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PAUL THEROUX

A POLITICAL ROMANCE

To calm his wife after a quarrel, Morris Rosetree always recalled to her how they had met in the National Library in Prague, how he had said, ‘Excuse me, miss, could you tell me where the reading room is?’ and how she had replied, ‘You are excused. It is in this vichinity.’

He had been doing research for his doctoral dissertation on the history of the Czechoslovak Communist Party. But he had lost interest in it. He asked about the reading room because he heard it was well heated: he wanted to sit comfortably and write a letter to his folks. Several days after asking the dark-eyed girl the question he saw her on the library steps and he offered her a lift home. She refused at first, but Morris was insistent and finally he persuaded her. She remained silent, seemed to hold her breath throughout the journey. Morris invited her for coffee the next day, and later to have lunch. He told her he was an American. On Valentine’s Day he bought her some fur-lined gloves. She was glad to get them, she said. She was an orphan. When they were married it was noticed by several American newspapers; one paper printed a picture of the bride and groom and titled it A Political Romance, explaining in the text that love was bigger than politics. At that time very little was happening in Czechoslovakia: Morris Rosetree’s marriage there to Lepska Kanek was news.

With the help of Lepska, Morris finished his research. A year later, in the States, Morris got his Ph.D., and he told Lepska that if it hadn’t been for her he would never have managed it. Some chapters of the dissertation were published in political journals, but no publisher seemed interested in the whole book. What depressed Morris some time after his book had been turned down was a review he saw of a similar book. The review was enthusiastic (‘… valuable, timely …’), but judging from quotations used in the review the book was no better than his own. He knew his own was dull, so he was irritated reading praise of a book equally dull on the same subject. He became so discouraged that he moved away from Eastern European affairs and began a fitful study of the ruling parties of certain African countries.

It was at about this time that his quarrels started with Lepska who, once she had arrived at the Massachusetts college, nicknamed herself Lil. Morris had found her accent attractive in the early years of their marriage: ‘You could cut that accent with a knife.’ She had learned Morris’ swearwords (‘Kleist!’ ‘Sanvabeach!’). Morris had been charmed by her way of asking dinner guests innocently, ‘There was big – how do you say rayseestonce in English?’ (this provoked ‘Resistance!’ from the guests). But now the accent annoyed Morris. When she said, ‘You Americans hev zoch dirty manners,’ he corrected her English. If there were friends present he said, ‘Sure, Americans have

bad manners. Look at this. This is the way your Czechs eat their grub.' He reached across the table, speared a potato on his fork and made noises of chewing and growling as he cut the potato savagely on his plate. The friends laughed. Lil went silent; her face shut. Afterward she cried and said she was going back to Prague with the children. They had two girls: one had been born while Morris was finishing his dissertation; one a year later. Both had Czech names. Lil cried in their room.

'Remember the library?' Morris would say whenever Lil cried. He could do both voices well, his bewildered American question, her stiff mispronounced reply.

One night she rejected the memory and said bitterly, 'I vish I had not met you.'

'Aw, Lil.'

'You make me zo unhappy,' she sniffed. Then she shrieked, 'I do not vant to leave!'

'Christ, I don't want you to either.'

'No, not leave… leave!' she insisted, and burst into tears again.

She was, Morris guessed, talking of suicide.

He went easy on her for a while and was careful not to criticize her accent. But something had happened to the marriage: it had become impersonal; he felt they did not know each other very well, and he didn't care to know her any better. Her accent made him impatient and set his teeth on edge: he interrupted her as you do a stutterer. She moped like a hostage. Her hips were huge, her face and hands went florid in the January cold, though her face was still pretty. But she was like so many Czech women he had seen in Prague, like his landlady, like the librarians and the shrews in the ministries who would not allow him to interview officials. Those women who tried to kill his research: they wore brown, belted dresses and heavy shoes; not old in years, they were made elderly by work. Somehow, they were fat.

His daughters were fat, too, and once Morris had said to his office mate O'Hara (the Middle East), 'I think if we gave them American names they'd get skinny again.' O'Hara laughed. Morris was, afterward, ashamed of having revealed his exasperation. Exasperation was the name he gave it, despair was what he felt: because nothing would change for him. He would have no more kids; he would not marry again. He had tenure: this was his job for life. He could hope for promotion, but in thirty years he would be – this hurt him – the same man, if not a paler version. The manuscript of his book, the letters from publishers containing phrases of terse praise and regret and solemn rejection clipped to the flyleaf, would stay in the bottom drawer of his desk. Once he had had momentum and had breathed an atmosphere of expectancy; he had flown across Europe and been afraid. But he had been younger then, and a student,

and he had been in love.

The study he planned of ruling parties was getting nowhere. He could not keep up with the revolutions or the new names (the presidents and generals in these countries were so young!). He taught Political Theory and used a textbook that a colleague had written. Morris knew it was not a good one.

Then the Russians invaded Czechoslovakia. Morris looked at his newspaper and saw photographs of chaos. He was tempted to throw the paper away and pay no further attention, for he could not separate in his mind the country from that woman in his house (Lil!) urging food into the two fat little girls whose Slavic names, instead of being dimmed by three and four years of utterance, had acquired queer, unfamiliar highlights and were the roots of even sillier diminutives, encouraging ridicule.

Morris fought that impulse, and he did not want the oblique revenge which his indifference to the invasion would have been. So he read the story and looked at the pictures, and he felt exhilaration, anger stoked by a continuous flow of indignant shame, as if he had returned to a deserted neighborhood and realized, standing amid abandoned buildings, that he too had been a deserter. The pictures were of Prague: tanks in formation on a thoroughfare's cobbles, their slender cannon snouts sniffing at rumpled citizens; some boys near the tanks with their hands cupped at their mouths, obviously shouting; others, reaching, in the act of pitching stones; people being chased into doorways by soldiers wearing complicated boots and carrying rifles; people laying wreaths; pathetically small crowds wagging signs; two old ladies, with white flowers, weeping. Morris read the news reports and the editorial, and he fumbled with a cigarette, discovering as he puffed that he had put the wrong end in his mouth and lighted the filter tip.

'What's that awful stink?' It was O'Hara. He saw the paper spread out, the headline. He said, 'Incredible, isn't it?'

'I could have predicted it,' said Morris. He was shaking his head from side to side, but he was smiling.

O'Hara invited Morris over for a meal the next night. He said, 'And don't forget to bring the wife! She's the one I want to chew the fat with.'

Remembering Lil, Morris folded the paper and started down the corridor. He was stopped by Charlie Shankland (Latin America). Shankland said, 'I'm sorry about this,' meaning the invasion, and invited the Rosetrees for Saturday.

Lil cried that afternoon. She saw the paper and said, 'Brave, brave people,' and 'My poor country, always trouble.' At the O'Haras' and the Shanklands' Lil was asked about the Russians: how did she feel about them? what would she do if she were in

Prague today? who would she support?

‘You do not know how … messianic … are the Russians,’ she said. Morris had never heard her use that word before. He was pleased. ‘My husband,’ she went on, looking at Charlie and lowering her eyes, ‘my husband thinks they are okay, like you all do. But we know they are terrible –’ She could not finish.

She had said ‘sinks’ instead of ‘thinks.’ Morris was angry with himself for having noticed that. He wanted her to say more; he was proud and felt warm toward her. He was asked questions. Twice he replied, ‘Well, my wife says she thinks,’ ending each time ‘Isn’t that right, Lil?’ And each time Lil looked at him and bowed her head sadly in agreement.

Morris dug out his dissertation and read it, and threw half of it away. He made notes for new chapters and began consulting Lil, asking detailed questions and not interrupting her answers. He gave a lecture for the Political Science Club, and he was invited to Chicago to present a paper at a forum on the worsening situation in Czechoslovakia. He started buying an evening paper; he read of more students defying soldiers and scrawling Dubček’s name on the street with chalk. He followed the funeral of the boy who was shot, and he saw the Czechs, whom he often felt were his Czechs, beaten into silence by the Russians. But the silence did not mean assent; even less, approval. It was resistance. He knew them, better than most people knew them. Time had passed, but it was not very long after the first Russian tank appeared in Prague that Morris Rosetree came home from a lecture and whispered to his wife, ‘Lepska, I love you.’