THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING

A NOVEL BY

MILAN KUNDERA

"*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* has something important to say, and it says it with stunning clarity and inventiveness."

—Anne Tyler, *Chicago Sun-Times*

"*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* calls itself a novel, although it is part fairy tale, part literary criticism, part political tract, part musicology, and part autobiography. It can call itself whatever it wants to, because the whole is genius. ... I ought to invoke Günter Grass and Garcia Marquez, because Mr. Kundera belongs in their demonic company."

—John Leonard, *The New York Times*

"*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is at once an impassioned plea for the struggle of memory against the obliterating forces of modern life, an eloquent act of personal memory by a Czech writer living abroad who is forbidden to publish in his own country, and an absolutely dazzling entertainment . . . it is arousing on every level—political, erotic, intellectual, and above all, humorous. And it is proof once more that the strongest voices in world fiction today are those of writers in exile, whether they be political exiles like Solzhenitsyn and Gabriel Garcia Marquez or self-exiles like V. S. Naipaul."

—Charles Michener, *Newsweek*

"*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is a seven-part invention of immense wit, intelligence, and verve . . . a remarkable achievement."

—Robert M. Adams, *The New York Review of Books*

"This book, as it bluntly calls itself, is brilliant and original, written with a purity and wit that invite us directly in. . . . Kundera is able to merge personal and political significances with the ease of a Camus."

—John Updike, *The New York Times Book Review*

"The boldness with which Kundera cuts back and forth among the different levels—from history to autobiography to the apparition of fallen angels—transfigures the familiar with a power entirely his own. Throughout this triumphant act of the imagination, Kundera has made his experience of non-being an ineradicable part of our consciousness."

—Pearl K. Bell, *Commentary*

"This wholly original novel has humor, charm, and enduring power. . . .

The combination is profoundly appealing and explains why Kundera is read and admired in so many languages. There are dozens of ways in which one can become an exile, and he touches directly upon them all."

—Elaine Kendall, *Los Angeles Times*

"A provocative, unsettling, magical, lucid, tortured, humorous, utterly painful, contemporary book. Neither the characters, nor the author, nor the reader is spared when it comes to confronting our perverse, confusing, peculiar current world, whether we live in Czechoslovakia or not."

—Arthur J. Sabatini, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is deeply and impressively subversive, in more ways than one. Kundera not only raps the iron knuckles of totalitarianism; he coolly unravels the velvet glove of liberalism. . . . His condemnation of modern life is broad, but his sympathy for those who create and suffer it is deep."

—Paul Gray, *Time*

"Poetical, political, philosophical, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* is a wonder. And how this man can write."

—Dan Cryer, *Newsday*

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THE BOOK OF LAUGHTER AND FORGETTING

The son of a well-known pianist, Milan Kundera was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia. He was enrolled in the Czech Communist Party right after the Second World War, then debarred from it after the incidents of February, 1948 (the takeover of Prague), at which time he was a student. He worked as a laborer, then as a jazz musician, and finally ended up devoting himself to literature and film. He was a professor at the Prague Institute for Advanced Cinematographic Studies, where his students were the creators of the Czech New Wave in film. After the Russian invasion in 1968, he lost his post and saw all his books removed from the public libraries in his country. In 1975, he settled in France, and in 1979, the Czech government, responding to the publication of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting,* revoked his Czech citizenship. His first novel, *The Joke,* and his collection of stories, *Laughable Loves*, appeared in print in Prague before 1968. His other novels have not been allowed publication in his fatherland. *Life Is Elsewhere* won the Prix Médicis for the best foreign novel published in France in 1973, and *The Farewell Party* won a similar prize, the Premio Mondello, for the best foreign novel published in Italy in 1976. Kundera's works have been translated into twenty languages.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting

by MILAN KUNDERA

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PART ONE

Lost Letters

1

In February 1948, Communist leader Klement Gottwald stepped out on the balcony of a Baroque palace in Prague to address the hundreds of thousands of his fellow citizens packed into Old Town Square. It was a crucial moment in Czech history—a fateful moment of the kind that occurs once or twice in a millennium.

Gottwald was flanked by his comrades, with Clementis standing next to him. There were snow flurries, it was cold, and Gottwald was bareheaded. The solicitous Clementis took off his own fur cap and set it on Gottwald's head.

The Party propaganda section put out hundreds of thousands of copies of a photograph of that balcony with Gottwald, a fur cap on his head and comrades at his side, speaking to the nation. On that balcony the history of Communist Czechoslovakia was born. Every child knew the photograph from posters, schoolbooks, and museums.

Four years later Clementis was charged with treason and hanged. The propaganda section immediately airbrushed him out of history and, obviously, out of all the photographs as well. Ever since, Gottwald has stood on that balcony alone. Where Clementis once stood, there is only bare palace wall. All that remains of Clementis is the cap on Gottwald's head.

2

It is 1971, and Mirek says that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting.

That is his attempt to justify what his friends call carelessness: keeping a careful diary, preserving all correspondence, taking notes at meetings where there is discussion of the current situation and debate of where to go from here. Nothing we do is in violation of the constitution, he tells them. Trying to hide, feeling guilty— that's the beginning of the end.

A week ago, while working with a crew on the roof of a new building, he looked down and had a sudden dizzy spell. He lost his balance and grabbed at a poorly fastened beam, but it came loose and he had to be pulled out from under it. At first the injury looked serious, but

later, when he learned it was just a run-of-the-mill broken arm, he said to himself with satisfaction that now he'd get a week or two off and have time for some things he'd been meaning to take care of.

He had finally come around to the position of his more cautious friends. True, the constitution guaranteed freedom of speech; but the law punished any act that could be construed as undermining the state. Who could tell when the state would start screaming that this or that word was undermining it? He decided he'd better put the incriminating papers in a safe place after all.

First, though, he wanted to settle the Zdena problem. He called her long distance, but couldn't reach her. He wasted four whole days calling. Then yesterday he'd finally gotten through. She'd promised to wait for him this afternoon.

His seventeen-year-old son protested that he couldn't possibly drive with his arm in a cast. It really was pretty hard going. His injured arm swung helpless and useless in its sling on his chest. Whenever he changed gears, he had to let go of the steering wheel for a second.

3

Twenty-five years had gone by since his affair with Zdena, and all he had left of it was a few memories.

Once she showed up dabbing her eyes with a handkerchief and blowing her nose. He asked her what the matter was. A Russian statesman had died the day before, she told him. Some Zhdanov, Arbuzov, or Masturbov. Judging by the number of teardrops, she was more disturbed by Masturbov's death than by the death of her own father.

Could that actually have happened? Or was her lament for Masturbov merely a figment of his present hatred? No, it had happened, though of course the immediate circumstances making the event credible and real escaped him now, and the memory had become implausible, a caricature.

All his memories of her were like that. They had taken a tram back from the apartment where they made love for the first time. (Mirek was particularly gratified to note that he had completely forgotten their copulations, couldn't conjure up a single second of them.) Bumping up and down in a corner seat, she looked gloomy, introspective, amazingly