. Not really. She shouldn't worry so much about not finding the answer to the riddle of Toyen. She had given this torturous lecture, as painful as having teeth ripped from her mouth, just to find out what she already knew. Both Toyen and Charlie were conjurers, each of them masters of mindfuck and absence.

But there was more to it than that. For Breton, like Apollinaire, Prague was the magical capital of Europe. And Breton was right, Prague *'carefully incubates all the delights of the past for the imagination.'*

All that she had known of Charlie was infatuation. What they had had was exuberant, frenzied and incandescent. What she had experienced with him was the intensity of budding, mad love, a snapshot of delirium, frozen perfect in time. If surrealism was the real functioning of thought, then Charlie was her aesthetic education, pure bliss, but mirrored, like the light in Toyen's eyes, magnificent. What had she really known about him, save for the refracted shards, facets and sharp-ended splinters?

What then was her life with Charlie? What had it been? It was as untested and hyperreal as the molten emulsion slides warmed too long on the slide carousel. Their life together was premised on becoming, the excitement of it, their strangeness to each other. As beautiful as the chance encounter of a sewing machine and an umbrella on a dissection table.

She took the book from the student, thanked him, promised to return it next week at the lecture. As she flicked the slide projector off, she hurried out of the room, not wanting to talk to anyone. She couldn't leave the university quickly enough, needing to move so badly, she almost ran. She bolted in the direction of the squat.

So, who was Charlie? Charlie was the systematic derangement of her senses, irrational, wonderful. He had offered escape from everyday absurdity, that prison of unreason. He had given her a new vantage point, a window to a big, wide world, an incomprehensibly complex universe to marvel at. No wonder she craved him, like an addict urge-surfing her drug. Her classical conditioning had not worn off still, not yet. Would she always be imprinted to him, like an animal to the first object in motion it came across?

But who, then, was she to him? Maybe she had been nothing more than Charlie's ingénue. There was no happily-ever-after in that. Is this what she had come to understand from the shitty lecture? Was absolutely nothing the sum total of all she knew?

THIRTEEN

As Pavla reached the stairwell of the apartment building, she heard laughter cascading down the stairs. She trudged up, pushed open the door and walked down the hall in the direction of the noise. Just as she had predicted, Milena and Nadja were at the kitchen corner bent over the sink, their heads thrown back. They had washed and peeled a huge pile of potatoes, their arms brown to the elbows. Neither of them shared the joke or invited Pavla to join in.

‘What’s so hilarious, kids?’ Pavla asked.

‘The sweet potatoes in Tesco’s looked so fresh and good, especially to our Aussie hero, Čez,’ Milena said and giggled again. ‘He sped down the long escalator from the perfume section so fast we couldn’t keep up. The sweet potatoes were so excellent, in fact, he felt like sketching them. We watched as he actually got out some paper and a pencil from his backpack,’ Milena said.

‘Thanks to the perfume section, he smelled delicious, he told me. And he was wearing his best jeans,’ Nadja added.

Milena winked at Nadja and said, ‘We followed just behind him down the escalator. He was getting so many stares in those tight Levis, and was relishing every leer! We saw a wrinkly ogling him. But a bunch of well-built boys looked him over too. He seemed delighted that the supermarket was so overheated; no reason at all for him to swelter in a jacket there.’

Milena threw a potato peel at Nadja and clapped her hands, happy to be done with the peeling. She grabbed a clean wet towel, pulled Nadja firmly towards her, and sat her down on her lap, gently wiping the dirt from between her skinny fingers. Nadja giggled as Milena dragged the towel like a tug-of-war, under her armpit. Pavla wondered at the ease and warmth with which Milena parented.

‘Then he shared his plan with us, while still sketching. Those picture-perfect sweet potatoes had given him an excellent idea, he told us. His favorite dish. Not Polish. Not Australian. Food from his travel adventures in Toronto. Candied yams. If he hurried, he could call his best friend Clover, in Canada, for her recipe. He told us all about her as we waited in the queue to weigh them. Clover would take time out for him, from whatever she was doing, to chat as she cooked in her flower-wallpapered kitchen, camouflaged in her daisy frock. A

girl with speckled skin, like a turkey-egg, by the sound of it, talking to him from a flowerbed. The level of detail he provided was super extensive.'

'Hang on. Don't take your shoes off yet, Muminko. We need to get some more stuff for the party. More fruit and vegetables. We were just waiting for you to get home. You took forever,' Nadja said.

Pavla wanted to sit down, or maybe take a nap. But she let Nadja take her by the hand and drag her down the stairs again. It was easier than arguing. She wrapped her scarf around her neck tighter and pulled her hoodie over her head.

Pavla, Nadja and Milena walked hand in hand, like paper people cut-outs, concertinaed, Milena's shoulder charging the crowd, down congested Mostecká Street. Pavla noticed that the cobbled laneways nearby were almost deserted, so she pulled them sideways so they could escape the madness and overcrowding and walk with greater ease.

As overwrought as Pavla felt, it was good finally to be sharing this quarter of the city with Nadja. Like it or not, it was this part of town where the scenes of her own childhood stretched wide. These were the cobblestones over which she had taken her first steps, dragged by Lada. It was here too that she had trudged with Nadja trampolining inside her, Charlie beside her, holding her hand, taking her nowhere. Like old Clarissa Dalloway, Pavla felt that walking through the Malá Stana, she was returned somehow to some place entirely knowable, like she was the one who *feels fold round her the familiar veils and the response to old devotions...* She loved and detested these winding medieval laneways in equal measure.

'So, what was so funny then, heh?' asked Pavla.

'Čez's trip to Tesco's got super complicated, as it always does. Day after day, the same torture. He always makes it to the perfume counter and all that spritzing, only to come undone downstairs in the supermarket. It's hard not to see him as a foreigner sometimes; impetuous and needy,' said Milena.

'Could we stop with the foreigner bashing. We hardly qualify as locals. We're ring-ins too now, you know?' said Pavla.

'Čez is wonderful. I like him. I like him a lot. I think he's funny when his face goes pink. Today it went properly red and shiny, like a sucked lollipop,' said Nadja.

Milena spoke next. 'Today's melodrama began when he couldn't find the button on the weighing machine for sweet potatoes. He was speaking his formal, insanely polite Czech to ask for help. You've heard him? He gets more and more prosaic and stilted when he's getting flustered. He looked to me, but I shook my head. Nadja followed my lead. She's excellent like that. So, then he summoned the shop assistant who wouldn't play either. She seemed baffled by his insistence. He asked her to go down the back of the supermarket and get the manager. The manager trundled over, grunted at him, said that there wasn't a button. Čez looked like he'd been slapped. She told him to come back next week. Big hurt eyes, pathetic, almost tearful, like an overgrown puppy.'

'Well you can't really blame him. He grew up in a place where shops aim to sell things. Here isn't exactly consumer heaven, now is it?' said Pavla.

'Yeah Mum, but it's still funny to watch him lose his shit.'

Pavla and Milena traded glances. 'Don't speak like that,' Milena said. Nadja, put out at being reprimanded, wandered ahead.

Milena giggled. 'So, here's the really good bit. Once he'd shrugged off the worst of it, he ventured over to the deli counter. He was stupid enough to interrupt the woman slicing ham. She was dour. She glared at him, not welcoming the interruption. I thought she might have been going to stop him, but no. He cleared his throat, big time, like a Czech with a lungful of phlegm. Even she looked curious. Then he got going, pointing at the cheese. He asked for *syr bez presevice*, 'cheese without chemicals,' I'm presuming he meant. Anyway, the woman's face cracked open. She said very loudly, in English, 'You find condoms at counter, in cardboard box, mister.' By the time we left Tesco's, his story seemed to have done the rounds of the supermarket. The whole staff was laughing. Even the woman handing out chocolate cinnamon almonds in the aisles was giggling as we walked by. The yogurt sample woman was trembling with laughter.'

'Why don't you help him out to avoid this everyday punishment?' said Pavla. 'It's draconian. Giving him a hand sometimes when he's struggling, it wouldn't kill you.'

'Čez has to learn for himself. We had to make fools of ourselves every day in London. Are you soft on him because his accent is like Charlie's? At least Čez speaks Czech almost.'

‘Speak for yourself about playing the fool in London. Čez might sound Aussie, but he isn’t anything like Charlie. The little I’ve seen of him, I quite like having him around. He’s definitely gay,’ said Pavla.’

‘He told me he’s bi, or maybe trans,’ said Nadja, who had wandered back, bored with being by herself.

‘How do you even know what that is?’ asked Milena and Pavla, almost in unison.

At the Lennon Wall on Grand Priory Square, they passed yet another crowd of camera-happy tourists. John beamed down benignly through round glasses from his vertical tombstone. There were poems and flowers and Beatles lyrics. Nadja traced her fingers around and around shiny silver peace symbols. ‘The Wall is Over’ she read, asking aloud what the slogan meant. *Laska/Love* was painted in big multi-coloured letters; Milena’s work most certainly - with very fresh paint. And the word ‘IMAGINE’ in Milena’s distinctive font, in cobalt blue.

‘Nice work,’ Pavla said.

‘Thanks, but it feels so strange to be able to graffiti in plain sight. This was once our wall of grievances, our covert secret. Some of the fun has gone missing. The fear and panic of getting caught. As well as the rush of getting away with it.’

This secluded Wall had been Pavla’s favourite fresco. The first rainbow had appeared here when she was younger than Nadja, on the day that must have been the week of John Lennon’s assassination. Lada and she had been sprinting to school. Pavla had glimpsed the unexpected kaleidoscope of colour splashed over the wall, briefly, as Lada tugged her away. She remembered describing what she’d seen to her classmates. Then the humiliation of teachers overhearing her and being in trouble. But the worst of it had been that no one at all had believed what she’s seen.

For a whole decade, the Wall had remained the only place in Prague for the expression of angst. Students had painted epithets to love and peace, two things the regime had tried to regulate, but missed the mark. This was the one place where acts of subversion were visceral, growing layer upon layer. It was the place of constant renewal and the overwriting, the place that Charlie had

described as 'Uluru.' Only years later in London, thanks to Google, had Pavla finally been able to understand what he'd meant; that civilisations always need new stories as well as an adaptable canvas on which to express them.

She knew that somewhere, buried among the layers of peeling paint were her own contributions from 1988. Together she and Milena had torn away a corner of a bleak autumn night to spray paint *Lennon, John! Not Lenin, Vlad. I. I.*, in shocking pink. Their act of defiance completed in a terrible hurry in that last winter of utter darkness.

And after, they had roamed the city together, arm in arm, pink paint under their nails, terrified by their stupidity but hyped by the thrill. Pavla remembered having felt wired for days after, wary of everyone and everything, unable to drift into sleep. It had been wonderful, like she was political, finally. It was on one of the days that week, still exhausted but watchful, that Charlie had turned up in the university canteen. Maybe if she'd looked carefully enough that day, the undersides of her nails would still have been fluoro pink.

Today, Pavla saw a sea of eyeless automatons, snap, snap, snapping away at the crumbling beauty of the peeling graffiti. She felt sure the tourists were impervious to any of what this place meant.

She was glad suddenly that she had never taken to London with a camera, photographing a life she couldn't fully comprehend. But then, maybe she should have done so for the sake of Nadja. And Milena too, for that matter. She had never understood why Milena had not loved London. Nadja, on the other hand, had loved it. The lions and street performers, her favourite foods, fish and chips with vinegar, duck pancakes and butter chicken. But for how long would she remember the daily texture and flavour of any of it? And why were they back in Prague for keeps? Was it cancelled visas, Lada dying, or Milena's stupid homesickness? None of these reasons seemed reason enough. She didn't want to stay, not for longer than was necessary.

As they reached the salmon-coloured footbridge near the Grand Priory Mill, Pavla noticed a weathered old woman standing just a few footsteps away, almost hidden. Her odd composure suggested she was summoning the strength to perform some act of courage or conviction. She noticed the woman glaring at the hundreds of padlocks hooked and clamped to the metal bars and barbed wire along the sides the footbridge.

Pavla had visited love locks as they had begun to appear all over Europe. She travelled long distances, going out of her way to see them. She was intrigued by them, wherever they appeared.

It seemed impossible that the charm of the setting and the lazy ease of this place could be lost on anyone, so she wondered again at the odd expression on the old woman's face. Ducks floated down the stream, the ancient water mill churned rhythmically and the traffic chatter from the nearby Charles Bridge washed over everyone. It was astonishingly lovely.

'This place is magical,' said Nadja.

'At times, it can be,' said Pavla.

Pavla had crossed the river this way often enough over the years. Even today, it was far less congested than Charles Bridge and the strange Disney-like turrets that flanked it at either end. Fewer tourists ventured this far. For locals, this was their unhurried way to other places. But the area was changing. The area called Kampa was becoming gentrified, now a sickly shrine to love and lovers as much as to sentimentality itself. The tackiness made Pavla feel slightly ill.

Pavla glanced over to read a couple of the inscriptions on particular locks: 'My Monkey,' 'You Complete Me,' 'Jiří & Katka forever.' She began to invent imaginary faces and soap opera scenarios for each one. She liked to wonder how long some of these promissory symbols had survived, which of the relationships had endured the ravages of post-communist angst or bi-cultural confusion, and which were star-crossed or successful in spite of unlikely odds. She wondered who held the keys or whether they lay submerged at the bottom of the stream, irretrievable. Some locks, it seemed, had been put there by locals, Czech-made locks bearing Czech names. Many were foreign, inscribed with names that were less predictable. These locks, invariably, looked stronger, safer, more durable. Was it silly teenagers or serious young lovers that put them there? Did the need for an audience mask some other insecurity? Why wasn't there a lock with Charlie's name and her own etched into it?

Little about the scene was novel. A pristine white wedding band had been added to one of the black metal bars. Otherwise the padlocks were largely as she remembered them from her last visit, haphazardly clustered, like

overripe grapes on an untended vine. Today the locks looked ready to take over.

The old woman was out of place. She distracted Pavla from her thoughts again. She looked like a cat ready to pounce on an unsuspecting lizard. Milena and Nadja were watching her too. They waited with the crowd, but watching her, riveted. Nadja held tight to Milena's hand and gawked, her mouth gaping slightly in confusion.

The woman's bent frame straightened and then convulsed momentarily as her wrinkled arm reached into an overcoat pocket. She retrieved something that caught a weak ray of sun. She then stepped forward, both arms raised above her head, wielding her prize. The bolt-cutters looked heavy and ancient, too heavy to control. Rather than attempting to cut them apart, she threw the weight of the metal against the locks, at once warden and executioner. With both hands she smashed open four of the padlocks and had begun smashing the fifth. Those relationships must have been cheap and expendable, nasty, Pavla thought. The woman hammered and pounded some more. More locks fell hard against the cobblestones and clattered.

The locks lay severed and broken, like people that once loved madly. The woman's red face beamed with satisfaction, more luminous now than the glint of the cutter in the sun. Her aging body moved with the vitality of someone half her age. She seemed temporarily young.

Pavla felt discomfited by the violence, but more disturbed by the woman's transformation. She felt Nadja's little body shudder in horror and nestle in closer.

The woman continued hammering away for a few more minutes, until she was spent, her pencil thin arms no longer able to wield their heavy load, her blows vague and imprecise. She rested her skull momentarily against the metal bars, then dropped the cutters back into her pocket. She stooped and shuffled away slowly. Milena and Nadja followed a few steps behind. She had returned to being small and fragile, the husk of the angry person that had moments before contained her.

Examining the site of her rampage, the broken padlocks lying like broken bodies, Pavla noticed that each was inscribed with the same two initials, P & K.

Each of the trunks had been outlined carefully with the same determined heart-shape scratch, marked by the same steady hand.

‘Scary,’ said Nadja.

‘No, just sad,’ said Milena. ‘And very strange.’

Pavla steered Nadja away from the carnage. She watched the old woman disappear into the crowd sobbing, her own lips trembling. When Nadja had grown up enough to start thinking about love, she didn’t want her associating it with misery and destruction. Even for her own sake, she wouldn’t participate in the theatre of pathetic melodrama that other people craved. She didn’t want histrionics. She had wanted big love. She had wanted a forever with Charlie, she remembered that need so clearly now. Family. She had ached for it.

FOURTEEN

‘Čerstvý jahody! No way, Nadja, said Pavla. Not at this time of year. Anyway, *‘čerstvý jahody’* might mean fresh strawberries in Czech, but in Polish, according to Čez anyway, it’s stale blueberries. We’re not in London now, but we still speak English when the meanings between languages get blurred. Prague is a stuffed-up place all of its own. Wanting anything here is useless. We can’t afford luxuries on my part-time teaching. I earn a pittance here. You’ll need to start remembering that!’

‘What sort of party doesn’t have strawberries? I want to go back to the squat. I want Milena,’ Nadja demanded. She didn’t sound petulant, just disappointed. ‘Nothing is fun without her around.’

‘Milena is buying booze for the party, you know that. So bad luck, you’ll need to stay with me for a whole ten minutes,’ Pavla said.

As Nadja looked on, Pavla negotiated the purchase of two outrageously over-priced containers of bruised strawberries. The sour vendor, forced to abandon the warmth of his blanket, asked if she was insane. His gloved hands closed in over her coins all the same. Then he handed her a third container. ‘Your little girl, she should be speaking the mother tongue,’ he said in ungrammatical Czech.

‘That would be taking eccentricity much too far,’ said Pavla. She looked so serious that Nadja laughed.

Pavla handed the strawberries in their bag to Nadja. She put her arm around Nadja’s shoulder and pulled her in towards her armpit. ‘Sorry to be an old grump on your birthday.’ And she thought to herself, I have absolutely no idea what we’re doing here, in this miserable place, living among strays. ‘I just wish we didn’t have to go through the farce of this party tonight. It’s been a huge week and I’m exhausted. We’ll hardly know anyone.’

‘That’s exactly why we’re having the party, Muminko. It’s so we don’t have to be strangers anymore. This is our home now. We have to make it work for us. That’s what Milena said. I like it here. This is a fairyland with snow on top. What’s not to like?’

‘The way I see it, sometimes remaining a stranger is safer and better. Just not when you’re eleven, I guess. But this decade of democracy debacle is

ludicrous. Democracy still hasn't arrived here yet. Even Milena would agree with that. So, my problem with today is that I really have no idea what we're celebrating. Except, of course, Tinkerbell's birthday.'

'Relax Muminko. The party is going to be awesome. You overthink everything. Let's get some more good stuff. How about grapes and raspberries?'

'Yep, let's go crazy,' said Pavla. She knew she really shouldn't be spending the majority of her pay on food. She should be putting it aside for rent, so they could escape the squat and Vlasta, sooner rather than later.

Pavla let Nadja choose more fruit and vegetables, all the things she liked best from the market. Then they continued walking towards the bakery. On their way, they passed a stall that sold cheap and nasty cackling witches on broomsticks. Tourists clapped their hands like performing seals, and more witches cackled. It was hideous. Pavla thought of the organic wholefoods in Old Spitalfields market. She missed civilisation, as well as civility.

The next stall was even more depressing. Overhead a hand-made sign read 'Dead People's Stuff.' The stallholder had made a speaker from a rolled-up newspaper. '*Find out how the government is spending up big, with your money, while you're out working,*' he ranted. Pavla thought about this. There was no evidence to suggest that the local government had spent anything at all since she'd left in '89. The city was a ruin. Nadja stood watching him, big eyed, until Pavla pulled her away. At the next stall, which seemed not to even bother with the pretence of offerings goods for sale, the stallholder was shouting '*This time around, a successful epidemic will eradicate superfluous human life. You just wait. It's inevitable. Find yourself a ticket off the planet.*'

'Happy citizens. Such delight!' said Pavla.

'You're weird, Muminko!'

'The cage is deep and wide' said Pavla. 'Maybe things will feel more fathomable at the bakery. Hopefully, we might see bread, something recognisable. Realistically, today can't get any stranger.'

Before they had trudged back up the stairs to the flat, with their elasticised bags brimming with fruit and bread, they heard music blaring. As they walked through the open door, they were pummeled by the stench of

sweat. Amps, leather, fat men and guitars took up most of the space in the front of the room. It seemed to be a slow rendition of *A Perfect Day* that the band were attempting. Highly appropriate, thought Pavla. It sounded like the tortured purr of a dying cat.

Pavla opened the windows, letting the cold seep in. It smelled less rank, but the sound didn't dissipate.

'Close the fucking windows, Princess,' the keyboard player yelled.

'Only when you guys invest in some deodorant,' Pavla said.

'Meet the bros,' said Čez. 'Aren't they awesome?'

'You must be joking,' said Pavla. The look on his face said he wasn't.

'Hey, weren't you Charlie's chick back in the day?' the lead guitar yelled over the music. 'He used to play bass and sing for us. He was a legend. He could sing *Heroes*, the Bowie cover, just like Dave Gahan.'

'She was. That's her. Far out. The kid looks just like him,' the keyboard player screamed over the noise. 'That curly hair. It's a mop. Just like his.'

Pavla had nothing to say, but felt her throat tighten. She kept her legs moving, wishing she could leave for the night and not ever come back.

'Have you caught up with Charlie lately?' she asked, trying to sound casual, when the song ended.

The men just shrugged and started playing again.

When she reached the kitchen corner, she saw Milena mixing lime juice and garlic through some avocado. The potatoes had disappeared into the oven. Vlasta sat on the bench watching, poised like a vulture. Next to her, there were twenty or so vodka bottle necks protruding from an ice-filled garbage tin.

'Don't ever say I don't contribute,' Vlasta said in Czech.

'You may have noticed that I rarely find reason to speak with you at all,' Pavla replied in English as she turned the tap for a glass of water.

'Stop!' demanded Milena. 'Let's just try and have a good night.' She handed both Pavla and Vlasta a mango daiquiri. She reached for her own glass, took a large mouthful of her own cocktail and said, 'Nazdravi Vlasto!, Cheers Pavla!'

Pavla gulped down her water then took a sip of the cocktail. It was perfectly made. Her hands were trembling. She took her drink over to the table and sipped again while slicing through some long bread rolls. She noticed that

their texture was disappointing. She looked for Nadja and saw that she was eyeing off the bottles of lemonade.'

'Go for it,' Pavla said. 'Today is your lucky day. But only one, it's all sugar. Now come and help me make the *clebičky*.' She wanted to keep Nadja close. She wanted her not to have to answer questions from strangers that might wound her, pointless questions with no answers.

'Help you make what?' Nadja asked.

Pavla looked puzzled. 'Little open sandwiches, the ones you would know about from the bakery today, if you opened your eyes or bothered to read the labels.'

'Oh, those things with ham and egg and a bucket of mayo. They look disgusting.'

'The egg ones are delicious when they're fresh,' said Milena. 'You'd like them.'

Nadja tried a slice of bread that Pavla had just prepared, putting the pickle and cabbage back on the table, but scoffing the rest.

'Not bad,' she said, as she reached for a whole egg and dipped it in the jar of homemade mayonnaise.

'So, now you can help me with these. Not with that blunt knife, use the egg slicer. OK, so that one had a crash landing. No big deal. Hand it over. I'll eat it, still haven't had lunch. Maybe I'll slice the eggs and pickles, and you can begin the assembly.'

'What, so you're preparing food now, Pavla?' said Vlasta. 'The lofty academic plays hausfrau. Getting into the swing of things, are we? Breadcrumbs in the slum? Perhaps Charlie's heard you and Nadja are in town? He might just take you by the hand on bended knee? Beg your forgiveness? Better late than never... By the way Milena, this mango thingy is disgusting.'

Milena glared at Vlasta. Pavla wasn't sure whether it was the insult directed at herself or at the mango daiquiri that seemed to get Milena so upset. Pavla watched as Milena's chin quivered and tears sprang to her eyes. Her reaction was certainly unsettling. There seemed more to her exchange with Vlasta than Pavla wanted to understand.

'Are you talking about my dad?' said Nadja.

'If that's what someone who does a runner before you're even hatched is called, then I guess he's the one,' said Vlasta. Before Milena could say anything, Vlasta stomped out of the room and down the corridor towards the open door, stopping only when one of her stiletto heels got wedged in the parquet floor.

'That daddy of yours. He's an absolute winner,' she hissed, over her shoulder.

'She doesn't know your dad like we do, honey. There was a lot to like. A bit quirky, like you, but far better than most men, that's for sure,' soothed Milena, still sobbing.

'Fuck, I hate her. Tell me what there is to like?' asked Pavla. She felt the weight of Milena's recrimination. Milena always hated it when she swore around Nadja. But Milena didn't react.

'Vlasta's letting us stay here. She's the reason we currently have a roof over our heads. She minds this space during the day. Without her here, someone would make off with the clothes we brought with us from London. We'd never replace them.'

'So, she's the bulldog who frightens people away? That's her one claim to fame, over the course of a decade?'

'Yep. She's the reason we have somewhere to sleep.'

'What's going on with her and you? What's the big secret?' asked Pavla.

'There's no secret. But...'

'But what?'

'She said she'd heard something about Charlie on the grapevine, but she wouldn't say what.'

'So, he's alive then!'

'We know that's incredibly unlikely, Pavla. And that's not at all what I said.'

FIFTEEN

Much too soon, the party guests began to clatter up the stairs. Pavla watched from the end of the hall as they trickled slowly through the narrow doorway of the apartment, couples, groups and a few loners, most carrying bottles, but some clutching at tiny bags of pills or phials. One stranger in a half-length duffel coat carried with him an entire cannabis plant.

Pavla didn't need emotional triggers. She longed to retrieve her mattress and pillow, tucked away inside the cupboard, wishing she could smell their funky mattress stench, and just lie down and get some sleep. She pictured them all, six mattresses, all rolled up on their ends, wrapped in duvets. They were waiting for her, exquisite corpses, grey with age, infused with the smell of cheap cigarettes, damp boots and sweat. She imagined them sighing, falling over themselves. She imagined herself, folded like paper, widthwise and lengthwise, tucked away, in communion with them, in their misguided attempt to stay vertical.

At least the band had finally taken a break. Pavla heard Nadja greet each and every stray at the door. She was much too enthusiastic. Most of them seemed unused to dealing with a kid and acted as though Nadja belonged to some tribe that wasn't quite human. Each of them handed over their jacket in turn, ignoring Nadja mostly, like she was nothing more than the cloakroom attendant. It was excruciating to watch. Why on earth did Nadja bother? It wasn't as though she needed the practice in English. She spoke better English than most of them.

Milena, makeup fixed and tears washed away, sailed over and introduced herself and Nadja to each person, and soon Nadja was being hugged and kissed like family, long lost and treasured. Good God, Milena knew a lot of utterly pointless people. At least Nadja looked thrilled, like she was suddenly at the centre of everything that mattered.

'Wow, Naddia, the view from up here is incrrrrredible,' Pavla heard. They must be Americans, Pavla thought.

'Ohhhh, my God! We'rrre in a posstcard. This is sooooo beautiful here.' Whiney, childlike intonation, Northern Ireland for sure. Gobsmacked, half off his face squished against the window.

Fucking Anglos and their need to state the obvious. Unfit slobbs most of them, panting, out of breath. It would be good to see them manage the five flights of stairs ten times a day, to send them out into the cold for water or bread, just for the fun of it. That might reduce the size of those beer-crawl guts. Men all ruddy and sweaty, like ham left out of the fridge too long. They reminded Pavla of the East End boys in bright pink she had passed all week on her late-night walks. Buck's-night Neanderthals in town for beer bought by the half litre, greasy food and sex, all for the price of a curry back home.

'Yes, it's really lovely,' said Milena, smiling as always, but noticeably quick to shuffle this mob in and out of the way to avoid extending the conversation.

'It's an actual Fairyland. Wait until you see the view from the balcony,' said Nadja, talking to their backs. She turned her gaze to Milena and asked her about the packets of sweets the group carried in their hands.

'They're not sweets and they're not for you,' said Milena, raising one eyebrow and turning to look directly at Pavla.

Then the smell of unclean jackets, more footsteps and words sailing up the stairs. Young Czechs filed through the door. Was it snowing outside? No, that must be the residue of last year's dandruff on their coats. The most successful business venture would most certainly be a chain of industrial dry cleaners. They would stay busy well into the next century.

Then sexy sounds wafting up, smoother, louder, more lyrical and jovial than Czech. Slovak. Footsteps louder, a faceful of 'happy birthdays!' and insistent kisses. Milena and Nadja giggling. Milena's childhood friends, frequent floor dwellers in the old life in London. Body language that was warm and big. Bear hugs that showed that they adored Nadja, just as much as they loved Milena. These mad people weren't terrible.

Nadja stood entranced with her big toothy grin. One of the arrivals, Honza, handed her a bunch of magenta tulips that he'd kept hidden behind his back.

'They're beautiful,' said Milena.

Nadja looked delighted. Katka and Jiří handed over a prettily wrapped box. Jiří grabbed Nadja, handed her to Katka who lifted her onto his back. Nadja passed the flowers to Milena and threw an arm around his neck. Her

daughter had unwittingly become part of a troupe of circus performers. They all walked towards Pavla, Nadja still holding her box in one hand. Oh, fuck, proximity! Personal space soon to be annihilated, thought Pavla.

'Pavlo, I'm so happy to see you.' More bear hugs. Pavla felt squeezed to within an inch of not breathing. Luckily Jiří still carried Nadja on his back, otherwise there would have been even less air.

'Pavlo, why so glum? It's Nadja's birthday. Congratulations! You've both made it! Our Amazon is eleven!' said Honza.

Nadja jumped down when she heard the sound of new footsteps in the hall. She dragged Milena with her.

'Yeah, It's excellent. We've made it! I'm so proud of her, for all that she is. She's feisty and brave, awesome. It's just all too much at once ...'

'You've a lot on your plate.'

'This 'freedom' crap just doesn't seem for real. Now Mum is so sick. And you know how it was, I loved our life in London and wasn't even close to being ready to give it up. I miss it. It feels like grieving.' Pavla grabbed a cigarette from Cež, who happened to be passing.

'Pavla, you don't smoke,' Cež said. 'By the way, someone left a big fat envelope for you. It's over near the sink.'

'Yes, that would be my millions in book royalties. I smoke, as of this minute, Cež,' replied Pavla as she leaned in for a light and inhaled deeply.

'Well, you are back,' continued Katka. 'And now Prague is a world city, the Left Bank of the 90s, and a great place for Nadja to learn about her roots. So much better than the grey wasteland of our childhoods, you here in Prague and us in Bratislava. Think of the stodge we used to eat back then! Think of the hideous big hair and ugly clothes on our backs!' said Katka laughing.

'Think of our teachers, neighbours, parents and friends, denouncing us for what we thought and read! Jesus and Maria, how fucking messed up was that?' laughed Jiří.

'Well, my mother didn't denounce me, that's for sure. Instead, Lada threw me out of home for incubating a tiny half-capitalist against her wishes...', Pavla giggled too. 'As it turns out, Lada was dead wrong. I didn't throw my life away. Because of Nadja, I got to study what I wanted, somewhere decent.'

‘And here she is, eleven!’ added Milena. ‘Lada adored her and did from the start. She was there from day one. She’s been incredible.’

‘It’s certainly true that any time I’ve needed her, she’s been there,’ said Pavla. ‘One day, when we’d been in London for a year or so, I told her over the phone that Nadja had tonsillitis. She left her patients sitting in her waiting room at the hospital where she works, to head to the airport with nothing but the clothes that she wore. I call that loyalty. She was awesome when it came to Nadja... She has been incredibly supportive, it’s true, I’ve be so lucky.’

‘Where is your mum tonight? I know she’s sick, but she wouldn’t want to miss Nadja’s birthday,’ asked Katka.

‘Mum can’t leave the hospital now, with no immune system. They’ve given her just a couple more weeks to live,’ said Pavla. ‘The last round of chemo was the last shot. It didn’t work.’

‘I’m so sorry. That totally sucks,’ said Jiří.

‘I’ve totally given up on rainbows. Those happy-ever-after miracles never appear where I happen to be standing.’ Pavla felt the lump in her throat and heard the tremor in her voice. She wondered if she’d had too much to drink and decided to have one more.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said Katka. ‘That must be awful, especially now you’re both on the same page, finally. But isn’t that a messed up way of looking at things, Pavla? Look at Nadja. She’s incredible, the best kid we know. We’d have one in an instant if Jiří could give birth to her clone. I’m too scared to get pregnant, I might play host organ for baby Satan.’

‘It’s the luck of the draw for any of us. We don’t get to choose the babies we have. Now come inside, out of the hallway, will you, you Slovak freaks?’ said Pavla over her shoulder, already walking ahead towards the drink bin and away from them all.

Inside, the main room was filling up. It felt almost at a human temperature for the first time she could remember. Someone had drawn a love heart through the window condensation. Lamppost light glittered through it, seeping. The thought of oranges crept in.

Pavla retreated to the kitchen bench, the place where the uneaten plate of *chlebičky* and other browning finger food sat. She saw the collection of presents for Nadja. She poured out glasses of the wine that the Slovaks had

brought and noticed they'd followed her. Milena was looking at the love heart as she handed out the glasses, then poured another for herself. The taste was sweet. Why did Slovaks insist on their sickly wine when there was excellent beer to drink? Milena sniffed the wine, proposed a toast to their health, '*Na zdraví!*' she said. She made eye contact and grinned at them serially. Milena was superstitious, believing that direct eye contact vanquished the curse of twenty years terrible sex.

'*Nádraží!*' said Pavla, then translated the word, 'train station,' for Nadja. It was her standing joke when uncomfortable. She would much prefer to accept a toast to leaving, in preference to a toast to good health, if that meant staying.

Honza, Katka and Jiří laughed.

'Lighten up Pavla. For God's sake, just a little?' Milena said.

Pavla shrugged. Next to the sink plug on the bench lay a brown envelope, stuffed to overflowing. A computer printed label read 'Pavla.'

'Is this from you clowns?' Pavla asked, picking it up.

'Not me,' said Milena.

'No, not us. By the look of the Soviet-era paper, it looks like standard university issue,' said Katka looking blankly at the others. 'Have they decided to dispense with your services to student subversion already?'

'I hope not,' Pavla said. 'Or we're seriously fucked. We won't eat.'

Just then Cež arrived with the cake. It was a huge chocolate thing, with eleven candles lit. The hum of the party in their immediate vicinity stilled. Everyone sang 'Happy Birthday' tonelessly. Some of the strangers, half drunk or stoned, looked teary.

'It's been terrific, these years of freedom,' someone slurred.

'Better for some than others, apparently,' another stray barked.

Nadja blew out the candles and sliced the cake. She hugged Cež, looked at Pavla and headed over to her little pile of presents near Pavla. She fingered each one, restacking them, marvelling at the bows and brightly coloured wrapping. She saw the envelope addressed to her mother, walked the couple of steps in her direction and handed it to Pavla.

'What's wrong with you, Nadja? What kind of kid are you? Open your last presents!' said Pavla. Nadja was still inspecting the wrapping.

Pavla opened the envelope and peered inside. She wasn't expecting mail. She saw a thick wad of unbound time-yellowed papers, photos stapled by their corners to them. She poured the contents out onto the table. They fanned out like a dirty rag of yellow, black and white.

The photo to tumble out on top was an image of someone strange and yet familiar, her younger self. She was seated cross-legged on a checked rug, with an expression no more knowing than Nadja's. The photo was taken from above, her pregnant belly filling a full quarter of the frame. She was leaning back against someone whose arms were wrapped around her, two hands, palms down, unable to meet. There he was, just chin and lips, grinning like a lunatic. Charlie! She looked at the image and passed it to Milena, her mouth half open, lips moving, words stuck.

'What the fuck is this?' said Milena, gathering up the contents of the envelope and stuffing it back inside. 'Who brought this here?' Her voice sounded panicked. She looked around the room to see who was watching.

'Let me see,' said Pavla, choking down sobs. 'I want to know what else there is.'

'How about later?' said Milena.

'How about now?' demanded Pavla, grabbing the envelope back from her. She saw that Nadja had come to stand beside her and was looking scared.

'It's OK, Nadja. Why don't you open your presents?' said Pavla.

'I want to know what's making everyone so upset,' replied Nadja.

This time, typed pages fell first. Thin paper, with indentations, double spacing, set out like the script of a play. No stage directions, no set, just two actors on an empty stage. There were places where the typist had hammered so hard that the centres of the letters 'a' and 'o' and the space between letters and some of the diacritical marks had gone missing. Pavla thumbed through a few pages as Milena looked on, bewildered.

'This isn't the time or place. Pavla, let's do this once our guests are gone?' whispered Milena, locking eyes with Pavla and almost begging.

'The file name is 'Skippy,' Milena continued slowly, her voice shaking. 'You must understand by now what this is about. I have no idea who this Pospíchal person is in the documents, but he's clearly an informant or operative of the secret police.'

Then more loudly, Milena commanded, 'Nadja really should open her gifts now.' Milena's eyes tracked Vlasta moving nearer and nearer. ~~They locked eyes and~~ Vlasta sneered. back at her.

There was a photo attached to the fourth page of the file. 'That's just Charlie with his PhD supervisor,' said Pavla, looking at an image and feeling relieved. 'He invited us for dinner a few times and gave us baby clothes. He was always arguing with Charlie. Always telling him to be more attentive. He was sleazy. But I remember he seemed to lighten up sometime early on in the pregnancy, when he found out somehow or other that my mother was Lada. I think he even invited her out on a date.' Pavla and the adults realised that Nadja was still listening and had stopped her talking.

'I saw Skippy on TV in the late 80s. They even had it dubbed into Slovak. It was so crap, more unbelievable than anything. But they could never translate that bit, how's it go, 'What's up, Skip? So they left it in English,' said Jiří, trying to lighten things up.

'Do kangaroos even actually make noises?' asked Nadja, trying to play along.

'I'm not sure. I liked Hector the emu best. And each week, we were left looking skyward. Do you think that wide blue open sky was for real, or did they doctor it all a bit?' said Jiří, still trying to distract Nadja.

'Shut up Jiří,' said Vlasta. 'Can't you see what this is? It's about Charlie, who was clearly responsible for crushing butterflies into the pavement.'

They all looked down at the page and read it.

Person- description of object 65739

SEX : Male

AGE : 20-25 years

HEIGHT : 1.83m

BUILD : Slim

HAIR : Dark brown, curly, to the shoulder, untidy and decadent

DRESS : Levi jeans (authentic)

Blue denim jacket (too thin for winter), shirt and several bulky sweaters underneath.

Doctor Martins, expensive, English, the colour of plums.

OF NOTE : Has access to fresh fruit, from Australia, by post.

Appears not to smoke.

'Yep, it's someone messing with Pavla, but it's not for real,' said Jiří.

'It looks real enough to me,' said Katka. 'That official dick, look at his shitty Commo suit. He must have been one of those fucking arseholes, working for them.'

'Everyone joined the Party then. Especially men. He probably had no say in it. He was probably just keeping his job.'

'Party membership didn't require active surveillance. Not like this,' said Katka.

'Well, sometimes it did,' said Milena.

'There must be 400 pages of this shit,' said Jiří. 'What the fuck?'

'Day one of the file begins Charlie's first day at university, the day we first met,' said Pavla.

Katka read the first page out loud as Pavla, Milena and Jiří looked on. Pavla filled her wine glass to the brim with vodka. She took a huge sip and read the page in front of her.

11.12.88

17.27 hours to 18.32 hours

Object 65739

Object arrived Ruzyně airport, carrying Australian passport and letters of introduction from University of Sydney and Consulate of Czechoslovak Socialist Republic in Canberra. Object is the son of traitorous dissidents. Photocopy of library record from University Sydney notes subject borrowed 39 books on the subject of Dialectical Materialism since 1987. Object's shoes were removed and examined by officials. Noted to be 'very high quality.'

Object collected large suitcase and caught bus to metro, took metro, consulted map and walked directly to student dormitory in Malá Strana. Person to be observed did not leave place of residence until the following morning.

12.12.88

12.13 hours 65739, 'Skippy' travelled on foot from his place of residence to the Carolinum.

12.27 hours

Object entered the student mensa without completing the necessary forms or depositing his rucksack in the cloakroom as is required. Object took a seat next to a girl, long dark hair, tied back, pretty but not feminine. Object smiled often, drugs a consideration. Other students seemed suspicious. Object spoke to girl in English, too rapidly to record conversation verbatim. She told him to slow down. Object ignored abundance of food on tray. Object ate orange, retrieved from pocket. Girl looked away. She is intrigued, perhaps with the orange. She made eye contact with object. He looked amused.

Person-description of connection to 'Skippy'

SEX : Female

AGE : 18-22 years

HEIGHT : 1.63m

BUILD : Slight

VISAGE : like a pretty boy

HAIR : Dark brown, long

DRESS : Jeans (Yugoslav)

green jacket, green shirt

black boots - east German

(Instructions - Keep close tabs on object, noted as eldest son of traitorous dissidents in exile. Investigate the object's university activities and what he is doing in Prague. Find out why object's Czech vocabulary and grammar is so poor. Investigate how object has access to oranges. Find out why object chose to sit near girl dressed in green.

Install tape recorders in mensa, perhaps under tables or in artificial flower buds on each table. Keep watch on object and girl. Find out who girl is and investigate who are her family and company).

'I can't believe they collected all this. That they were watching us all the time, even before I knew even the first thing about him,' said Pavla, slugging her vodka down. 'They knew all this, so much more than I knew. I only saw he was useless in snow and good with oranges.'

‘Charlie didn’t stand a chance,’ said Milena. ‘And neither did you. Clearly they had decided to arrest or recruit him. From day one, it was always going to be one or the other.’

‘That’s for sure,’ said Vlasta, sorting expertly through the pages. Finally, she stopped thumbing and handed Pavla two pages from the back of the pile.

The first page showed Charlie staring down the barrel of the camera lens as he talked to seven men wearing red berets. He looked exhausted. He had a hand to his forehead. They were listening attentively, leaning in, standing so close that their beanies were almost touching.

‘Why is Charlie engaging directly with the riot squad?’ asked Jiří. ‘No one talked with those evil bastards! He must have been insane.’

‘Charlie knew precisely what he was doing,’ said Vlasta. ‘He worked with them directly. Jesus, you people are thick. Who do you think led the crowd to the riot squad on Národní Street? Charlie was their plant. I took more than a hundred photos of him that day. I’d love for you to have all of them...’

‘Charlie, more than anyone in that pressure cooker, wanted the regime to last forever,’ Vlasta continued. ‘He started off shit scared, like a big baby, but then got braver and braver as the night of the protest wore on. Why do you think, Pavla, that he picked a fight with you, made it all your fault and then suggested that you go back to the dorm to rest? He knew what was brewing and didn’t want you to see it.’

‘How do you even know we fought?’ asked Pavla. ‘You’re so creepy.’ Pavla noticed that Nadja had moved away from Milena and was standing adrift, her chin quivering.

Vlasta handed a second photo of Charlie to Pavla. By now Pavla and Milena were sobbing uncontrollably. They both looked at the photo. It showed Charlie curled into a foetal position in the back of a Trabant, clutching at his ribs with one hand. Charlie’s other arm reached out over the back of the trunk, open palm extended, bitten fingernails on the stubs of cigarette stained fingers. Charlie’s long fingers. The torchlight that streamed directly into his face and mass of matted hair also caught an object in its wake. The hypodermic needle glimmered at the crease of his tourniqueted arm. Less visible, but there all the same, two drops of blood, suspended in time, dripping like ink onto the cobblestoned street.

SIXTEEN

Four hours after the party had ended, Pavla woke up on a lounge, feeling seedy. Her first thought was to get up and bolt out of there. She wondered why she had stayed and how it was that she had slept at all. Her head was spinning. She thought she might throw up.

The squat was trashed and smelled acrid. The floor was littered with cigarette butts, glasses, bottles, puke and humans. She heard the room breathing. Nadja was asleep, her head heavy, lolling in Pavla's lap. Shaking Nadja's shoulder, Pavla jostled her awake.

'We need to get out of here,' she whispered, shaking Nadja awake.

'I'm tired. I want to sleep.'

'Sorry, honey, we need to leave. So get yourself up. Let's grab your things quietly. All of them. Don't forget your birthday stash.'

'Where are we going? We live here now. That's what you said a few days ago.' Nadja yawned and squinted into the seeping light. She looked gutted.

'We're going.'

'Going where?'

'It's just super important we get moving.'

'To where? Into thin air?'

'First stop, Lada at the hospital.'

'Isn't Milena coming with us?' asked Nadja, suddenly more awake.

'No. Let's get moving.' Pavla grabbed the bottle of milk from between the windows and handed it to Nadja.

'Drink up,' she said. 'When you're done with the milk, head to the bathroom. While you're there, grab our toothbrushes and toothpaste from the sink, will you.'

'Yes, boss,' Nadja said, pouting. She drank slowly from the bottle. 'Why are you taking our stuff?' she asked, walking towards the bathroom but dragging her feet. 'Why isn't Milena coming too? I hate it when you make us do stuff without her. Without Milly it's just less fun.'

Pavla threw Nadja a look that said arguments were not going to be tolerated, all the while tearing up. She retrieved the rest of their things from the

cupboard in the hall, stuffed clothes into backpacks and then tied up mattresses, pillows and blankets with the cords from their dressing gowns.

‘Out,’ she whispered, steering Nadja towards the door.

Down the dilapidated stairs and out on to the street they went, Pavla struggling with the backpack on her back, Nadja’s bag on her front and a mattress under each armpit. They seemed to have ended up with even more stuff than they’d arrived with from London. Pavla wished they were still in London now. She found herself fantasising about eating fish and chips. She was starving and hungover and such a piss-poor vegetarian. She felt like throwing up. She needed food. But what could they possibly eat? Something greasy would help. The streets looked empty and desolate.

‘Nadja, how do you feel about smažak?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about, Maminko. But there’s nothing new in that.’

‘Smažený sýr. Smažak. Jesus, don’t you know any Czech at all?’ said Pavla, laughing in spite of herself. ‘It’s fried cheese. In a bread roll with spring onions and mayonnaise. It’s the one delicacy I missed the whole time we were in London. It’s disgusting. And delicious. You have to try it. Now’s a good time.’

‘The food here is gross. I hate everything. I hate you,’ said Nadja. ‘Why isn’t Milena with us? At least she’s normal. And what about Cež. Are we running away from him too?’

‘I guess ‘normal’ depends on your definition. I’m thinking there isn’t very much about people that we’ll ever understand. We’re not running away, we’re leaving. Now smažak, on the other hand, is simple. And excellent. You’ll love it,’ said Pavla. ‘Let’s grab the tram to Karlovo Náměstí? The cheese they sell there has always been good.’

‘Why not the metro? Aren’t we going to the hospital? It’s faster that way. Even I know that much already.’

‘Why go underground when we can take in the world of the street? There’s everything to see there, it’s frenetic, bodies moving, buildings...’

‘I hate the tram. The jackets stink.’

‘They do, that’s absolutely true,’ said Pavla, in English, as they pushed their way onto the tram. ‘They’re covered in white stuff.’

‘Dandruff. That’s what it’s called in English. You’re so weird. I never understand what you’re on about, not in any language,’ said Nadja.

‘That’s possibly just how it is between mothers and daughters?’

‘I’ll bet Lada made sense, back last century, when you were a kid.’

‘No, never. She didn’t even try, then, or ever. She was a mystery to me. Such shocking taste,’ Pavla said, half of her mouth involuntarily grinning.

‘Then why are we in Prague now?’

‘She’s my mother. I love her to bits. It’s complicated, but my love for her is bottomless. She let me work out what I wanted from life...become who I needed to be, as well as being your mother. For her, it was never just one or the other, she always insisted it needed to be both. And she was right. I understand now what she was thinking. Raising me on her own, on our own terms, must have taken a lot.’

The tram turned the corner quickly, and everyone lurched sideways, throwing Pavla and Nadja together. Pavla giggled, her head pounding and nausea kicking in. Nadja didn’t even crack a smile. ‘And now you and she, you’re all I’ve got.’

‘This is Karlovo Náměstí, our stop’ said Pavla, grabbing their stuff. ‘I feel like the Michelin Man carrying all this crap.’

‘We’ve got Milly too!’ insisted Nadja, defiantly. Pavla looked at her daughter and wondered how she would ever explain the heaving sadness in the pit of her gut.

They walked to a kiosk, the wafting smell of sausage fat almost overwhelming both of them. Pavla sat their bags and mattresses on a park bench, walked a few steps away and ordered two smažak. She returned and handed a bun in a paper napkin to Nadja. She was starving, but the sight of food made her feel ill.

‘Just as disgustingly awesome as they’re meant to be,’ Pavla said, her mouth stuffed, mayonnaise dripping from the corner of her lips, the greasy goodness already beginning to do its trick. The people moving through the park suddenly seemed less pungent and less evil.

Nadja took a bite. She looked pleased. ‘The cheese is stretchy. This is great,’ said Nadja, pulling out warm liquid dollops. ‘I suppose you’ll make me eat the green bits?’

‘Yep, the shallots are today’s nod to vegetables and healthy living.’
This time they both smiled a bit.

Inside the hospital, Lada was sleeping, snoring from time to time, each breath laboured and wheezy. She had tubes up her nose and inserted into her wrists. Pavla deposited their things in the corner and looked at the collision of red and clear lines enveloping her mother’s gaunt body. The view was more Frida Kahlo than Toyen, more visceral than cerebral; Frieda, post trolley car accident, Pavla thought. Lada would smile at Pavla’s association if she were awake. Her mother approved of Kahlo, who had shagged Trotsky in her house of blue. There were lots of different Kahlos, Pavla mused, the vivacious urban surrealist, for example, before the monobrow and moustache made her formidable.

Pavla looked out the window. Bodies slid along the streets now, feet slipping over the sludge of cigarette pitted ice, the last traces of pristine white snow vanishing.

When she looked up, the nurse was staring at Pavla accusingly, inches from her face.

‘Your mother is dying. She has only a few days left. She needs to rest now. You need to not disturb her. Those items in the corner are putrid and ridden with vermin. Over the last few months you have not been here. Why have you come only this week? You need to get your stuff and that child out of here.’

‘Greetings sweet sister. Thank you. We’ll be staying,’ said Pavla.

Nadja looked at her mother questioningly, as though she thought Pavla had misunderstood the nurse’s instructions.

‘Enough, Nadja! I get it,’ said Pavla, sobbing. Nadja gave her a sideways bear hug and she cried even harder, unable to stop. Soon Pavla felt the warm caress and slow breathing of her sleeping daughter, sprawled out across her lap.

Some time later, Lada stirred.

‘Pavla, Nadja!’ she choked. ‘You’ve made it!’

‘Yes, Lada. We’re back,’ said Pavla lifting Nadja up on to the bed and kissing her mother on the cheek. Lada smelled like antiseptic, the perfume she’d worn all my life, Pavla thought.

‘Well, thank you for coming,’ said Lada, observing the pile of things in the corner. She struggled to slide backwards in order to sit up but coughed and hacked instead. Pavla and Nadja helped her sit up against a stack of square pillows.

‘Come here, little Nadja, give Babička a hug,’ she choked. Her voice was thin and wheezy. Nadja looked terrified, but did as she had been instructed.

‘My, you’ve grown. But forgive me, Nadja, I don’t have energy much today. Pass me my handbag, while I am remembering. In drawer, bottom one, here, next to bed.’ Pavla wondered what made her mother’s English sound so broken and strange, today of all days.

Nadja retrieved the bag and handed it to Lada, looking at her mother for explanation. Lada fished around and retrieved something slowly.

‘Pavla, you look upset,’ Lada said in Czech, studying her daughter’s face. ‘Here, keys for you, before I forget,’ she said, holding them out to Pavla to take. ‘Your set, the ones you left behind in the apartment. My set is in the cutlery drawer at home for Nadja. You’ll be needing them. I won’t be leaving this dump. The flat is yours now. Brehzo doesn’t like the new neighbour who has been feeding him, so he will have kittens of happiness when he sees you both. He’s getting old and grumpy, like me...

‘I see you have your things here today, Pavlo. I’m pleased. So, that’s excellent, you’ll take Nadja to the apartment this afternoon. Have you come straight from the airport?’

Nadja looked confused. ‘No, Baba, remember we’ve come to see you every day since we got here. We had the party last night. Remember? For my birthday and November 17 celebrations.’

‘Ah, yes, now I am remembering. Happy birthday, Nadja. You’re eleven! Jesus and Maria, time is now flying. This time last year we were together in London, patting those lions on Trafalgar Square and eating fish and chips. Such a lovely day. There is little something in the drawer for you also. Middle drawer. Open carefully. No dropping. And why then didn’t I see you yesterday for your actual birthday?’

‘We came, Milly and me, but you were sleeping soundly, Baba,’ said Nadja. ‘We didn’t want to wake you.’

Pavla was sobbing loudly.

‘How was the party? Where’s Milena?’ Lada asked, looking at her daughter crying, as Nadja opened her gift. It was an art set. Expensive, beautiful, with paints and brushes of extraordinarily good quality.

‘Wow, excellent!’ said Nadja. ‘Thanks, Baba, this is awesome.’

‘I’ve some news. Photos,’ Pavla said, choking the tears back. She handed just three from the pile of photos to her mother. Lada reached over for her glasses, and put them on, her trembling fingers settling on their rim.

‘What are Charlie and Milena doing here, exactly, in this photo?’ asked Lada, examining the first image, like her life depended on it.

‘Briefing the riot squad, it seems to me. Issuing instructions,’ responded Pavla, also in Czech.

‘Yes, that’s what I make of it too. But Milena? I can’t believe for one second she was caught up in that. Not dear sweet little Milly.’

‘And yet, you’d believe it of Charlie? That comes quite easily to you, doesn’t it, Lada?’ said Pavla. She heard the reproach in her voice and took her mother’s hand in her own.

Lada gave a weary sigh. ‘Pavla, I knew things. I warned you. He was being followed. You both were. Maybe he didn’t have a choice? I’d seen him talking with terrible people I’d always steered clear of.’ She wheezed. ‘He was implicated... In that hideous web of lies and secrets. I knew more about him than I wanted to. But you wouldn’t listen. I tried to tell you. I saw him last on the streets at the *happening*, in cahoots with them, those evil reactionary bastards...’

‘You were there at the demonstration, on November 17? You were there? And you didn’t come and walk with me? It would have meant everything,’ said Pavla, shaking her head in disbelief.

‘I didn’t see you, though I looked. I saw Karel. And Milena in the crowd, and waved, later in the day. She was with that friend of hers, the angry one with the Praktica camera. I remember wondering at the time about that.’

‘Vlasta?’

‘Yes, nasty piece of work. Maybe she took these photos? I looked everywhere, hoping to see you that day. Then I reassured myself that you were probably safe back at Charlie’s, resting. It’s where you should have been. You were more than eight months pregnant after all...

‘You always told me, a woman’s only legitimate place is the revolution,’ Pavla responded smirking, a lone tear trickling down her cheek.

Pavla flinched as her mother took her hand in hers.

‘Late that afternoon, I headed to the hospital when I saw the streets were becoming bloodied. I felt old and useless and wanted to be of some assistance. It was unbearable, watching kids getting hurt. The riot squad broke all the rules of human decency. They should never have treated students like that. You were all just kids, armed with flowers, a bunch of mad hippies, not exactly dangerous.

‘As soon as I got to the hospital, they called me to help out in emergency. I dealt with scrapes and bruises, mostly. A few concussions. Then a nurse told me a young unconscious woman had gone into labour. The interns and younger doctors on duty looked panicked. Early twenties she was, they said. No ID. She’d been truncheoned. I held my breath. It couldn’t be you, no, not my Pavla. I hoped they would wheel in any other young woman on a gurney, anyone else on the planet.

‘And that’s when I saw you, for the first time in months. I broke all the rules, deciding in that very instant to treat you. You weren’t carrying ID. And I kept quiet. I couldn’t trust anyone, not enough. I gave you life, I thought to myself. No one gets to take that away. It was my duty to keep you safe, so you could live to be a mother to the dear little one inside you.’

‘So, you were there when I was born?’ asked Nadja, incredulous.

Both Lada and Pavla looked shocked that Nadja had kept pace with their conversation in Czech. Pavla wondered what else her daughter was understanding.

‘You were in such a hurry. I caught you and held you when you screamed and took your very first breath, Nadja. I was so happy you’d managed to survive. You’ve always been tenacious.’

Nadja looked confused. Her grandmother had used old-fashioned Czech words that she didn’t quite comprehend the meaning of.

‘Oh, Mother, what didn’t you tell me any of this?’ asked Pavla.

‘You wouldn’t have believed me anyway,’ said Lada. She was now staring at the image of Charlie with the needle in his arm, holding it near, careful not to let the image be seen by Nadja.

‘State sanctioned leaving?’ Lada asked in Czech, in a low whisper.

‘I guess we’ll never know,’ said Pavla. ‘I know only that we were just beginning. Everything about him seemed exotic. He was so strange and mesmerising.’

‘Milena is the surprise package in all of this,’ said Lada.

‘I must be the shittiest judge of character,’ said Pavla, continuing in Czech. ‘I can’t believe how stupid I’ve been. I misread everyone and everything.’

‘You’re not stupid. Trusting. Like your father. A painter. Quite revered in Paris these days, as I understand it. He took a big chance on me. We made you just weeks after meeting on the Pont Neuf. It was all big romance and chaos. I made sure I kept it that way. I left him at his exuberant best. Our relationship was embryonic, a perfect idea frozen in time, undiminished by the reality that we could never make it work, not in a million years of trying. I wasn’t ever sure that I believed in happy-ever-after. I’d had parents, you see...

‘He’s always wanted to meet you. You should contact him soon, before it’s too late,’ Lada insisted.

‘You stayed in touch?’ Pavla asked.

‘Well no, he managed to track us down, just recently, in spite of my best efforts to evade him. I would have told you about him, if you’d asked, he wasn’t a secret. He was just one of many things you didn’t seem interested in. In your world, there was walking and dreaming. Not so much room for the boring stuff, like listening to your mother,’ Lada laughed until she wheezed.

‘I loved him always, my heart has belonged to no one but you and him. But once we had returned to Prague, you and I, well, we were locked in.’ Lada stopped for a moment to catch her breath. She looked winded and seemed lost in thought.

‘I was distracted, Mother, dreaming of bustling city streets, teeming with moving bodies. Other cities, lives lived outside the collective fish bowl. We could have been living in Paris, and you never thought to mention it?’

'You were busy enough just dreaming yourself out of a lounge room that wasn't brown,' said Lada, rasping. You know, Pavla, it's not as though I didn't know it was ugly. The flat and our reality. Both were genuinely hideous. But I used all the Tuzex coupons I could get my hands on to buy healthy food and decent clothes for you, so you didn't ever have to go without the basics.'

'What is a Tuzex coupon?' asked Nadja, in English.

'Oh, my God, Nadja is understanding her mother tongue, after all!' said Lada, in English. She tried to clap her hands together, but the tubes wouldn't allow it. 'I knew you were a genius the minute you arrived. It's that high forehead, just like your mother's,' she continued in Czech.

'The coupons let us buy things with Western currency, goods less substandard in quality than the local versions. Your grandfather was helpful in many ways, frequently he sent me foreign currency. He's how we managed to get a washing machine and television.'

'I'd always wondered how those came about,' said Pavla.

'So, are we going to stay at your place now, Baba? Is that why we're here?'

'It would seem so,' said Pavla. 'Thanks mother.'

Lada tugged Pavla's hand, and pulled her in toward her body and sobbed in her embrace.

Pavla held her mother's hand until Lada's eyelids grew heavy and closed. Sleeping, head tilted sideways but still propped up against the pillows, she looked just as Pavla remembered her from her teenage years, nodding at the kitchen table after a long night's shift, too exhausted to find the energy to get horizontal. Pavla rearranged the pillows, tucked her mother in and kissed her forehead. Nadja stroked her grandmother's hand and left three strawberries on the bedside cabinet that she'd been carrying in a tissue in her pocket.

Walking out through the doors of the hospital, Nadja carried her backpack and one of the mattresses, clutching her mother's hand tightly.

'Should we catch the metro to Baba's?' asked Pavla. 'It's faster.'

'No, let's walk through the stinky streets,' said Nadja. 'Above ground is how you roll, crazy mother. You love stinky chaos.'

‘Let’s ditch the mattresses first,’ said Pavla, eyeing up a homeless young Roma woman who was carrying a thin child under one arm while also pushing a trolley. She went over and asked her, ‘Could you use these?’

The woman nodded her head and accepted the mattresses with enthusiasm.

‘Let’s get icecream,’ said Pavla, as they pushed onto a tram. ‘From near the Dancing House. Have you seen it, the Fred and Ginger building? You’ll love its ninety-nine concrete panels and two separate incongruous bodies. It’s like a cicada that crawled out of its own deconstructed shell.’

‘Again, no idea what you’re saying. And no, I haven’t seen it, not up close anyway. Maybe from across the river.’

‘You’re responsible for buying the ice-cream,’ as they stepped down from the tram.

‘My Czech sucks,’ whined Nadja, in her best London accent.

‘Only one way to change that. You certainly understand enough.’

When Nadja returned with two cones, both chocolate, they rested beneath the awning of the Dancing House and looked out over the river and the islands. It was much too cold for ice-cream and they both sat shivering, perched together. Pavla looked out over the city. Manes Gallery, her mecca, white and functionalist. Slovanský Island, right next to her favourite island, Střelecký, where she had spent an entire summer with Charlie. Ice chunks drifted down the river, gulls riding them, then flying back to start again, like a film reel broken.

From their vantage point on the embankment, the bare trees seemed haunted and grim, greedy fingers grabbing skywards. Even her island was deserted, except for a young couple, balanced up against a tree. She imagined them kissing and groping each other hungrily, utterly oblivious to everything.

‘Yuck,’ said Nadja, looking disgusted.

‘You might fall in love and get all sappy one day too,’ said Pavla.

‘I won’t ever be so stupid,’ said Nadja. ‘But this city, it’s alright. Magic even. It’s like walking inside a giant snow globe.’

Pavla looked at her daughter and saw her for all that she was; bright and curious. She looked at her long lashes batting, eyes like blotting paper, soaking

the city in. It occurred to her in that heartbeat, like the suddenness of love at first sight. Nadja, her daughter, was utterly marvellous.

‘Let’s go for a proper walk together, before it gets dark,’ said Pavla. ‘This is our home now.’

‘Which is? The city, or Baba’s apartment?’

‘Both,’ said Pavla.

‘But you hate the apartment. You’ve told me that always. It’s turd-coloured. That’s what you said.’

‘We’ll have to reconsider the view we take of everything. Today is new, Nadja. Today, for me, feels like a tragicomedy just ended. Yes, we’ll need to dismantle the apartment, repaint it, like the way we live. Colour bombing, it can be our project together. The flat is both a container and what is contained. It’s us, as well. I guess it will be our very own *maison trouvée*. But also, there is always the world of the street, with its own set of lungs, breathing when we can’t. It’s all about our way of seeing, our attitude, the frame, the meaning we give to all of it.

‘And you’re right about the streets, Nadja. The streets here are pure magic. I’d forgotten. From now on, it’s just you and me and the Golden City. Together, I’m thinking, you can show me what you see, with those big wide blue eyes that drink life in. We’ll do all we can to make our life here liveable, I promise us that.’

‘We’ll shake it all up. We get to live in our very own snow globe,’ added Nadja, delighted.

‘Only the city itself, the undoing of space. You and me, in the presence of absence. The city and us, we’re all that’s left moving.’

‘Once again, Pavlo, I have no clue at all what you’re talking about...’.

‘See that tree growing sideways on the island, Nadja?’ said Pavla, pointing at it. ‘The tree that looks for all the world like a hammock. Race you to it?’

‘As soon as we’re safely across the road, game on. Watch out for the trams. Come on, Nadja. Up you get. On your feet. Ready! Set! All we need to do is get going. That’s it, Nadja. Go! We’re off. Let’s get moving!’

Girl on the City Streets



November 17, 1989. Czech students offer flowers to riot police.

SURREALISM, noun, masc., Pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought. Thought dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations.

André Breton, *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*, 1924.

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Introduction

This essay invokes the notion of *flâneuserie* as a literary metaphor for the mobile urban observer, a metaphor connected with the influence of surrealism and questions of gender difference. Widely understood as a practice of walking, exploring, observing and interpreting the city, the term provides a practical and adaptable metaphor.¹ The *flâneur/flâneuse*, ‘adds new maps to the city atlas; those of social interaction but also of myth, memory, fantasy and desire.’² The essay also explores the ways in which the *flâneur/flâneuse* enacts a range of surrealist practices, by ‘wandering a city in which the past uncannily and repeatedly resurfaces in the present.’³

The setting for the movements of the *flâneur/flâneuse* are often the bustling streets of European cities. The *flâneur/flâneuse* is not simply an idler, supercilious spectator or dawdling observer of the urban crowd. Rather, *flânerie/flâneuserie* is a celebration of freedom of movement and autonomous solitude within the heady spectacle of the crowd. The *doing of flânerie/flâneuserie* is embodied, a kind of ‘tactile gaze’ that allows for both objective and subjective engagement in the flows and rhythms of the street.⁴

Flânerie, (ascribed traditionally to male subjects), mobilised as an aesthetic practice and literary device, has frequently and repeatedly enabled writers to produce a narrative of the cities they inhabit.⁵ Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin and Virginia Woolf, for example, all chose to celebrate city wandering as a way of gleaning a particular kind of urban aesthetic experience within the context of modernism. Following their lead, numerous writers have since also come to recognise *flânerie/flâneuserie* as a lens for understanding,

1 Deborah L. Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis, Women, the City and Modernity*, Oxford Uni Press, 2006, p. 41.

2 Parsons, p. 2.

3 Parsons, p. 10.

4 Rebecca Williamson, ‘Walking in the Multicultural City – The Production of Suburban Street Life in Sydney,’ in Evrick Brown and Timothy Shortell, *Walking in Cities, Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method and Practice*, Temple Uni Press, 2016, p. 26 & 27.

5 Timothy Shortell, ‘Introduction’ in Evrick Brown and Timothy Shortell (eds.), *Walking in Cities, Quotidian Mobility as Urban Theory, Method and Practice*, Temple Uni Press, 2016, p. 9.

interpreting and depicting cities undergoing change.⁶ Even in our own time, novelists continue to see *flânerie* as a ‘way of reading the street.’⁷

I choose to imagine the life of the protagonist I’m writing, Pavla, by writing her through the lens of *flâneuserie*, precisely because the *flâneur* has always been used to signify issues of changing city life, irrespective of time and place.⁸ While sauntering through the flux of bodies, encountering the vitality of the city, as well as the exclusionary and disorienting practices enacted within it, the protagonist grows and accumulates the power to transgress. Pavla needs the elbow room of the crowd, her detachment is a protection against the shocks of the city in flux. The city that she moves through is a fiction, precisely because *flânerie* is at once both a myth and an expression of imagination taking flight.

My explicit purpose, in both the novella *Saunter* and this essay, is to track the footsteps of a *flâneuse* in the making, as she traverses the meandering, shadowy laneways of late state socialism and the bustling, chaotic streets of post-revolutionary Prague. I want to see the world through her eyes, imagine the city clues that she needs to decipher and learn what she comes to know. I invoke *flâneuserie* as a lens for understanding what Pavla makes of the transition from state socialism in Czechoslovakia in 1989 and what comes next.

In our own time, as ‘consciously adventurous’ observers, women have achieved increased access to the city. *Flâneuserie* for the twenty-first century requires adaptability, boundary-crossing and fluidity. I want to imagine some of the means by which the *flâneuse* has managed to step out of bounds while moving through frenetic city streets. Her gaze signifies a kind of intellectual trespass, of daring to ask questions about women and fiction and women and history.⁹

Lauren Elkin’s *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*, has drawn attention to the fact that ‘looking, and not

6 Timothy Shortell and Evrick Brown (eds.), *Walking in the European City, Quotidian Mobility and Urban Ethnography*, Ashgate, 2014, p. 3.

7 Gail Jones, ‘Portraits from the City of Reinvention,’ *SMH (Spectrum)*, March 11-12, 2017, p. 20.

8 Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p. 16.

9 Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London*, Chatto & Windus, 2016, p. 86.

simply appearing, signals the beginning of women's freedom in the city.¹⁰ Elkin's observation that, 'as important as what the *flâneuse* sees, even more radical than this are the implications of what the walk does to her sense of self,' is astute.¹¹ The act of walking through city streets, in and of itself, is transformative. But even more significantly, the *flâneuse's* gaze is what comes to signify her presence.

In this essay, I look at *flâneuserie* explicitly as a practice of seeing, walking, exploring and interpreting the uncanny/unhomely city, in order to watch my young protagonist, initially constrained in movement, finally learn to saunter through Prague in the company of her daughter. I transpose Pavla's self-styled *flâneuserie* from the streets of late twentieth-century state socialism to the twenty-first century, post-communist, post-modern Prague, a surreal city, always in the making.

I invoke *flâneuserie* very deliberately as a practice connected with surrealism. André Breton defined surrealism in 1924 as

pure psychic automatism by which it is intended to express, either verbally or in writing, the true function of thought [...] dictated in the absence of all control exerted by reason, and outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations. By which I mean the practice of producing fantastic or incongruous imagery by means of unnatural or irrational juxtapositions.

For Breton, surrealism was the future resolution of two states – dream and reality, 'into a sort of absolute reality, a *surreality*'¹² co-implicated with the mind, the irrational, the poetic and the revolutionary.

Pavla walks the streets in a state of disoriented youthful risk averse *Kopfkino*, or 'cinema of the head.' She is a dreamer, distracted by the marvellous, compulsive beauty, trauma and the horror of its traces. Her context is built on deliberately tentative histories of the present, journalism and films, such as Wolfgang Becker's *Goodbye Lenin!* (2003) Or Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colours White* (1994).

10 Elkin, p. 220.

11 Elkin, p. 86.

12 André Breton, *Le Manifeste du Surréalisme*, 1924, excerpted in Patrick Waldberg, *Surrealism*, Thames Hudson, [1965] 1997, p. 70.

Pavla's story unfolds in free indirect style, as a means for the reader to 'inhabit juvenile confusion.'¹³ Influenced by *Mrs Dalloway* and Gail Jones' *Five Bells*, both of which are written in free indirect style, are compressed in time and examine in pointillist fragments what it feels like to think and to remember. *Saunter* also draws influence from Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, in the sense that 'action is internalized; instead of narrative progress, it pursues a calculus of hauntedness.'¹⁴ Like Jones and Michaels, I'm interested in reconstituting Woolf's project of 'excavating the spaces behind the present,' and thinking 'about time and the way it lapses into, and recedes from the present.'¹⁵

When I imagine my protagonist engaging directly in street protest on November 17, 1989, she walks unwittingly on to a vast political stage where revolutionary 'happenings' are unfolding at an unfathomable speed. She becomes part of an audacious student generation driven to speak truth to power, one of hundreds of nameless students moving within film reels, archival material and documentaries, that show young people on the streets of Prague, armed with nothing but flowers. The flowers in the hands of the students are juxtaposed with brute violence in ways that are both incongruous and disturbing. Through the act of walking, Pavla saunters into history, via streets where revolution is unfolding.

Given that 'we have so few occasions for doing the same thing at the same time [...] when we do it, we feel we belong to something bigger than us.'¹⁶ For Pavla, being present on the streets with her friends in 1989 is the moment her world changes, at the very same time that the fate of her whole nation is transformed with a kind of speed, orderliness, euphoria and optimism that was both surprising and has become the stuff of legend.¹⁷

For Pavla, *Annus mirabilis* (the year of miracles) comes as a mixed blessing. The evening of November 17 is the tipping point where Pavla's

¹³ James Wood, *How Fiction Works*, Vintage, 2008, p. 9.

¹⁴ W.S. Di Piero, 'Fossil Remains,' *New York Times*, April 20, 1997.

¹⁵ Catherine Keenan, 'Novelist Gail Jones Explores Tacky Tourist Traps,' *SMH*, (*Spectrum*), February 5, 2011, pp. 30-31.

¹⁶ Elkin, p. 188.

¹⁷ Student non-violence and police brutality inspired mass protests among city workers, and these workers brought the city and the regime to its knees in the weeks that followed.

youthful naivety and the predictable certainties of the state socialist existence she had come to detest, were eviscerated forever. It is also the moment that that her trust in Charlie was betrayed. The events of 1989 confer freedom of moment for Pavla and simultaneously the rearrangement of desire and a new kind of aloneness, choicelessness and parental limitation.

Living a very different life by the second part of the novella, Pavla is no longer simply an idler, spectator or dawdling observer of the urban crowd. Instead, she is in the process of becoming a *flâneuse*, obsessed with surrealism and returning Czech surrealism, or surrealism in daylight, to the European map. She spends her days recovering the forgotten Czech surrealist painter of the spectral, Toyen, for both art and feminism. She loves Toyen for being the chaser of images of disintegration, disorientation and dislocation and the dissolving, molten wastelands of human cruelty. On a personal level, Pavla is simultaneously pacing her way through the complication of maternal ambivalence and questions of resident exile.

The verb closest to *flâneuserie* in English is *saunter*, and hence this is the current working title of the novella. The verb, *saunter*, possesses a meandering, drifting, almost leisurely quality. A novella with this title would naturally allude to the relaxed pace and engaged manner in which the protagonist might slowly make her way through a city. However, for Pavla, sauntering functions as an ideal or aspirational state, premised on continuous, unimpeded and unfettered freedom of vision and movement. In reality, this kind of spectacular mobility is hard won and Pavla spends much of her time in search of it.

This essay frames and contextualises Pavla's trajectory through the liminal cityscape being constantly remade around her. The setting for the novella is Prague (or *Praha*, the Czech word for *threshold*). Prague makes an excellent stage for a reconstitution of the notion of the *flâneuse* and provides me, as a writer, the elbow room to explore that which my protagonist *flâneuse* sees and how she moves.

Cities, as contexts for social relationships and actions, or 'urban mindscapes,' function as important narrative spaces, invoking conflicting and

conflated attachments, memories and representations.¹⁸ Prague, like all cities, is marked by time and histories, the stuff of personal and collective memories, as well as memory contestation and forgetting.

The liminal space between the end of state socialism and what comes next is depicted as a site of indeterminacy, transience and chaos. The novella tracks the protagonist's search for a liveable intellectual 'home' and a life of her own making. It is an exploration of the kind of writing that novelist Hannah Kent has called 'speculative biography,' depicting a 'life as it might have been lived.'¹⁹ Like Kent's novels, the story arc is deliberately located 'within the realms of the plausible.' The work explores Kent's idea that

the play between fact and fiction, cannot be separated. 'Is it true? No. Is it false? No, not that either. Is it somewhere in between. An approximation. A likelihood. A work of possibility.'²⁰

On returning to her home city in November 2000, Pavla needs to relearn to 'read' her hometown city map. She is overcome with what can only be described as *Sehnsucht* – an intense and impossible longing or yearning for something far off and undefinable, perhaps the return to a past that never existed from the disorienting perspective of an uncontrollable and out of kilter present. Amid the chaos and congestion of the public holiday bustle, she observes that the last remnants of post-communist euphoria have become

18 Godela Weiss-Sussex and Franco Bianchini (eds.), *Urban Mindscapes of Europe, European Studies, An Interdisciplinary Series in European Culture, History and Politics*, Rodopi, 2006, p. 13.

19 Kent discusses the term in her PhD dissertation for Flinders University, entitled *Speculative Biographies* . . . , not yet complete. She makes reference to Margaret Atwood's essay 'In Search of Alias Grace,' in *Curious Pursuits*. However, the use of the term 'speculative' in relation to writing histories and biographies is far from new. It was used for example, in May 1966 in a paper entitled 'Should the Habsburg Empire have been Saved? An Exercise in Speculative History,' delivered by historian Robert A. Kann at the State University College of New York in Cortland (see Stanley B. Winters, 'Introduction: Robert A. Kann on "Speculative History," *Austrian History Yearbook*, 42 (2011), pp. 201-202). Literary theorists have also employed the term (see for example, Maurice Hunt, 'Bertram, the Third Earl of Southampton, and Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well*: A Speculative Psychosexual Biography,' *Exemplaria*, 21:3, pp. 319-342).

20 Hannah Kent, 'How Much Actual History Do You Need for A Historical Novel? Hannah Kent on Searching for the Life of Her Main Character,' *Literary Hub*, September 20, 2017. <https://lithub.com/how-much-actual-history-do-you-need-for-a-historical-novel/> (accessed October 2017).

gritted up and sullied, much like the cigarette ash street sludge that all too quickly replaces a fresh carpet of snow. Over the course of two days, in spite of her discomfort with return and the unwanted knowledge she acquires, she manages to negotiate a way to move through her past and into her present.

Throughout both parts of the novella, Prague is framed as an unhomey place, a dilapidated, ruined city that functions as the quintessential site of strangers. Within this depiction, the city can be viewed as both home and cage. The urban uncanny denotes the slippage or mismatch between our expectations of the city and the surprising and unsettling experiences it evokes, leaving an existential void for Pavla to make sense of, or not.

The term *Das Unheimliche* was popularised by Freud in an essay published in 1919. Although the term is most frequently (and inaccurately) translated into English as *the uncanny*, Freud had intended it to refer to unwanted return of repressed experiences, feelings, memories or ideas. *Das Unheimliche*, for Freud referred to the ‘unconcealed,’ ‘unhidden,’ or ‘un-secret,’ quite literally the ‘unhomey’ unconscious, which ought to have remained secret or hidden,²¹ but which once unleashed, leaves a residue of insecurity, foreboding and fear, a kind of disorienting urban gothic.²² The Freudian uncanny ‘is a curious combination of the familiar made strange, of repulsion and attraction,’ fragmented, disturbed and de-familiarised.²³

The city becomes uncanny ‘when it reveals itself in a new and unexpected light; when, for example, its familiar streets and buildings suddenly appear strange, even hostile.’²⁴ The urban uncanny imbues the city with a kind of power over its citizens. However, at the same time, it threatens to show us what is hidden, including the neglected and repressed parts of ourselves that can stimulate us to think and broaden our perspectives.²⁵ The uncanny city is a panic space with a breathtaking view and therefore an intriguing stage for the unfolding drama of Pavla’s *flâneusery*.

21 Lucy Huskinson, *The Urban Uncanny, A Collection of Interdisciplinary Studies*, Routledge, 2016, p. 2.

22 Weiss-Sussex and Bianchini, p. 17.

23 Huskinson, p. 3.

24 Huskinson, p. 1.

25 Huskinson, p. 7.

Flâneuser is a particularly useful metaphor for the urban observer protagonist connected with the influence of surrealism and the uncanny. *Flâneuser* for the twenty-first century requires adaptability, boundary-crossing, nomadic and fluid subjectivities. I want to locate my female protagonists, both Pavla and her daughter, Nadja, as ‘consciously adventurous’ observers with increasing access to and mobility within the city. The curiosity of their gaze is what enables their practice of becoming. The surrealist would seem a natural *flâneuse*, wandering through Prague, a city in which the past, dreams of progress and competing modernities, uncannily and repeatedly resurface in the present.²⁶

Flânerie

I begin this exploration of Pavla’s *Flâneuser* by retracing the footsteps of the *flâneur*, almost always imagined as a male subject and written into existence by male writers. A creature of capitals, he stepped into the literature, art and social criticism of the mid-nineteenth century. He did so in Paris, at a time when urban space was being redistributed under Napoleon III and his master planner, Baron Hausmann, in order to transform the medieval city into a glittering metropolis and create grand boulevards from the ruins of isolated neighbourhoods.

In the paragraphs that follow, I trace a thumbnail sketch of the literatures that provided the *flâneur* with his unequivocal imaginary foothold on the boulevards of post-revolutionary Paris and beyond. The *flâneur* (or more accurately, his mythical presence) was *in situ* by the late nineteenth century, the very moment that the city became inseparable from debates about social development and the nature of modernity,²⁷ when the largest European cities were growing at unprecedented rates from the pull of new jobs in industrial centres. The male writers who wrote the *flâneur* into existence, wrote about

²⁶ Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century, A Surrealist History*, Princeton University Press, 2013,

²⁷ Barbara Caine and Glenda Sluga, *Gendering European History, 1780-1920*, Leicester University Press, 2000, p. 136.

Paris and modernity as being entirely synonymous and in ways that showed that they were largely uninterested in questions of historical specificity.

The *flâneur's* 'early prophet' was the poet of mid-nineteenth century Paris, Charles Baudelaire.²⁸ In an essay entitled 'The Painter of Modern Life,' published in *Le Figaro* in 1863, Baudelaire famously described the *flâneur* as a new breed of urban stroller. He wasn't just any man, but an unattached single man, freely exploring the city streets and its pleasures, observing boulevards, arcades and shoppers, and gazing at women. Baudelaire's observations of the fleeting and the transitory, centre on the male observer who can reap aesthetic meaning and existential security from the spectacle of the teeming crowds.²⁹ Baudelaire's *flâneur* was 'the passionate spectator,' 'one flesh with the crowd,' for whom

it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet feel oneself everywhere to be at home; to see the world and to be the centre of the world and yet remain hidden from the world – such are a few of the slightest pleasures of those independent, passionate and impartial natures [...] The spectator is a prince and everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family.³⁰

Baudelaire is credited with drawing attention to the novel experiential possibilities opened up with the emergence of the modern city; the new experiences of space, time and sociality which were the corollary of the economic and cultural transformations and social dislocations also associated with modernisation in Europe.³¹ The stunning novelty of a new Paris, covered in dust and at the same time reinvigorated by the destruction of old social and geographical divisions, is depicted by Baudelaire in a manner that evokes

28 Janet Wolff, 'The Invisible *Flâneuse*: Women and the Literature of Modernity,' *Theory, Culture and Society*, 2 (3), 1985, p. 38.

29 Tester, p. 2.

30 Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life,' in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, translated and edited by Johnathan Mayne, Phaidon Press, 1964, p. 9.

31 Zygmunt Bauman, 'Desert Spectator' in Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p.160.

'elegiac melancholy as well as immediate pleasure that was both mournful and buoyant.'³²

Baudelaire's *flâneur* becomes knowable through what he does, while seeming not to do anything at all. He is the 'hero of modernity' precisely because of his 'ostentatious inaction' and 'detachment from the ordinary social world.'³³ With his 'psychic distance from the city and its commercial nexus' he is 'suspended from social obligation, disengaged, disinterested and dispassionate.'³⁴ The *flâneur*, is the 'perfect idler, the passionate observer,' a poet or writer 'probably at his busiest when he seems to be his laziest.'³⁵

Of course, this larger than life image of the ideal artist, who is at once 'passionate lover of crowds, and incognito, a man of the world', is both 'elaborate and impossible.'³⁶ Since Baudelaire and perhaps because of his famous and hyperbolic conflation of Paris and modernity, 'writers recast the *flâneur* in the image of their own changing conceptions of the social order and their place in it.'³⁷ According to sociologist and cultural theorist, Keith Tester, post Baudelaire;

the flâneur has been allowed, or made, to take a number of walks away from the streets and arcades of nineteenth century Paris. Not least, the figure and the activity appear regularly in the attempts of social and cultural commentators to get some grip on the nature and implications of the conditions of modernity. The flâneur has walked into the pages of the commonplace.³⁸

The *flâneur* functions as an expansive and elusive figure who can be read to represent a variety of 'wanderings,' in terms of ambulation, nationality,

32 Katherine Kramer and John Ronnie Short, 'Flânerie and the Globalizing City,' *City*, 15:3-4 (2011), p. 324.

33 Tester, p. 26.

34 Tester, p. 26.

35 Tester, p.3.

36 Griselda Pollock, *Vision and Difference, Feminism Femininity and the Histories of Art*, Routledge, 1988, p. 99.

37 Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'The Flâneur: from Spectator to Representation,' in Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p. 22.

38 Tester, p. 1.

gender, race, class and sexuality.³⁹ He is so quintessential and generic that he has become 'a social construction within discourse more than a sociological reality.'⁴⁰

His myth is worth further exploration. For Walter Benjamin, writing in the 1930s, Baudelaire was the original *flâneur* and his walking was a way of experiencing and celebrating the dynamic and sensual vitality of the modern city.⁴¹ In his notes for his *Arcades* project, *Passagen-werk*, itself a labyrinthine building site of disorienting fragments, organised into thirty-six *Konvoluten* (bundles), Benjamin attempted to 'map' the city of modernity as a 'panoramic vision.' According to theorists Kramer and Short, 'Benjamin's work is so encyclopaedic, so complicated, so unfinished and so often contradictory that it just endlessly spins itself as a source material for a variety of interpretive goals.'⁴² Benjamin's 'rag and bone shop of *flâneurie*' uses literary montage as a mode of discourse to the extent that the city becomes a 'rich archaeology of quotations, actions, addictions and evasions.'⁴³

Closer to our own time, by the mid-1980s, as the interest in the *flâneur* as the key figure of modernity resurged in popularity, partly as a metaphor to understand globalisation, cultural sociologists and critics from a range of disciplines took renewed interest in Benjamin's texts, which had recently been translated into English. Benjamin's writings remained the key source for subsequent interest in the *flâneur*. In his first version of *Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century* (1935), Benjamin noted that the 'monuments that I seek to recognize as ruins are those of *modernity itself*, or at least, to be a little more modest, of what has been constituted as modernity in the grand narratives that have been so central to the self-consciousness of the age.'⁴⁴

Benjamin's *flâneur* was to be found 'botanizing the asphalt' in the anonymous asylum provided by the crowd. As astute readers have since noted,

39 Parsons, , p. 8.

40 *Dictionary of Human Geography*, p. 156.

41 Shortell, p. 9.

42 Kramer and Short, p. 328.

43 Aritha Van Herk, 'Street Walking: The New Flâneuse in the New City', *Western Humanities Review*, 61(3), 2007, p. 23.

44 Sayer, p. 11.

he was 'the naturalist of the unnatural environment.'⁴⁵ He symbolises the privilege and freedom to move around the city observing and taking visual possession of it, but not interacting.

Significantly for this essay, Benjamin describes 'the new act of strolling' as a kind of surrealism and writes that the 'street leads the strolling person into a vanished time.'⁴⁶ Benjamin describes an urban aesthetic of overlooked everyday city landscapes, including rooftops, lightning-conductors, weathercocks and stucco work. For Benjamin, 'walking in the city is at once an encounter with modernity and with the past, with the new and unknown and also with haunting ghosts.'⁴⁷

Benjamin noted that the habitat of the bourgeoisie he was describing was in the process of being destroyed even as he was writing. His texts catalogue an altered city, struggling under the weight of bureaucratic rationalism and municipal control.⁴⁸ The site of consumption and display, 'the spectacular city,' was achieved by rapid industrialisation, urbanisation and commercialisation, requiring a vast increase in population, a speeding up of life, and the regulation of time. Benjamin's critique identifies 'phantasmorgia,' the dream world of the urban spectacle as a kind of false consciousness generated by capitalism.⁴⁹

The underside of the city panacea that Benjamin chronicles is the chaotic and bewildering ruined landscape in which his *flâneur* was deeply uncomfortable and out of place.⁵⁰ For many readers of Benjamin, the *flâneur* becomes the 'inquisitive artist (intellectual) burdened with uncertainty,' his passionate curiosity 'blended with fear and uneasiness (or anxiety) because the new reality is alien and threatening to him.'⁵¹ The *flâneur* becomes the embodiment of alienation,⁵² a symbol of uncertainty, or fragmentary and

45 Elizabeth Wilson, *The Contradiction of Culture. Cities, Culture, Women*, Sage Publications, 2000, p. 78.

46 Parsons, p. 8.

47 Parsons, p.10.

48 Shortell and Brown, *Walking in the European City*, p 3.

49 Wilson, p. 85.

50 Parsons, p. 35.

51 Stefan Morawski 'The Hopeless Game of *Flânerie*' in Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p. 183.

52 Tester, p. 77.

episodic relationships. His malaise is temporal and acute; he carries with him the problem of presence and absence.

The *flâneur* 'becomes convoluted in Benjamin's study and has many incarnations.'⁵³ Robert Musil's novel, *The Man Without Qualities*, set in Vienna, similarly examines how the *flâneur*'s movements had become out of synch within the rapidly moving modern metropolis and the ways in which he had become 'nostalgic for a slower and more intelligible world.'⁵⁴ For Balzac, for whom 'to stroll is to vegetate, to stroll is to live,' the *flâneur*'s anxiety was grounded in the forced promiscuity and potential unmanageability of the crowd.⁵⁵

Most famous of all, for Sigmund Freud, writing at roughly the time of Benjamin, the notion of '*das Unheimliche*' within cities, came to mean not just 'the unhomely,' but to function as a sign of foreboding and fear, insecurity, disorientation and the urban gothic.⁵⁶ On a hot afternoon of 'circular walking' and arriving in the same destination repeatedly via different routes in Genoa, it was the 'strangely familiar' that dis comforted Freud most.⁵⁷ For Freud, like Benjamin and other writers, the *flâneur*'s fragmentary, incomplete and 'sorrowful engagement with the melancholy of cities' produced a kind of profound ambivalence.⁵⁸ His urban landscape was both utopia and dystopia at once and the simultaneity was profoundly disturbing.⁵⁹

Feminist theorists have noted that the appearance of the *flâneur* in the literature of the turbulent metropolis of the industrial period coincided with the emergence of moralising and regulatory discourses about the social dangers wrought by the presence of women on the streets. The *flâneur* strolled the streets at a time when a generalised insecurity destabilised gender identities, to the extent that they had become both fluid and precarious, anxious and

53 Parsons, *Streetwalking the Metropolis*, p. 8.

54 Tester, p. 15.

55 Prissilla Parkhurst Ferguson, 'The flâneure on and off the streets of Paris,' in Kieth Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p. 30.

56 Weiss-Sussex and Bianchini, p. 17.

57 Nicolas Whybrow (ed.), *Performance and the Contemporary City, An Interdisciplinary Reader*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, p. 7.

58 Wilson, p. 85.

59 Wilson, p. 87.

disordered.⁶⁰ The *flâneur* and his 'disturbed glance' was the sum total of multiple sites of ambivalence. As Elizabeth Wilson noted, the *flâneur* had come to represent

not the triumph of masculine power, but its attenuation. A wanderer, he embodied the Oedipal under threat. The male gaze failed to annihilate and castrate, woman. On the contrary, anonymity annihilates him. His masculinity is unstable, caught up in the violent dislocations that characterised urbanisation.⁶¹

For a range of feminist theorists, the *flâneur* functions as a *mise-en-scène* that plays out the disintegration of the myth of masculine potency and identity on the streets. He never existed, since he was only ever the embodiment of the special blend of excitement, boredom and horror evoked in the new metropolis, and all its disintegrative effects. Within this reading, it was the *flâneur*, and not his impossible female counterpart, who was rendered invisible.⁶²

Flâneuserie

Narratives that focused on walking in cities and the theorists who read them, repeatedly left out women's experience.⁶³ Feminist scholars have looked long and hard to recover *flâneuserie* for women and have been dextrous in their adoption of the term to summon the urban experiences of women to memory.⁶⁴

Certainly, there is the masculine bias within modernism to contend with, but it's more than just that. Baudelaire's poetry, for example, denies women the power of observation, objectifying her as inanimate or as a commodity.⁶⁵ Given that by definition, the *flâneur* is what he does, suspended from social obligation, disengaged, disinterested and dispassionate, many readers have noted that 'no

60 Tester, p. 126, Wilson, p. 72.

61 Wilson, p. 88.

62 Wilson, p. 88.

63 Elkin, p. 20.

64 Teresa Gomes Rues and Usandizaga Aranzuzu, (eds.), *Inside Out, Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space*, Rodopi, 2008.

65 Parsons, p. 25.

woman is able to attain the aesthetic distance so crucial to the *flâneur's* superiority.⁶⁶

Benjamin is well aware that Baudelaire 'never once wrote a prostitute poem from the perspective of the prostitute.'⁶⁷ Less misogynistic, but problematic all the same, is Benjamin's construction of the 'stubble-and-necktie image' of the city and modernity 'as if cement demands testosterone in order to be cement.'⁶⁸ In her study of London, Lynda Nead concludes that the mythology of the male *flâneur* wrote women out of the city and obscured diverse historical practices enacted by them. This in turn obscured cultural debates about women's increasing participation in metropolitan life.⁶⁹

Written by men, woman as sexual object is present on the streets to be 'consumed' and 'enjoyed' within the commercial nexus,⁷⁰ either as prostitute or barmaid, or sometimes as a rag-picker, (the woman associated with the refuse objects of everyday life), lesbian, old hag, or as an androgynous or childless woman. Only working-class women are present, and even then, only as a recurring symbol of chaos, disorder or loss of nature. It is for so many reasons that the city has been 'habitually conceived as a male space, in which women are either repressed or disobedient marginal presences.'⁷¹

Where she was summoned into existence at all, the myth of the hysteric *flâneuse*, highly susceptible to the manipulations of consumer culture, was juxtaposed against the myth of the supremely detached and entirely rational *flâneur*.⁷² As Australian novelist Gail Jones has noted, the male *flâneur*

66 Tester, p.27.

67 Wilson, p. 85.

68 Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell, 'Reviewed Work(s): The Invisible Flâneuse? Gender, Public Space and Visual Culture in Nineteenth Century Paris by Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough; Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting by Ruth E. Iskin; Women in Impressionism; From Mythical Feminine to Modern Woman by Sidsel Maria Sondergaard,' *Woman's Art Journal*, 30 (2), Fall/Winter 2009, p. 24.

69 Ruth Iskin, 'The Pan-European Flâneuse in Fin-de-siècle Posters: Advertising Modern Women in the City,' *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 25(4) 2003, p. 334.

70 Parkhurst Ferguson, p. 28.

71 Parsons, p. 2.

72 Iskin, p. 348.

engaged in a 'circumambulation of attraction, not consumption' (he was looking, not buying), and this set him apart.⁷³

However, in reality, at the very moment when women were entering the city in greater numbers as both workers and consumers, both men and women were subject to the provocation of desire by the commodity spectacle. As recent feminist scholars have noted, the 'whole society was engaged in a sort of gigantic prostitution; everything was for sale, and the writer was one of the most prostituted of all, since he prostituted his art.'⁷⁴ Possibly, what was actually at stake in the hyperbolic construction of the hysteric *flâneuse*, was more about masculine fears than anything else. That bourgeois women might desert their homes and/or domestic duties in order to access and enjoy the delights of the modern city was as terrifying to men as women's physical presence on the streets and public life.⁷⁵

Since the 1970s, feminist theorists from a range of disciplines have engaged in an ongoing project of deconstructing the 'the masculinist myths of modernism' and recasting them as a particular and gendered set of practices and power relations, to which it is not possible to simply 'add women.'⁷⁶ These theorists highlighted that men's writing offers only a particular and limited depiction of the city, one that chronicles the transformations of the public world, the arena of the experiences of men, but not women. According to art historian Griselda Pollock, for example, what was needed was a 'feminist analysis of the founding moments of modernity and modernism, to discern its sexualized structures, to discover past resistances and differences, to examine how women producers developed alternative models for negotiating modernity and the spaces of femininity.'⁷⁷

The first efforts were clumsy. In an essay entitled 'The Invisible Flâneuse; Women and the Literature of Modernity' published in 1985, Janet

73 Gail Jones, 'The Modern Flâneur,' author talk at Sydney Writers' Festival, Sydney Dance 1, Pier 4/5, Hickson Road, Walsh Bay, Saturday 21 May 2016, 1:30 PM - 2:30 PM.

74 Wilson, p. 86.

75 Iskin, p. 348.

76 Pollock, p. 77.

77 Pollock, p. 127.

Wolff claimed emphatically that ‘there is no female equivalent of the quintessential masculine figure; there is not and could not be a female *flâneuse*.’ According to Wolff, ‘any account of life outside the public realm, of the experience of ‘the modern’ in its private manifestations⁷⁸ was ‘rendered impossible by the sexual divisions of the nineteenth century’ and the ‘ideology of woman’s place in the domestic realm.’ Baudelaire in particular is invoked to expose the ‘classic misogynist duality, of woman as idealised-but-vapid/real-and-sensual-but-detested.’⁷⁹

Close at Wolff’s heels, in a 1998 essay called ‘Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,’ Pollock noted that ‘the flâneur embodies the gaze of modernity that is both covetous and erotic.’⁸⁰ It was the ‘the imagined freedom of the voyeur,’⁸¹ that provided men with the power to compromise female virtue. Influenced by Lacan, Pollock posited that woman, captive of the male gaze and immobilised by it, was unable to lose herself in the crowd in ways that men could.⁸² Within the *flâneur*’s ‘fictive map of urban spaces,’ ‘woman is just a sign, a fiction, a confection of meanings and fantasies,’⁸³ in which the social, sexual and psychic construction of femininity is constantly produced, relegated and renegotiated.

According to Pollock, like Wolff, woman had spent her time confined by the practices and ideology of domesticity to the private sphere of home, children and servants, where she came to be defined ‘by this other, non-social space of sentiment and duty from which money and power were banished.’⁸⁴ Looking at the paintings of French female Impressionist painters, Berthe Morisot and Mary Cassatt, Pollock sought to unpack the ‘matrix of bourgeois ideology through which the social spaces of the city were reconstructed by the overlaying of the

78 Wolff, ‘The Invisible Flâneuse,’ p. 45.

79 Wolff, ‘The Invisible Flâneuse,’ p. 43.

80 Pollock, p. 94.

81 Pollock, p. 100.

82 Pollock, p. 97.

83 Pollock, pp. 100-101.

84 Pollock, p. 95.

doctrine of separate spheres on to the division of public and private which became as a result a gendered division.⁸⁵

Since the 1990s, Wolff's and Pollock's 'overly-deterministic and ahistorical'⁸⁶ depictions of simple binary 'crude accounts of strictly gendered separate spheres and static notions of respectability,⁸⁷ passivity and victimisation, have been rewritten by more nuanced studies completed within a wider range of disciplines, including film studies, urban history, literary theory, social history, cultural studies and geography. By seeking to expose the inconsistencies and contradictions that sought to omit women, by reconsidering the opportunities available to some women and by looking at differences *between* women, in terms of class, ethnicity and geography, these studies have looked to a broader set of visual, literary and historical sources, including art, fashion, journalism, design and posters, in order to show that the *flâneuse* was entirely visible on the streets of cities by the 1880s.⁸⁸ Wolff, decades later, forced to capitulate, recognised that explorations of the 'liminal space, the ambiguous situation, the unexpected moments of access' remove us from what has increasingly seemed the cul-de-sac of complaints about women's absence from (or invisibility in) the public sphere.⁸⁹

A range of feminist theorists writing more recently, including D'Souza and McDonough, have noted that a more complex reading of women and the city in the nineteenth century was prompted by 'the discovery of significantly more complex practices of women in the period,⁹⁰ as well as class and other differences. Just as the public sphere was never simple or homogenous, the private sphere was 'not a hermetically sealed container, but a living space with doors and windows standing in permanent contact with the world outside.' In this reading, the private sphere came to be reimagined, with all its complexities,

85 Pollock, p. 94.

86 Wilson, p 92.

87 James Kneale, 'Modernity, Pleasure, and the Metropolis,' *Journal of Urban History*, 28 (5), July 2002, p. 656.

88 Iskin, p. 333.

89 Janet Wolff, quoted in Teresa Gomes Rues and Usandizaga Aranzuzu, (eds.), *Inside Out, Women Negotiating, Subverting, Appropriating Public and Private Space*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2008, p. 15.

90 Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough, *The Invisible Flâneuse, Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-century Paris*, Manchester University Press, 2006, p. 1.

as both a masculine domain, as well as women's workplace.⁹¹ The private sphere was revealed to have rarely functioned as a refuge for women, especially not for the domestic servants and the women of all classes subjected to violence who found themselves trapped within it.

From this alternate vantage point, we also see an expanded view of public life, where middle and lower-middle-class women entered department stores, cinemas, restaurants, tea-rooms, railway station buffets and refreshment rooms. For example, Emile Zola's novel, *The Ladies Paradise* (1883), documents the ways in which the department store provided women of respectable classes with a socially sanctioned context by which to access the street, and to continue their 'urban promenade unmolested [...] circulating freely.'⁹² As Zola himself noted, 'it was for women that all the establishments were struggling in wild competition.'⁹³ The presence of women shoppers on the streets is documented not only by Zola, but also by Proust, Dickens and Dreiser.⁹⁴ Once the department store supplanted the arcade, women could wander the city unchaperoned. Even court records could be interrogated to show that some women turned their lack of property rights and lack of control over household budgets into opportunities for personal consumption.⁹⁵

When feminist theorists looked beyond Baudelaire and Benjamin, other texts showed that mobile women were found undertaking social and charity work in the slum districts of the East End of London,⁹⁶ while in the West End, feminine spaces for female shoppers, diners, prostitutes and feminist activists were opening up.⁹⁷ The 'poetics of gas (lighting)' opened up the night and changed the night-time city.⁹⁸ Feminist scholars continue to explore the 'non-mappable networks' of the modern city and the hidden lives of some residents,

91 Gomez Rues and Aranzuzu, p. 23.

92 Lisa Tiersten, quoted in Ruth Iskin 'The Pan-European Flâneuse in Fin-de-siècle Posters: Advertising Modern Women in the City,' *Nineteenth Century Contexts*, 25(4) 2003, p. 334.

92 Parkhurst Ferguson, p. 28., p. 335.

93 Emile Zola, quoted in Iskin, p. 334.

94 Wilson, p. 81.

95 Kneale, p. 654.

96 Parsons, p. 5.

97 Kneale, p. 648.

98 Kneale, p. 648.

such as abortionists and their clients.⁹⁹ Other writers have looked to the history of posters to see images of women browsing the bank of the Seine, or bicycling, walking, or sightseeing. They find women on trains, travelling to foreign cities, visiting Turkish bathhouses and engaging in philanthropy.¹⁰⁰ According to Ruth Iskin, for example

If we consider representations of women in the European city along with modern woman's increasingly active participation in the city, burgeoning mobility, and practices of walking, looking, and enjoying a variety of urban pleasures, then we may well conclude that feminine flânerie became integral to urban modernity by the late nineteenth century.¹⁰¹

These re-territorialisations prompted Wolff to recognise that 'simple narratives of exclusion' were inadequate, given the 'fragmenting' and 'paradoxical' 'multidimensional, shifting and contingent' spaces of the city and the hitherto invisible groups that inhabit them.¹⁰²

The debate shifted ground on other fronts too. Where once the debate was about the usefulness of Lacan and whether urban space was so fundamentally constructed by gender difference, such that women were not simply disadvantaged, but representationally excluded, or even expatriated, the debate shifted to one about whether the city as a contradictory and shifting space is one that can be appropriated by women.¹⁰³

Women have a long history of contesting masculine monopolies of public space.¹⁰⁴ Feminist demands, congresses and numerous articles published in journals throughout the 1890s brought debates on the New Woman to public attention. Women demanded much more than simple physical access to the pleasures of the modern metropolis, insisting on the right to education, to work outside of the home, to enter professions and for political rights. Speech acts of

99 Parsons, p. 227.

100 Gomez Rues and Aranzuzu, p. 23.

101 Iskin, p. 351.

102 Janet Wolff, 'Keynote: Unmapped Spaces – Gender, Generation and the City,' *Feminist Review*, 96, 2010, p. 10.

103 Wilson, p. 83.

104 Caine and Sluga, p. 140.

these kinds implied a rewriting, not only of the physical boundaries of territorial access, but also the socially engineered internal limits of feminine identities as well as the symbolic geography of the modern public sphere.¹⁰⁵

Far from having been invisible in nineteenth century discourses, woman appeared, for example, in the title for the entry of the 1866-79 edition of Larousse *Grande Dictionnaire*, as 'Flâneur, euse.' The definition - 'a person who strolls, or has the habit of strolling' - is gender neutral, while the rest of the text explicitly refers only to the flâneur¹⁰⁶ and the definition of the most exalted kind of *flânerie* was reserved for grand *flâneurs*, "who were both 'productive and fecund.'¹⁰⁷ This definition in turn influenced other languages. Even in Dutch etymology, the verb, *flaneren*, even today means to saunter or stroll.¹⁰⁸

This renewed debate prompted a growing tide of feminist writers to mine literary texts in particular, in order to highlight the instability and ambiguity of both masculine and feminine gender identities throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁰⁹ The *flâneur* is read as the quintessence and embodiment of male anxiety, and this, in and of itself, weakened the male *flâneur's* claim to his confident appropriation of the urban realm.¹¹⁰ If the *flâneuse* could never have existed, it was only because the *flâneur* had never existed either. Both were myths embedded within fictions.

It is women's fiction itself that locates women unequivocally as *flâneuse*. Elkin reminds us that there have always been women writing about cities, chronicling their lives, telling stories, taking pictures and making films.¹¹¹ Similarly, Parsons has argued that women writers were the 'consciously adventurous' observers and artists who increased their access to the city, at precisely the moment that male artists withdraw from it.¹¹² According to

105 Iskin, p. 351.

106 Iskin, p. 334.

107 Iskin, p. 348.

108 Van Herk, p. 25.

109 Janet Wolff, 'The Artist and the Flâneur; Rodin, Rilke and Gwen John in Paris,; in Keith Tester (ed.), *The Flâneur*, Routledge, 1994, p. 127.

110 D'Souza and McDonough, p. 1.

111 Lauren Elkin, 'A Tribute to Female Flâneurs : the Women Who Reclaimed Our City Streets, *The Guardian*, July 29, 2016.

112 Parsons, p. 41.

Parsons, it was through their writing that women countered women's historical exclusion from the city and appropriated the city for themselves. 'Their writing of the city *in* texts results from their walking of the city as text. They embody the surrealist notion of modernity as 'mythology in motion....'.¹¹³ It was through writing that

women were entering the city with fresh eyes, observing it from within. It is with this social influx of women as empirical observers into the city street that aesthetic, urban perception as a specifically masculine phenomenon and privilege is challenged.¹¹⁴

Virginia Woolf, 'perhaps the greatest *flâneur* of twentieth-century literature,' 'mined the streets for drama, filling her books with the people she observed', walking, shopping, working and pausing, presenting impressionistic, psychological and atmospheric images of the city. Her essay, 'Street Haunting' written in 1927, set in London, is not simply an essay about *flânerie*. Rather, it is explicit in its insistence on the possibilities afforded by *flânesery*. Woolf's urban observer is 'a central oyster of perceptiveness,' 'an enormous eye.'¹¹⁵ Street haunting, undertaken in the 'champagne brightness of the air and the sociability of the streets' as part of 'that vast republican army of anonymous trampers,' is the act that Woolf claims provided the 'difference of view' where the city becomes somewhere that we finally get to be ourselves.¹¹⁶ As Elkin has argued, Woolf 'used the streets as research,' where she wondered about people and their lives and representing 'life itself' on the page.¹¹⁷

Woolf thought deeply about the relationship between women and the city. The first words of *Mrs Dalloway*, whose very name suggests '*flâneser* incarnate,'¹¹⁸ are 'I love walking in London. Really, it's better than walking in the country.'¹¹⁹ Woolf walks alone through Piccadilly, Whitehall and the Royal

113 Parsons, p. 229.

114 Parsons, p. 6.

115 Elkin, p. 86.

116 Elkin, p. 37.

117 Elkin, 'A tribute to Female Flâners....',

118 Elkin, 'A tribute to Female Flâners....',

119 Elkin, p. 80.

Parks, alive to the possibility that they might be altered by her gaze. According to Aritha Van Herk:

The city now has the potential to be irrevocably changed by a flâneuse's presence, a presence demonstrating a different dynamic. The new flâneuse is not a mirror of the masculine loiterer. She is both habitué and visitor, both drudge of the fluorescent-lit office and demoiselle adventurer.

According to Van Herk, this is the moment at which the *flâneuse seule* becomes the intrepid transgressor, her presence, absence and observation altering the public arena enormously,' creating a 'city of her own absurdly individual imagination and experience.'¹²⁰

As Parsons has argued, the modern flânuese counter(s) women's historical exclusion from the city and women's highly self-conscious awareness of themselves as walkers and observers of the modernist city.¹²¹ In our own time, where gender roles are recognised as having been socially and culturally produced and interrogated and deconstructed on the basis of this, there is no reason to accept that female *flânuesery* is an impossibility. Elkin is right when she argues that '[the *flâneuse* does exist, whenever we have deviated from paths laid out for us, lighting out for our own territories.'¹²²

She can be found in the least likely of places. Nazgol Bagheri, for example, contends that it is possible to find 'the emancipated *flâneuse* in Tehran's Shopping Malls'¹²³ where she has a new role to play. Within the city's 'unpredictable narrative,' the *flâneuse* nomad must reinvigorate her right to *flânerie* in order to rejuvenate the city. What cities need most is a 'radical movement of women who loiter, who watch and play and ignore their cell phones and Blackberries and who, in creative and critical ways, take back the streets from their chilly transportation, their lonely isolation.'

120 Van Herk, p. 24.

121 Parsons, p. 6.

122 Elkin, p. 22

123 Nazgol Bagheri, 'The Emancipated Flâneuse in Tehran's Shopping Malls' in Evrick Brown and Timothy Shortall (eds.), *Walking in Cities: Quotidian Mobility and Urban Theory, Method and Practice*, Temple University Press, 2016.

According to Van Herk, 'in the new city, it will have to be the *flâneuse*, practitioner of contemporary creative culture, punk or alderwoman, politician or executive assistant, who offers an alternative to the old cold streets and their oblivious ways.' It will be up to her to

rescue raw and recent forms of the city from its mercantile greed, its cultural resistance. It will be up to her to invent a new grammar that gives her room to loiter and listen, watch and wander, practice focus and intensity.

Literary and theoretical readings of the urban have also been transformed by the self-conscious postmodern context, by poststructuralist theory and by a complex vision of constructed subjectivities and difference.¹²⁴ The postmodern city is 'an open and migrational one, available to female as well as male walkers of the street'¹²⁵ in which the *flâneur* 'is a kind of tourist at home, a native who feels partly homeless.'¹²⁶

As Isabel Carrera Suárez has observed, in today's transnational, global city, defined by fluidity and multiculturalism and emphatically inhabited by women and racialised subjects, different actors necessarily emerge. Contemporary postcolonial, post-diasporic texts create embodied *pedestrians*, sentient participants in the city.¹²⁷

Embodied perspectives and practices provide 'not only vivid documents of cities in transformation, but also represent the new urban imaginaries at their megalopolitan peripheries and beyond.'¹²⁸ Modern *flânerie* is immersed in labyrinths of the urban, extra-urban, inter-urban, nomadic and even diasporic, to the extent that the 'experiences of the contemporary flâneur/flâneuse would shatter Baudelaire's kaleidoscope.'¹²⁹ By becoming conscious of the invisible boundaries of the city, the *flâneuse* can challenge them.

124 Isabel Carrera Suárez, 'The Stranger Flâneuse and the Aesthetics of Pedestrianism,' *Interventions-International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 17 (6) 2015,, p. 855.

125 Parsons, p. 9.

126 Morawski, p. 184.

127 Suárez, p. 857.

128 Kramer and Short, pp. 338.

129 Kramer and Short, p. 338-9.

A female *flâneurie* - a *flâneuserie* - not only changes the way we move through space, but intervenes in the organisation of space itself. We claim the right to disturb the peace, to observe (or not observe), to occupy (or not occupy) and to organise (or disorganise) space on our own terms.¹³⁰

Most significantly, within this new reading, 'it's the gaze of the *flâneur* that makes the women who would join their ranks too visible to slip by unnoticed.'¹³¹ The *flâneuse* is a 'vigilant watcher, not so much detached as impartial, not apathetic, but unbiased in her interest.'¹³² The act of looking while walking through cities has increasingly come to be recognised as a creative strategy of resistance enacted by nomadic sexed bodies, or, at least, some sexed bodies, sometimes.

My intention is that Pavla, in reading the street and rewriting her city map, is up to this challenge. Her gaze shifts once she begins to move through the city streets accompanied by her daughter. She is fast becoming a travelling nomad lens, moving freely, all the while taking visual possession of what she sees. She is a *flâneuse* in the making. But before we can accept this, first, we need to locate her.

Meandering Prague's Surreal Liminal Landscapes

Prague has long been regarded as having been 'a part of the world in which modernity has been exactly what Charles Baudelaire said it was: *le transitoire, le fugitive, le contingent*.'¹³³ Numerous writers and artists over time, with good reason, have conceived of Prague as a moving shard within the kaleidoscope of modernity. For Franz Kafka, for example, Prague became an imaginary topography that transcends the fallacy of realism, as well as a hallucinatory version of reality that disjoints powerful fictions.¹³⁴ Contemporary Czech novelist Jáchym Topol conceives of the events of 1989 in Prague as contributing to the 'rupture of time,'¹³⁵ but this hardly seems possible.

130 Elkin, p. 288.

131 Elkin, p. 13.

132 Chrisman-Campbell, p. 24.

133 Derek Sayer, *Prague, Capital of the Twentieth Century*, p. 9.

134 Kafka Museum, Cihelná 635/2b, 118 00 Malá Strana, Prague, Czechia, viewed 2006.

135 Jáchym Topol, *City, Sister, Silver*, (trans. Alex Zucker), Catbird Press, 2000[1994].

Walter Benjamin once observed that memory functions as a type of 'scene' (*Schauplatz*) of the past, a place from which the past is constantly remade and remembered in the present.¹³⁶ When Benjamin wrote his first (1935) version of 'Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century,' he looked forward to an awakening in which 'we begin to recognize the monuments of the bourgeoisie as ruins even before they have crumbled.'¹³⁷ He was referring specifically to Hausmann's remaking of Paris for Napoleon III, but his concentration on the 'ruins' themselves are symbolic.

At the height of Czech Francophilia (from the early 1890s to mid 1910s), more than 300 buildings were knocked down in Prague and the Jewish ghettos demolished, in an extensive slum clearance and sanitation program that saw the emergence of spacious boulevards such as Pařížka ulice (Paris Street) a street of handsome townhouses that tried to emulate Hausmann's Paris.¹³⁸

In the midst of all that, in 1902, the young poet Guillaume Apollinaire (Wilhelm Kostrowitzki), aged just twenty-one, described 'the beauties and sights of Prague,' in first person reportage mode, in *Le Passant de Prague*. Within his story, a French visitor to the city encounters Ahasuerus, the 'wandering eternal Jew'¹³⁹ who has since come to be regarded as 'the quintessential modernist *flâneur*.'¹⁴⁰ Apollinaire wrote his version of *flâneury* in an age of slum clearance, perhaps as a premonition of Jewish statelessness and genocide that would follow.

Apollinaire's poem *Zone* (1913), inspired Czech surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval's *Pražský chodec* (*Prague Walker*), published in 1920, which describes the city as a prostitute with whom the narrator falls in love.¹⁴¹ Nezval coined the term 'city book' to describe the city, where there remained 'still so much to be

136 Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin, Memory, Politics, Place*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

137 Sayer, pp. 11 & 13.

138 Alfred Thomas, *Prague Palimpsest, Writing, Memory and The City*, University of Chicago Press, 2010, p. 3.

139 Sayer, p. 35.

140 Thomas, p. 13.

141 Thomas, p. 13.

read.¹⁴² It is entirely possible also that Nezval's *Prague Walker* influenced André Breton's surrealist romance, *Nadja* (1927).

Breton's sense that cities have a capacity to unravel the people who walk their streets is most clearly explored in *Nadja*. Over the course of ten days, Breton's meanderings offer a cinematic view of Paris and the beautiful and intriguing Nadja, with her fern green eyes, who possesses the capacity to bewilder the wandering protagonist, André. From their first encounter on Place Lafayette, André is infatuated with Nadja's haunting presence. Not only André, but even drunk revelers and children fall under Nadja's spell on the streets. She is depicted as fantastic, dreamlike, an obsessional presence, the disinterested functioning of thought. But Nadja is also ultimately a source of self-revelation, and once she has revealed what ought to have remained secret, she is exposed as frivolous, irresponsible, banal, and perhaps mad. She is abandoned by André and removed from the streets forever.

Breton viewed Prague as a dream world of signs and symbols, with its twisting medieval lanes and tiny nooks and crannies, declaring it 'the enchanted capital of Europe.'¹⁴³ He conceived a child there and made the city his second home until 1933. Paul Eduard similarly understood Prague as the perfect place for a surrealist *dérive* or meandering, directionless stroll, necessarily directionless because it is driven by the hope of chancing upon the marvellous hidden in the mundane. No doubt he understood that Czechs held an 'appreciation less for the marvellous than the absurd'¹⁴⁴ but this didn't seem to deter him. Post World War Two, Prague's distinct surrealist tradition endured, even once the movement was fading in Paris.¹⁴⁵ Canadian/Czech social historian Derek Sayer has claimed that when we go in search of a 'surreal world,' we should look to Prague as the capital of the twentieth century.

Surrealists suggest the need to consider the transformative effects walking has on seeing, as have a range of thinkers. For example, the act of

142 Thomas, p. 6.

143 André Breton, 'Introduction a l'oeuvre de Toyen,' in André, Breton, Jindřich Heisler and Benjamin Péret, *Toyen*, Éditions Sokolova, Paris, 1953, p. 11.

144 Sayer, p. 4 & 435.

145 Alison Frank, *Reframing Reality, the Aesthetics of the Surrealist Object in French and Czech Cinema*, Bristol, 2013.

walking through cities confers, or restores, *placeness* according to psychogeographers. A space becomes a place when, through movement, we invest it with meaning, when we see it as something to be perceived, apprehended and experienced,¹⁴⁶ when we connect it with memory and emotion.¹⁴⁷

Cities frame and embody economic, social and cultural processes and power relations. They also contain both structures and structuring qualities. Cities are both determinative and constitutive; they make us who we are, they make us what we do.¹⁴⁸ Cityscapes structure our perception, interactions and sense of wellbeing or despair, belonging or alienation.¹⁴⁹ Cities are also metaphorical structures, stimulating both memory and desire.¹⁵⁰ They get us going, moving, thinking, wanting, engaging. As Elkin has argued, borrowing from Balzac, 'the city is life itself.'¹⁵¹

Throughout central and eastern Europe, cities are the site of dynamic and often unregulated change, constantly reshaped by political, economic and social forces, as well as shifts in moral and value systems and are therefore always open to re-contextualisation and reinterpretation.¹⁵² Prague, like other cities, is enmeshed in global market forces, tentacles of global financial institutions and multinational corporations to which profits are repatriated.¹⁵³ The liminal transformation of cultural landscapes consists of multiple separations, transitions and reincorporations, expressed in political statements, everyday practices and place-memory discourses, where the changing political

146 Elkin, p. 21.

147 Andréa Průchová, 'Rereading the Monuments of the Past' in Simona Mitrouiu (ed.), *Life Writing and Politics of Memory in Eastern Europe*, Palgrave, 2015.

148 Elkin, *Flânuse, Women Walk*, p. 33.

149 Mariusz Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes of Post-Socialist Cities: Representation of Powers and Needs*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2008, p. 1.

150 Czepczynski, p. 2.

151 Elkin, p. 37.

152 Czepczynski, p. 7.

153 Jude Bloomfield, 'Researching the Urban Imaginary: Resisting the Erasure of Places', in Godela Weiss-Sussex, and Franco Bianchini (eds.), *Urban Mindscapes of Europe, European Studies, An Interdisciplinary Series in European Culture, History and Politics*, Rodopi, 2006, p. 17.

and social system implies changing reminiscences, recollections and reinterpretations of the past.¹⁵⁴

Place-memory discourses are useful when attempting to understand societies in flux.¹⁵⁵ These discourses applied to post-1989 transformations suggest that what came after 1989 was a kind of liminal state, a time of ambiguity, openness, indeterminacy and disorientation.¹⁵⁶ Logically enough, liminal times generate liminal streetscapes, some of them surreal.¹⁵⁷ Prague, like each and every street of post-communist cities is covered in layers of cultural sediment, imbued with symbolic and material references that change and morph repeatedly in complex and disorienting ways.¹⁵⁸

Prague looks, smells and feels different from other European cities. Myriad parts of the eclectic city are Medieval, Gothic, Renaissance, Romanesque, Baroque, Art Nouveau and Cubist. It is a fairyland badly in need of antipsychotic medication. To 'read' Prague is to accept that it is a city that contextualises itself and is in constant dialogue with the past, the 'West' and the future.¹⁵⁹ To this extent it remains 'a living laboratory of transforming meanings and forms.'¹⁶⁰

When cities can be understood as 'urban mindscapes,' that is, as structures of thinking, the space between the physical landscape of the city and people's visual and cultural perceptions of it, come to the fore. Michel de Certeau, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, argued that when people walk the streets of a city, they engage in illegible improvisations.¹⁶¹ The city becomes, in this way, a place of attachment and conflicting, alternative memories and

154 Mariusz Czepczynski, 'Representations and Images of 'Recent History,' the Transition of Post-Socialist Landscape Icons, in Alfrun Kliems and Marina Dmitrieva (eds.) *The Post-Socialist City, Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Imagery*, Jovis Diskurs, 2010, p. 19.

155 Alfrun Kliems, and Marina Dmitrieva (eds), *The Post-Socialist City, Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Imagery*, Jovis Diskurs, 2010, p. 19.

156 Mariusz Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 113.

157 Czepczynski, quoted in Kliems and Dmitrieva p. 17.

158 John Czaplicka, Nida Gelazis, and Blair Ruble, (eds), *Cities After the Fall of Communism – Reshaping Cultural Landscapes and European Identity*, John Hopkins University Press, 2009, p. 1.

159 Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 181.

160 Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 186.

161 Weiss-Sussex and Bianchini, p. 13.

representations, a kind of 'conceptual city.'¹⁶² There is much to recommend the conveniently elastic and eclectic construct, to continue to explore other aspects of the surrealist liminal city and to speculate about the protagonists who walk Prague's streets.

Wandering Student City

One of the core and recurring motifs explored throughout the novella is mobility/movement. We first encounter Pavla, least likely of protagonists, at a time when she is tethered to the city in the months leading up to the November 1989 student-led revolution in Prague, capital of the Czechoslovak Socialist Republic. A twenty-two-year-old fine arts student, Pavla is an aesthete, negotiating a student existence in the last days of 'really existing socialism' (really existing psychopathy, she calls it), a period of extreme regime constraint. She is a dreamy loner, hungry for both freedom and human connection. Her tastes are esoteric.

I locate Pavla among the young Czech generation growing up the 1980s who were acutely aware that the cultural and aesthetic freedoms associated with the 1968 Prague Spring had evaporated. She's discontent with and estranged from her everyday reality and determined to imagine a life less constricted than the one she is living. Life in Prague feels insufferable, limiting and claustrophobic.

Seen through Pavla's eyes, not only can state socialism be blamed for the moral, spiritual, ecological, economic and political malaise, but even worse, it's the very thing limiting her access to the ideas that might prove liberating. As a student of art history, Surrealism, surrealist artists and the histories of Czech and French surrealisms, are her imagined islands of freedom. But Pavla is unable to study surrealism, or the Czech surrealist painter Toyen that she obsesses over. She can't read the books she idolises, including Breton's 1928 classic, *Nadja*, or at least not openly. She'd do almost anything to leave for Paris or London to study, but travel to Western democracies isn't permitted. She

¹⁶² Weiss-Sussex and Bianchini, p. 17.

is unable to exit her tiny landlocked country and is aware that she's been 'protected' from hearing more than one state sanctioned view of anything.¹⁶³

The shut-in city smells of stale urine, pork, cooked cabbage and potato dumplings. The streets are grey, drab and eerily deserted, except for the menacing presence of secret police agents, who enthusiastically keep tabs on Pavla and her foreign boyfriend, Charlie. The couple move through the city streets slowly, watched and uneasy. Their world is tiny because the last doddering days of late state socialism, experienced in terms of the everyday reality of surveillance and risk of police interrogation, handicapped *flâneuser*y of any kind.

We learn that Pavla, as a small child, was dragged along at breakneck speed in an effort to keep pace with her career-driven, Party-serving mother. We meet her just as she struggles to gather momentum on her own terms and is slowed to a standstill by her infatuation with her reckless lover, Charlie, who dithers and dawdles. Charlie's mobility is substantively dissimilar in quality from Pavla's. As an Australian-Czech in Prague on student exchange, Charlie's irresponsibility leads him to a kind of cavalier or maverick bumbling slowness that only privileged strangers can afford to enact. George Orwell aptly captures Charlie's brand of naivety with the line 'so much left-wing thought is a kind of playing with fire by people who don't even know that fire is hot.'¹⁶⁴

By the end of Part One of the novella, constrained further by the physical limitations of late pregnancy and subjected to increased police surveillance, Pavla exists within the vortex of what Czech dissident playwright/President elect Václav Havel, once referred to as the 'bleak sky boredom and mortifying eventlessness'¹⁶⁵ of a shutdown city ruled by apathy and fear. Pavla avoids moving through the city and, when forced, walks in small concentric circles, from home to university and back again, trying not to deviate from her well-

163 Ludislav Holy, *The Little Czech and the Great Czech Nation, National Identity and the Post-Communist Social Transformation*, Cambridge University Press, p. 142.

164 George Orwell, *Inside the Whale and Other Essays*, Penguin, 1967.

165 Václav Havel, quoted in Kateřina Kolářová, 'AIDS-Ed Perestroika, Discourses of Gender in the Negotiation of Ideological Consensus in Late-Socialist Czechoslovakia, the AIDS Outbreak in the Time of Normalised Boredom,' in Hana Havelková and Libora Oates-Indruchová, *Politics of Gender Culture Under State Socialism, An Expropriated Voice*, Routledge, 2014, p. 234.

trodden path. She seems nothing at all like a *flâneuse* or baby feminist intellectual in the making.

When, on the afternoon of November 17, 1989, Pavla returns to the streets with Charlie and her best friend Milena, along with tens of thousands of students, demanding freedom, she needs to stop all the time, to pee, because she's eight and a half months pregnant and bladder constricted. She waddles for hours amid twenty thousand students. She and others enter into a peaceful standoff with riot police, armed with flowers. That night, as the student protest reaches fever pitch and the city teeters on the brink of revolution, she and Charlie are cornered in a narrow side-street and truncheoned. Their capacity to move together through the streets is ended.

Part Two of the novella, set eleven years later, in the year 2000, begins as Pavla returns to Prague with her daughter Nadja and best friend Milena. Pavla is back for a complicated mix of reasons. Her mother Lada is dying, Milena is homesick and British immigration has forced their return. Return is not what Pavla wants, given that she has an established life and successful academic career in London. Her return also comes at an inauspicious time of year. A new public holiday has just been created to commemorate the student-led revolution, on November 17. The anniversary festival will see parties and commemorative events all over the city. It is also Nadja's eleventh birthday.

In stark contrast to the city she abandoned eleven years earlier, the Prague of November 2000 is fast becoming an international frenetic city, crowded with ex-pat foreigners and tourists, mid transformation from grey decrepitude to a bright neon-lit city, advertising and billboards. Pavla sees that Prague has been visually and materially transformed by the spoils of freedom and is in the grips of what Czechs grimly referred to at the time as 'mafia capitalism,' or 'capitalism with fangs,' a time of gruelling economic and political change. Once again, Pavla feels that she is being slowed to a standstill.

For Pavla, seeing is knowing. Her shift from inertia (in Part One) to gradual freedom to gaze and move freely (Part Two), doesn't come easily. Her return alerts her to all that she has missed experiencing firsthand. She didn't witness the unfurling of freedom, won through a series of tenacious general strikes and public debates that started in universities and theatres in late November 1989. She didn't see the storm of flyers, proclamations, manifestoes

and bulletins billowing from her favourite landmarks, Manés Gallery, Špála and Laterna Magika (the Magic Lantern Theatre). She didn't experience the euphoria, optimism and unity of the first heady days of freedom. She missed the revolution that had come to hold such huge symbolic collective meaning.

Only in the final chapter of the novella does Pavla attain the freedom to move and read her city freely, autonomously and at her own speed. Only in the singular company of her daughter Nadja does she finally take the opportunity to become her own travelling lens and a new and more daring kind of urban walker/nomad, transnational and trans-urban, who comes to demand practical and aspirational mobility as her greatest freedom.¹⁶⁶

Remembering November

The student 'events' of November 17, 1989, sit at the epicentre of the novella. November 17 carries enormous symbolic resonance. It will remain for all time the day on which twenty thousand Czech university students, armed with nothing but flowers, entered into a peaceful standoff with Czech riot police.

In 1989, as they re-enacted their annual walk on November 17, the student crowds grew thicker and thicker. By 4pm, with more than 15,000 students on the streets, they began chanting 'We don't want to be last!', having seen tens of thousands of East Germans seeking refuge at the West German Embassy in Prague and 1600 abandoned Trabant and Lada cars on the city streets as East Germans crossed the border on foot. News of revolutionary events in Hungary, Poland and Berlin had spread. A statue located in the East German Embassy garden in Prague wore a necklace of Trabant keys around her neck. Students joked that 'with the continuous development of socialism, we have become a developing country.'

At around 7.30 pm, as they made their way to their symbolic destination, Václavské náměstí/Wenceslas Square, 15 000 parachute regiment police, recognisable by their fearsome red berets, cornered 5000 students and moved them into a narrow laneway, Mikulandská ulice. Loudspeakers lining the street coerced the students to disperse, menacing dogs barked, and all the while the

¹⁶⁶ Short, p. 7.

riot police prevented anyone from leaving by blocking all escape routes. Of the students trapped within the laneway, 593 were beaten and truncheoned.

During the days and nights that followed, in response to the brutality, Czechs from all walks of life mobilised in support of the students and continued to do so until the regime collapsed. This highly symbolic act of nonviolent defiance is widely remembered as ten days of demonstration with not a single window broken.

According to Czech social anthropologist Ladislav Holy, by brutalising its young, the state was widely perceived to have betrayed all of its citizens.¹⁶⁷ Workers and citizens formed the view that the state had provided explicit permission for students to participate in a state sanctioned commemorative event and then savagely turned on them. For a significant proportion of the general population, the brute force displayed on November 17 signified that state repression had become unbearable.¹⁶⁸ A parliamentary inquiry held in the years that followed found that the riot police had most likely planned the crackdown in the lead-up to the event.¹⁶⁹ Innumerable competing conspiracy theories continue to make the rounds of Prague, suggesting that the past is never really over.¹⁷⁰

Within the novella, Pavla and Charlie are co-located among the faceless and nameless victims of violence and symbolic manipulation on Mikulandská ulice. Pavla, more than eight months pregnant, watches as Charlie is truncheoned and carried off by a member of the riot squad. Once she and Charlie are separated, she is also beaten and taken to hospital. She doesn't see Charlie again. During the weeks that follow, Pavla lies in hospital, unaware

¹⁶⁷ Holy, p. 148.

¹⁶⁸ Holy, p. 144.

¹⁶⁹ Holy, p. 147.

¹⁷⁰ By November 28, the Communist Party had relinquished power, by late December the barbed wire that separated Czechoslovakia from its neighbours had been removed, and free elections were held in June 1990. Regime change took place more quickly than anywhere else in the former Eastern Bloc, with less violence and arguably with far more radical implications for a less chaotic transition to democracy and freedom, hence the Czech revolution became known as the Velvet Revolution (*sametová revoluce*).

of the street battles being waged, the demands for regime change, or the apocryphal stories making the rounds of the city.¹⁷¹

When Pavla returns to Prague in 2000, she returns to a transforming city, one that had begun to commemorate the suffering of victims of the old regime.¹⁷² The chaos of return is both disorienting and shocking. However, 'victim' is a label that Pavla would not ever apply to herself. In returning to Prague, Pavla comes to understand that by walking within what had begun to unfold on the streets in 1989, she had walked herself into a grand historical narrative, something far more complex than the story of a big-bellied waddling girl and her duplicitous boyfriend.

Speculating on Biography

Hannah Kent's use of the term 'speculative biography'¹⁷³ helped me begin to imagine my protagonist's life 'as it might have been lived.' I plugged the

171 One of the rumours making the rounds alleged that a student by the name of Martin Šmid, had been killed in the street violence on Mikulandská. The 'student death' was reported by the widely respected dissident Petr Uhl and aired on Radio Free Europe. This myth, as well as real stories of student bravery in the face of senseless violence and police brutality, sparked a wave of public outrage and anger. Eighty per cent of the working population of Prague joined street protests, day after day. By November 26, led by actors, musicians and intellectuals, there were 750 000 people on the streets engaged in general strike, openly defying the regime for the first time since the reforms of 1967-8 that had led to the Prague Spring. The rolling strikes ground the city to a standstill.

172 What gets remembered in any city, including the suffering of victims, is constantly renegotiated and re-imagined over time. Even today, the Memorial to the Student Velvet Revolution on Národní ulice (National Street) marks the site of the November 17 student massacre. Hands projecting from a bronze plaque show fingers forming the letter 'V' for victory, a timeless symbol of defiance used by Winston Churchill and kept alive by Margaret Thatcher. The student shrine in Prague commemorates student action, mobility, hunger for freedom and particularly freedom of movement. The candles burn brightly, day and night, even today. The emotional truth of the site is laid bare and elicits empathy from those who visit. Each year, Czechs commemorate, relive and re-enact November 17 as their national Day of Struggle for Freedom and Democracy. Each year they set about asking the question *jak to bylo?* (How it was?/How was it?), in order to draw into question and remake memories of 1989 for the purposes of an ever changing present.

173 Kent discusses the term in her PhD dissertation for Flinders University, entitled *Speculative Biographies*, not yet complete. She makes reference to Margaret Atwood's essay 'In Search of Alias Grace,' in *Curious Pursuits* and her own novel *Burial Rites*, in which Kent imagines the life of her protagonist Agnes, the last woman to be beheaded in Iceland. Historical leads about Agnes are thin on the ground, except through the accounts of the men who demonised her. Kent's research, unlike my own, meticulously recovers aspects of the life of a woman who really existed.

chasms between the observed and the meandering with what Virginia Woolf described as ‘the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, [and] dramatic effect,’¹⁷⁴ a craft residing, according to Drusilla Modjeska and Hilary Mantel both, in ‘the informed imagination.’¹⁷⁵

The novella imagines the life of a young woman who never existed; the protagonist, Pavla, is pure invention. The day I made her up, a public holiday, the anniversary of a student-led revolution, she meandered down the street under a sky of grey concrete. She was listening to early 80s Depeche Mode, too loud, through rasping headphones. Wandering in a world of her own, she reached out to hold the hand of a little girl who might well have been her daughter.

Even though I made her up, Pavla exists in a place and time that really was. She’s immersed in understanding a history of ideas that really existed and locating herself in relation to them. And even though she doesn’t know it yet, one day she’ll be famous for writing the biography of a little-known surrealist painter who called herself Toyen, who lived and breathed.

Pavla’s a made-up girl in a slipping-down world that’s shifting beneath her feet. My job is to build the lifeworld that Pavla inhabits, and make it seem realer than the stale smell of piss in a meandering lamplit cobblestoned street. I’m writing an imaginary life into a setting that really existed. For a while there I thought I was attempting to write historical fiction. But that’s not what *Saunter* is. Not the way I see it.

It used to be simpler. Twenty years ago, in Prague I scoured periodicals at the National Library, relying on bits of time-yellowed paper, sources and texts that enabled me to write and teach twentieth-century central European histories. My main game in those days, PhD and teaching, was *revolting*

174 Donna Lee Brien, ‘The Facts Formed a Line of Buoys in the Sea of My Own Imagination’: History, Fiction and Speculative Biography,’ *Text Special Issue, Fictional Histories and Historical Fictions: Writing History in the Twenty-First Century* (eds. Camilla Nelson and Christine de Matos), 28 April 2015.

175 Kiera Lindsey, *The Convict’s Daughter: Speculations on Biography*, posted on October 10, 2016, initially presented at ‘Intersections in History,’ the Australian Women’s History Network Conference, in March 2016. See also Kiera Lindsey, ‘Deliberate Freedom’: Using Speculation and Imagination in Historical Biography’, *TEXT*, forthcoming October 2018, and Hilary Mantel, ‘Can These Bones Live?’ (Lecture 4), BBC4 Reith Lectures, 2017 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b08tcbrp>

women, histories of women and revolution. I was in Prague to research the fifteen women eccentric enough to call themselves contemporary feminist intellectuals in the late 1990s, in a society that passionately detested them. But how had they come to be feminist public intellectuals? And who were they before they grew up, I wondered? I was reading and meeting fully formed butterflies, but the eggs, caterpillars and chrysalis stages were entirely undocumented.

In the end, it was the dead pot plants and cork soled slippers of the women librarians that provided the nuance I needed. The 1:5 ratio of getting the journal and edition that I requested via little squares of loo paper, suggested that the grim Czech librarians in the National Library might not have approved of my project. Their contempt for what I was doing cemented my love for my exotic feminist subjects. But I still couldn't find the elbow room of creativity to make those women's lives feel real or accessible.

The 'turn' in humanities had happened already. That is, the preoccupation with individual lives and stories as a way of understanding both contemporary societies and the whole process of historical and social change was well underway. Happy days. I slogged at writing contingent narratives capable of emphasising the particularity of experiences and multiplicity of layers of historical change and nuanced experiences.¹⁷⁶ It wasn't too terrible. But it still didn't give me what Orwell always asked for and I craved, 'a life seen from the inside.'

The old gig provided safety, but not much in the way of understanding interiority of any kind. Most days it felt as though my subjects' thoughts and feelings didn't exist. Sometimes locating women so exactly in a time and place meant the facets that made them them, their childhoods, personalities, the quirks, the left-of-centre-beliefs, just couldn't be accessed. I had wanted to write women who were fully human; flaky, vivid, intimate, accessible and connected. I wanted a way of accessing the subjective understandings of their worlds and experiences, located in situations that were often not of their own making. So it took a very long time, but decades later, I made Pavla up.

¹⁷⁶ Barbara Caine, *Biography and History*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

When I try to imagine Pavla meandering the streets of Prague in 1989, the city I conjure is edgy, polluted, corrupt, drab and dilapidated. It might have been like this, but I wasn't there to see it, still locked in my last year of high school. When in 1994 I did finally manage to see Prague firsthand, my most vivid memory of it, apart from the peeling liquorish all sort colours of the Old Town Square and dog shit everywhere, is of Depeche Mode songs played in every restaurant and pub in town. That and bed covers made of stretchy rubberised plastic, a material both new to me and very unpleasant. New too, was the pungent stench of European decay and the coal-flaked mist within the acid rain triangle.

I remember dour shop assistants with 1980s big hair and blue-green eyeshadow, the colours of bruises as they begin to vanish. Belarusian novelist Svetlana Alexievich wasn't exaggerating when she claimed that the Polish makeup on sale around most of central Europe at this time was intended for corpses.¹⁷⁷ I remember underemployed female shop assistants in poo brown-stockings and cork heels, guarding a shoddy assortment of substandard consumer goods. For a foreigner, it all seemed comical enough, if for no other reason than that I could always delay the purchase of my next tee-shirt, pair of Levis, or vegetable of choice, until I ventured someplace else. Leaving overnight for Paris or London was always an option.

Living in Prague for a year in 1998 as a humanities doctoral student and once again as an NGO worker and parent from 2006 -11, I came to better understand that post-revolutionary euphoria had descended into a state of perpetual 'anaesthesia',¹⁷⁸ or more precisely, what President Václav Havel astutely characterised at the time as the Czech 'bad mood.' Surprised citizens noted with horror that politics and elected politicians were hypocritical, self-serving and untruthful. Political and financial scandals, fraudulent privatisation deals, economic and financial crises or bullets in the mail, were not in the script of the play anyone had paid to sit through.

177 Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time, The Last of the Soviets*, Random House, New York, 2016 (trans. Bela Shayevich), p. 341.

178 Jiřina Šiklová, 'Everyday Democracy in the Czech Republic: Dissappointments or New Morals in the Time of Neo-Normalization,' in Grazyna Skapska and Annamaria Orla-Bukowska, *The Moral Fabric of Contemporary Societies*, Brill, Leiden, 2003, p. 93.

Histories of the present, as we know, are inherently unstable. There's freedom in that. But also, many, many dilemmas. We live in an age where we're acutely aware of the limitations of historical practices of any kind. We ask what we believe history is and how it happens.¹⁷⁹ We're aware that concepts such as 'history' 'literature' and 'biography' are always of their time. That means that they are always historical.¹⁸⁰

Since the 1980s, the 'linguistic turn' gave us discourses, history and biography, understood simply as discourses among many. We look to the 'fictive elements'¹⁸¹ of historical writing in our struggle for meaning, representation, understanding and interpretation. We live in an age where we need to manage 'our own uneasiness about the trustworthiness of memory, the reliability of story, and the continuity of time.'¹⁸²

Since Simon Schama's *Dead Certainties, Unwarranted Speculations*, the border between scholarly history and the historical novel dissolved.¹⁸³ We want ambivalence, contradiction, quirkiness and invention.¹⁸⁴ But then language itself intervenes. Joan Scott would say, for example, that the texts with which the historian works have no direct relation to an actual past – that language did not reflect, but rather created reality.¹⁸⁵

So where to with this? It seems to me that place-memory discourses are fascinating when applied to societies in flux.¹⁸⁶ The post-1989 transformation, created a kind of liminal state, widely recognised as a time of ambiguity, openness, indeterminacy and disorientation.¹⁸⁷ Logically enough, liminal times

179 Gabrielle M. Spiegel (ed.), *Practicing History, New Directions in Historical Writing After the Linguistic Turn*, Routledge, 2005, p. 1.

180 Zdeněk Vašíček, 'Philosophy of History,' in Aviezer Tucker (ed.), *A Companion to the Philosophy of History and Historiography*, Wiley-Blackwell, p. 42.

181 Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is History Fiction?*, UNSW Press, 2006, p. 6.

182 Margaret Atwood, 'In Search of Alias Grace,' in *Curious Pursuits*, Occasional Writing, 1970-2005, Virago Press, 2005, p. 228.

183 Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century, From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge*, Wesleyan University Press, 1997, p. 135.

184 Curthoys and Docker, p. 10.

185 Iggers, p. 151.

186 Alfrun Kliems, and Marina Dmitrieva (eds), *The Post-Socialist City, Continuity and Change in Urban Space and Imagery*, Jovis Diskurs, 2010, p. 19.

187 Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 113.

generate liminal streetscapes, some of them surreal.¹⁸⁸ Each and every street of post-communist cities is covered in layers of cultural sediment, imbued with symbolic and material references that change and morph constantly.¹⁸⁹

The transition from state socialism to whatever comes next, requires reinvention, and a desire to overcome the inertia of being stuck somewhere between an uncertain future and haunted memories. The conversions after 1989 were at once legal, structural, social, cultural and visual. Regime change also involved changing reminiscences and recollections.

Memory management, the endless oscillation between reminiscence and oblivion,¹⁹⁰ is frequently related to spaces, physical, social, semiotic and mental. Post-socialist landscape cleaning left behind landscapes of emptiness and 'empty pedestals,' or silences only understood by those residents of a city old enough to remember what had once existed in a particular place. It meant shifting gazes.

If one of the legacies of state socialism was the cultural and ideological landscapes it left behind, then yet another legacy is the thousands of icons waiting to be eviscerated, preserved or reinterpreted.¹⁹¹ As is true of many cities, Prague's multiple pasts belong within a trace landscape, constituted by presences, absences, ruptures, voids and ruins, intentional forgetting, painful remembering and stories of violence and trauma, some of which are told and some withheld.

The novella interrogates these landscape 'scars'¹⁹² and 'empty pedestals.'¹⁹³ Pavla is obsessed with the empty plinth on Letna Plain, at 'U Stalina' (At Stalin's), the site where the biggest Stalin statue in the world once stood. Then, on that same site stood Michael Jackson. Eleven years later Pavla sees the metronome built there and notes that it tips menacingly to the right. Through all of this, her way of seeing, her quirky, curious gaze, is what makes her present.

188 Czepczynski, quoted in Alfrun Kliems and Marina Dmitrieva (eds), *The Post-Socialist City...*, p. 17.

189 Czaplicka, Gelazis and Ruble, p. 1.

190 Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 115.

191 Kliems and Dmitrieva, p. 17.

192 Karen E. Till, *The New Berlin, Memory, Politics, Place*, University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

193 Czepczynski, *Cultural Landscapes*, p. 125.

So back to Pavla and how to write her. Pavla is invested in aesthetics and she needs to negotiate complex social structures and all kinds of gendered expectations. I want to depict Pavla in terms of what she *sees*, as she moves through her hometown city. She requires a number of versions of self and engages in multiple and complex acts of 'staging' and 'performance,' all enacted through gazing and walking.

By speculating on biography, in context, I get to see Pavla saunter through Prague, a site of everyday European *flâneuserie* and surrealism. *Flânesery* is Pavla's embodied transgressive 'tactile gaze' that allows her both objective and subjective engagement in the flows and rhythms of the street. By the end of the novella, *flânesery* is fast becoming Pavla's aesthetic practice, enabling her to produce and then subvert her own narratives of self, the streets and her city, as well as her own memories, fantasies and desires. Her gaze becomes increasingly curious, challenged by her daughter's wide-eyed fascination. It is the fresh new intensity, the transformation in her own gaze and gait, that enables Pavla to become, finally, the *flâneuse* she had always intended to be.

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