

## *Meridel Le Sueur Essay*

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### **AN INTERNATIONAL INCIDENT**

This encounter, the sliver of narrative I'm trying to tease out of my writing hand, occurred in the Spring of 1975 in a tatty Art Nouveau café in Prague. It was the day the Americans, a world away, finally gave up the ghost in Saigon—April 30, 1975 (I just googled it—you can trust the date.).

The pictures of that day went swiftly around the world: our helicopters whirling up and off the roof of the cool, white, colonial-style American Embassy, desperate evacuees hanging from the struts like aerialists. Those photographs penetrated everywhere, even “behind the Iron Curtain,” as I solemnly called my location. I had come to Prague to “look for my roots.” At the time “no one,” as people said then, went to Prague or to the other shrouded capitals of Eastern Europe (people routinely said “Eastern Europe” though Prague is farther West than Vienna). A visa was required and visas, it was understood, were hard to come by, almost impossible for someone traveling alone, without tour guide or group affiliation of some kind. I had written on the visa application line for Occupation “School Teacher,” which I wasn't, instead of “Writer,” which I alone considered myself to be. I thought “Housewife” would be better still, but I wasn't married and I felt lying about that would get me in hotter water than claiming to teach fourth grade. In fact, I had just quit my job editing copy at a radio station, and I was unemployed. The visa came through.

Maybe those Saigon pictures were published with extra speed and relish in a place like Prague because the Communist regime was glad to report the news: Americans fleeing in disarray, Americans *losing*. In fact, the day I'm trying to tweeze out of memory might not have been April 30—it could have been the day before the collapse of the American War (which we called and still call the Vietnam War), and time has conflated the two events. I may even have been sitting in the old Staré Mesto café a day or even a week *after* our defeat – which we still don't call a defeat. *We pulled out*—that's how we said it, how we say it still. I spent much of my two weeks in Prague sitting in that café or in others equally gloomy and satisfying. But because May is a sweeter month than April and therefore carries a more ironic charge (and the episode I'm getting to requires irony), and because April has already been claimed for its alleged cruelty, let's say it was May, early May, the springtime of our slow, still descending downward spiral. Or maybe I keep thinking *May, it had to be May* because I remember (and I do remember) that the lilacs were in full flower on Petrin Hill. When I walked on the Kampa by the Vltava, the chestnut blossoms dropped like bits of blood-stained tissue all around me. May flowers.

I had never seen a chestnut before, I had never seen a European capital, I didn't speak the language of the place, and I knew no one. I bore my big blue backpack like a penitential hump, no credit card, a small horde of traveler's checks I tended with fetishistic care and doled out in miserly drib-drabs to pay for dark stews I ate in crummy restaurants frequented by Gypsies or in smoky cafés where I made a meal of heavily sugared coffee. I was alone in that absolute way of untried youth and real travel that

causes details—spring blossoms, a faded café—to roil with significance. I felt poetic every single second.

This, roughly, was the situation, inner and outer, leading to the moment that was coming to get me in the *Obecni Dum kavarna*—Municipal House café—on what was probably a day in early May, 1975, less than seven years, as I was well aware, after the Warsaw Pact troops had rolled across the Czech border into the streets of Prague early on August 21, 1968 (a date I do not need to google), and surely less than a week after my own country had decamped in confusion from what had been Saigon but within twenty-four hours of the twack-twack of the helicopters' lifting away from the flat roof of the Embassy became and remains Ho Chi Minh City.

It's possible I wasn't aware until somewhat later that my country was no longer at war, the very war I had protested so hotly and proudly the length of my twenties. And of course I could not imagine that this day or whatever day it was in Saigon, half a world away from my temporary perch at an Art Nouveau outpost behind the Iron Curtain, would someday be marked as I am marking it now, over thirty years later, as the first day in the decline of what, till then, had seemed the inevitable and eternal ascension of my imperial but nonetheless vastly appealing country and its hot-dog culture. You can't remember everything, and I don't remember that. But there it is now, the retreat from Saigon, now part of that day, patched in next to my more recently acquired and probably eternally raw Abu Ghraib/Guantanamo national grief/shame/fury. This is how memory works: not as transcription (which is impossible) but as an attempt—as a memoir is an attempt (and this is a memoir)—to achieve meaning between the alluring, irretrievable *then* and the equally unfathomable *now*.

I do remember—and knew I would remember—the flimsy, red-flecked chestnut blossoms and the eloquent café smoke that conveyed—I was sure—much lyric information to decode. Pull out your notebook and describe. Which I did, wherever that notebook is now, wherever that fervent description lies, the non-acid-free pages inexorably deconstructing my breathless prose these thirty-some years. I had purchased the notebook from a bad-tempered clerk in a poorly lit Prague *papirnictvi*, a state shop that offered notebooks and toilet paper side by side according to the flat-footed marketing strategy of the socialist retail sales mind. I believe I noted that detail as well. I was starting to trust details. It was the beginning of becoming a writer.

I sat at a banquette in the *Obecni Dum kavarna*, the seat made of leather the color of a roan stallion, brittle and cracked here and there, just as I expected it to be and approved: old Europe. Behind me, the high back of the leather seat rose to a wooden railing above which was mounted a beveled mirror. The whole wall of the big room alternated these panels of dim mirror with outlandish mosaic scenes of idealized peasant life by Alfons Mucha—winsome girls with opulent bosoms fastening up sheaves of wheat composed of tiny tiles, a young man in a cocked hat sporting a long flourish of feather, a rook clamped to his gloved arm. They were figures imagined and executed in the first decade of the twentieth century, the kind of sentimental public art that later would be reconfigured in harshly idealized, rectilinear icons representing valiant workers of the machine age, a stolid socialist fantasy set in opposition to the luscious curves of this lazier Art Nouveau fantasy. The glazed glow of the tiles overflowed with bouquets of intricately devised flowers. Ornament and decoration cascaded, pastel and rosy jewel

tones predominated—all viewed, of course, through the fundamental blue-gray of the place's primer coat of obscuring smoke.

Waiters in formal attire, dour-faced and balletic, threaded their way through the crowded room, balancing oval trays outfitted with their complicated pre-War coffee-systems: clattery cup and saucer, creamer and bowl of sugar cubes with sugar pincer, juice glass of water, Oblaten cookie wafer, little silver spoon, a mingy paper napkin that looked suspiciously like the same waxy toilet paper ranked on the stationery store shelves next to the notebooks. That skimpy patch of napkin reeled the coffee tray back from its romantic memory of Kafka's late Habsburg Prague to the socialist-realist moment I found myself in.

Most of the clientele were students whose tables were interspersed with tables of pensioners dressed in the sagging, good lines of their First Republic haberdashery. Hats abounded on these elderly heads; gracious manners and low murmurs floated around the tables of these former citizens of the First Republic democracy who had lived through the various betrayals and coups of their century. The students, many African or Arab from either socialist or "non-aligned" states, spoke their own languages or Czech in staccato accents, apparently glad of their free educations in the only Europe they had a chance for, laughing and bending over engineering problems in their big textbooks, moving from table to table as if in a dorm lounge. It was the danky-deep of the Cold War, but it was also (as garish, red-and-gold placards and banners hoisted everywhere over streets and across soot-grimed buildings barked) the thirtieth anniversary of the Liberation of Prague by "our Soviet brothers."

Everything in Prague seemed ruined, lost, or at least damaged. Hence, the high poetry quotient. But the *Obecni Dum kavarna* hammered home a special heartbreak—that wild Art Nouveau excess, the glints of gold in the grimy mosaics, the sheerly happy and entirely unnecessary, creamy pastel feel-good art, the invitation to laziness—it was all a Czech joke, a rueful rebuke to the brittle demagoguery of the Husak regime that had been ruling the country since the minions of the Soviet empire had trashed the Prague Spring of 1968.

There was no imagining, in case that comes to mind, what lay ahead: October and November, 1989, the collapse of the regime which would bring about, among other more fundamental changes, the temporary closure of this *kavarna* for several years of massive reconstruction so it could re-open to cater to the New World Order—ourselves, that is, in massive, hard-currency-spending droves who would take the Mucha mosaics, thanks—but lose that unfiltered, second-hand smoke, OK?

None of that could be imagined in 1975 because one of the most curious aspects of the Cold War stand-off was that both sides believed the Curtain to be, truly, Iron. Iron that would never rust, never flake away. The strangest thing about the Cold War in retrospect is that everyone accepted it as permanent—with the exception, of course, of the only imagined alternative scenario: the apocalypse of atomic war that shivered everyone's timbers. That scary possibility no doubt contributed to the illusion of permanence in the stalemate of the two "Great Powers" those forty-some post-War years. If the only possible Other Thing is annihilation, the mind falls gratefully upon the breast of eternal stasis.

As for the *Obecni Dum kavarna* in those cold war days, the whole juicy Art Nouveau business was held together, it seemed, by nothing more substantial than the grimy smoke of ages. Another kind of stasis, another eternity. This was smoke that would never clear, an elixir not only of the café but the shallow breath of 300 years of Hapsburg smoke underlying the doughty puffs of the First Republic's scant twenty years, and on top of that the stench of the Nazi occupation, choked finally by almost thirty years of suffocating, gloomy-gus Commie air.

You didn't just sit in this murky place—you were slightly levitated off the cracked leather on a billow of historical ash, the smoke of national humiliation and endurance bearing you up, eyes smarting. I bought my coffee, a pack of cigarettes, and set up shop with my notebook and my ardor. I was finally down the rabbit hole of history after a lifetime atop the poured concrete of American self-idealization and historical amnesia.

I was determined to describe what was before me. I felt strangely, powerfully, alone and in charge of things. Even—especially—my language belonged only to me in this place where I never heard it spoken. Czech, though the language of my grandmother who had lived with us, was not my language and my attempts to learn it only persuaded me of the revenge possible to the small nation by way of the impenetrable labyrinth of its language. It seemed I was the only American in Prague. Not possibly true, but it felt that way amid the busloads of Bulgarian and Ukrainian factory workers carted to a fellow worker state for their holiday and the small bands of West Germans who had driven across the border in their Mercedes and spent a few days slouching around the hotel bars in their furs, coming for the music and cheap beer. I had never felt before that a whole

world lay before me and required my descriptive efforts. I experienced the most dynamic paradox a writer can be given as a prod: anonymity and urgency.

Strange that I would assume that describing in my notebook a smoky café abandoned by the rest of “the free world” would be an act of historical documentation, useful to others. But that was what I was doing—describing the *kavarna* with a ballpoint thick with lyrical ink—when he approached my table, my watch-tower on this “other world” which, I saw in an instant, was not his world, either.

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I don’t remember his name. Or rather, I never mastered it in our brief encounter (he repeated it more than once – carefully, courteously, thoughtful of my cultural ignorance). I had nothing to connect the beautiful, exotic sound to, a series of hummocky vowels that meant nothing but suggested, vaguely, Araby. I was too embarrassed to ask again. So, a name not forgotten—never inscribed.

He had detached himself from a group of students (all male) at a table not far from mine. Like them, he was probably a foreign student from some Arab country in the vaguely defined “Middle East” as I was from the flyover of the Middle West. That was all – until I looked up to see his chiseled, very young Omar Sharif face coming toward me. In his twenties, my age. Handsome, gentle, big soft animal eyes, a natural eagerness overlaid with winning shyness—all that in an instant. It was not the kind of shyness that requires tending and coaxing—his was the shyness of good manners, of not wanting to intrude while wanting, very much, to intrude. I felt—I was meant to feel—flattered and intrigued. Would I mind if he joined me?



Reader, I minded. For all my backpack toting, see-the-world romantic bravado, I was paralyzed by home-girl habits, a deep provincialism that had already morphed on my first big trip into a phony, aloof, Woman Alone manner – in fact, a Woman Writing Alone in cafés. The notebook as chastity belt. I thought of myself as a fly on the wall, not a girl to be picked up. Are you a lover or a fighter? they say in the Marines. I knew I was a fighter – that is, a writer. And yet . . . .

It was impossible not to smile back at him. And he was speaking English. English, my true home, my only friend. I pushed the notebook aside and turned to face him, glad of this living, breathing English coming sweetly to my ear, though inwardly I was terrified. I glanced over at the table where his friends sat—maybe he'd come over on a dare. But no, they were busy with their engineering texts. He seemed to be on his own. And he seemed to *like* me.

I liked him, too. Right away and for no reason. Well, he was outrageously handsome, but that, in my odd little feminist creed at the time, could have worked against him. I liked him because, I suppose, he seemed so unreservedly to like me, and because he seemed . . . free. I liked the inner eagerness I sensed, eagerness for nothing in particular, just life itself, just the next thing. Which at the moment was me. Come to think of it, I liked him *a lot*.

What did we talk about? I haven't the faintest idea, though hydrology comes faintly forward. He was studying hydrology at Charles University, I believe. He laughed when he spoke of his studies, as if hydrology were comic, but there it was—a watery fate. He said he had had to learn Czech, and shrugged his shoulders as if giving room in his brain to this otherwise unnecessary and unusable language were just another of life's

comic turns. I liked him, I think now, because I could see he hadn't a depressed nerve in his beautiful body. He took life as it came. He would let the world be complicated, not himself. He would be fun.

We were still young enough to ask immediately about our families—mother and father, sisters (of course he had several—that ease with girls), brothers. That took some time. It seemed his family was scattered all over the place, his siblings mostly in other parts of the Soviet empire doing what he was doing—studying, improving their lot. I had only a brother, a dentist, to offer, and a mother and father in Minnesota. Minnesota? He'd heard of it, he said quickly. But I think that was his good breeding speaking. He said he had a cousin in California.

I allowed that I was—or rather, I wanted to be—a writer. Novels? he asked with that adorable eagerness. Poetry, I said. Ah!—and I sensed in his *Ah!* that this was even better than novels. He would like to read one of my poems, he said. I demurred, but I liked that he asked. Later, I said.

He smiled. He liked “later.”

His friends had left their table without saying goodbye, without looking our way. Good. I was beginning to feel my wallflower writer self fading from the scene, some other self lounging forward like one of the Mucha girls on the walls around us – smoky gardenias in my hair, eyelids at half-mast. What my mother called the come hither look. It was understood we were going out to dinner somewhere nearby, though nothing had been said to confirm this.

But we didn't rise to go. I think we were so happy, we didn't feel like moving. We had all the time in the world. We'd just met. Besides, then as now, the coffeehouses

of Central Europe invite timelessness, the illusion of long life and endless talk. Why move? Why do anything?

I still think if we'd left the *kavarna* and walked down Dlouha ulice to some dumpy *pivnice* for a dumpling-and-gravy dinner, if we had not made the particular left turn in our conversation we were about to make at that table in the *kavarna*, if, if, if—you get the picture. The disappointed heart still figuring the odds.

But this I remember with the exactitude of misery so unlike the imprecision of happiness that preceded it which is all a mist of hydrology and family names lost or never really learned. I asked him (because it suddenly occurred to me I had not asked) where he was from. He had confirmed early on that I was an American and we'd had the Minnesota exchange. But now I asked where *he* was from.

From nowhere, he said. People like me are from nowhere. We're nobody. He became, in an instant, an entirely different person, not the eager, easy face I had uncharacteristically invited to sit at my Woman Traveling Alone table. A shroud of grief descended on the beautiful, dark features. He was a Palestinian, he said. And waited for me to respond, a bit fearfully, as if I might turn on him for this admission.

I sensed something decisive had been said, something grave and immense, unbridgeable. Something beyond my experience or imagining, something I was incapable of describing in my little black notebook that lay closed and mute between us on the table.

But I did not know what the word he had pronounced signified, and I sensed that not to know what “a Palestinian” was indicated that I, not he, was the nobody in this

conversation. I scurried for cover inwardly, instinctively aware that I could not, must not, let him know I had no idea what a Palestinian was.

It's hard to believe that I, who fancied myself "political" with my anti-war passion and my feminist this and that, my civil rights talk, my predictable sixties generation assumptions and "positions," did not know what he was talking about. There was Israel and there were Arabs over there and they were fighting—or not fighting but not friends. But I knew nothing, nothing. Palestine—it was something in the Bible, wasn't it? But I'm not even sure I connected his word "Palestinian" with Palestine. I don't even think I understood the word he had pronounced. He spoke fast—as I did (I'd noted with pleasure our similar rhythms) and maybe that speed, my ear not yet accustomed to his accent and the fact I knew only of "Arabs"—well, I was lost. I only understood the word was powerful, decisive—and that he must not know I didn't know it.

It was another word, like his own name, that I didn't recognize. It seems impossible that in May, 1975, I did not comprehend the word, so familiar now, so much a part of every day's news and my own sense of politics. But that was then, as people love to say, excusing themselves from history. My *then* was protest of the War in Vietnam and fascination with the Curtain I had managed to sneak behind. Wasn't that history? Hadn't I made an effort?

He spoke ardently, right into my eyes. I must understand that his people (he said "my people," that deep, affirming designation of solidarity I had never heard an American use to describe his fellow citizens) were good people, ordinary people (didn't he understand he wasn't ordinary to me?). We only want a home, he said. *You must understand this.*

I had no idea what he was talking about.

The panic that coursed through me was the panic of shame, of cowardice. I had to *get out*. I had to get away. No bready gravy for him and me. No poem, later. No Omar Sharif eyes gazing into mine, later still, his face coming nearer, nearer in the dark.

In a heartbeat I realized I knew nothing about the world, nothing about what he assumed any conscious being would know. My roots—ha! I had come to Prague after everyone in my lineage was dead or gone. I had no roots. I was an American. I had only literary dreaminess and my damn notebook to affirm my illusions, my basket of plucked details, my descriptions. Most of all, my cool blue passport, my traveler's checks, my security. My imperial ignorance.

I was too proud to admit the truth even—especially—to Omar Sharif. I gathered up my gear from the campsite I'd made of the table—postcards, map, book (Kundera in English which, like a visitor from First-Amendment-land, I had showily brought as my reading material), the notebook.

I have to go, I said.

He looked confused. Had he read me wrong? I had seemed so sympathetic. We had had such a wonderful talk. Was it that he was Palestinian? Was I—he hadn't thought of this—was I Jewish?

No, just Catholic, I said, offering an extraneous bit of my ID. No, it was nothing to do with his being Palestinian. I made that clear, as if I had never intended more than a passing cup of coffee to begin with. Just gotta go. Buh-bye.

*Please*—he packed such pleading into the word, and he reached across the table to touch my arm, the beautiful eyes right on mine. The only touch that passed between us.

He begged me to convey to my people (my people!) how simple were the hopes and dreams of his people. Please take our story back to your people—you're a writer.

He spoke with such naked urgency, there was no chance he was sneering.

Even now as I play and re-play the scene, looking for clues, I can find nothing to suggest he meant anything other than what he said, one ardent soul reaching to touch another, not just personally but in the name of history, before we went our separate ways.

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Describing the *kavarna* comes more easily than describing his face. Even what he said, though it has murmured over the years from a chagrined corner of my proud heart—even his words are approximate. I carried no tape recorder. I took no dialogue notes in my notebook. I was simply branded by the experience, by his voice, by my cowardly renunciation of his beautiful eyes. Gotta go. Buh-bye.

The one that got away. The one I pushed away. For all the wrong reasons. A liberal American running for cover, as my countrymen—my people—were turning and running half a world away. My little cowardice like a tiny pantomime of our gigantic one.

Maybe Fitzgerald captured this peculiarly American negligence best in Nick Carraway's last, disgusted commentary on Tom and Daisy Buchanan: "they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast careless or whatever it was . . . ." I had never had "money" as Fitzgerald meant it, but here in my astonishing ignorance was the result of my vast national carelessness, the fecklessness of my culture, the heritage I was heir to, a culture that didn't require its children to learn languages or know much beyond their own self-regarding "issues."

What do you do with moments like this, brief flashes that don't even amount to episodes, bare encounters lost in the richness of their gorgeous, eloquent settings? Such moments adhere in a life not only as "memoir" but as figments of history and therein lies their value—and their danger. Such a moment is not a story you simply "tell." It is not a chronicle, a tidy bit of personal "nonfiction." It is an essay, not a story. It cannot be written—or read—as a naive account of *what happened* that day. But its inevitable incompleteness doesn't mean it's a falsehood. Quite the opposite. A true memoir is not a story. It is a meditation on a story. Its truth lies in the quality of its reflection, not its narrative arc.

Memoir is not what happened (if we're lucky, that's the best journalism). It is what *has happened* over time, in the mind, in the life as it attends to these tantalizing, dismaying, broken bits of life history. Such personal writing is, as the essay is, "an attempt." It is a try at the truth. The truth of a self in the world.

That spring of 1975 I heard for the first time about the Czech philosopher and exile of the seventeenth century (so many Czech centuries, each with its philosopher exile), Jan Komensky, Comenius as he is known in the West. His book, a great autobiographical testimony and philosophical treatise, *Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart*, bears in its doubleness the real enterprise of writing a life: not psychology, not even spirituality, and certainly not the American enterprise of "finding a self." Memoir is trustworthy and its truth assured when it seeks the relation of self to time, the piecing of the shards of personal experience into the starscape of history's night. The materials of memoir are humble, fugitive, a cottage knitting industry seeking

narrative truth across the crevasse of time as autobiography folds itself into the vast, fluid essay that is history. A single voice singing its aria in a corner of the crowded world.

I don't fool myself, I hope: the encounter at the *kavarna* is no story and maybe not history. Such episodes are, like everything that lives in memory, mere parts, not a living whole. The story I've told isn't what happened—it's what's left of what happened. A ruin, in other words. The sort of place that becomes the site of pilgrimage.

Or fractured autobiographical moments like this one are ghosts that visit us, their sharp angles digging in our flesh. They have the goods on us. They come in the dark night of the soul, to do their woeful accounting. We can only attend them, endure them. That's why the notebook still lies open on the table. There's not much more a person can do than *try*.

Start the essay in the smoky room under the Mucha girls. Turn the page. Say what you see, what you saw. Keep writing.

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