

m i l a n k u n d e r a

International Bestseller



THE
UNBEARABLE
LIGHTNESS
OF
BEING

A Novel

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The Unbearable Lightness of Being
Translated from the Czech by Michael Henry Heim
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PART ONE
Lightness and Weight

1

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify?

Putting it negatively, the myth of eternal return states that a life which disappears once and for all, which does not return, is like a shadow, without weight, dead in advance, and whether it was horrible, beautiful, or sublime, its horror, sublimity, and beauty mean nothing. We need take no more note of it than of a war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century, a war that altered nothing in the destiny of the world, even if a hundred thousand blacks perished in excruciating torment.

Will the war between two African kingdoms in the fourteenth century itself be altered if it recurs again and again, in eternal return?

It will: it will become a solid mass, permanently protuberant, its inanity irreparable.

If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories, and discussions, have become lighter than feathers, frightening no one. There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads. Let us therefore agree that the idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia, even the guillotine.

Not long ago, I caught myself experiencing a most incredible sensation. Leafing through a book on Hitler, I was touched by some of his portraits: they reminded me of my childhood. I grew up during the war; several members of my family perished in Hitler's concentration camps; but what were their deaths compared with the memories of a lost period in my life, a period that would never return? This reconciliation with Hitler reveals the profound moral perversity of a world that rests essentially on the nonexistence of return, for in this world everything is pardoned in advance and therefore everything cynically permitted.

2

If every second of our lives recurs an infinite number of times, we are nailed to eternity as Jesus Christ was nailed to the cross. It is a terrifying prospect. In the world of eternal return the weight of unbearable responsibility lies heavy on every move we make. That is why Nietzsche called the idea of eternal return the heaviest of burdens (das schwerste Gewicht).

If eternal return is the heaviest of burdens, then our lives can stand out against it in all their splendid lightness.

But is heaviness truly deplorable and lightness splendid?

The heaviest of burdens crushes us, we sink beneath it, it pins us to the ground. But in the love poetry of every age, the woman longs to be weighed down by the man's body. The heaviest of burdens is therefore simultaneously an image of life's most intense fulfillment. The heavier the burden, the closer our lives come to the earth, the more real and truthful they become.

Conversely, the absolute absence of a burden causes man to be lighter than air, to soar into the heights, take leave of the earth and his earthly being, and become only half real, his movements as free as they are insignificant.

What then shall we choose? Weight or lightness?

Parmenides posed this very question in the sixth century before Christ. He saw the world divided into pairs of opposites:

light/darkness, fineness/coarseness, warmth/cold, being/non-being. One half of the opposition he called positive (light, fine-ness, warmth, being), the other negative. We might find this division into positive and negative poles childishly simple except for one difficulty: which one is positive, weight or light-ness?

Parmenides responded: lightness is positive, weight negative. Was he correct or not? That is the question. The only certainty is: the lightness/weight opposition is the most mysterious, most ambiguous of all.

3

I have been thinking about Tomas for many years. But only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly. I saw him standing at the window of his flat and looking across the courtyard at the opposite walls, not knowing what to do. He had first met Tereza about three weeks earlier in a small Czech town. They had spent scarcely an hour together. She had accompanied him to the station and waited with him until he boarded the train. Ten days later she paid him a visit. They made love the day she arrived. That night she came down with a fever and stayed a whole week in his flat with the flu.

He had come to feel an inexplicable love for this all but complete stranger; she seemed a child to him, a child someone had put in a bulrush basket daubed with pitch and sent down-stream for Tomas to fetch at the riverbank of his bed.

She stayed with him a week, until she was well again, then went back to her town, some hundred and twenty-five miles from Prague. And then came the time I have just spoken of and see as the key to his life: Standing by the window, he looked out over the courtyard at the walls opposite him and deliberated.

Should he call her back to Prague for good? He feared the responsibility. If he invited her to come, then come she would, and offer him up her life.

Or should he refrain from approaching her? Then she would remain a waitress in a hotel restaurant of a provincial town and he would never see her again.

Did he want her to come or did he not?

He looked out over the courtyard at the opposite walls, seeking an answer.

He kept recalling her lying on his bed; she reminded him of no one in his former life. She was neither mistress nor wife. She was a child whom he had taken from a bulrush basket that had been daubed with pitch and sent to the riverbank of his bed. She fell asleep. He knelt down next to her. Her feverous breath quickened and she gave out a weak moan. He pressed his face to hers and whispered calming words into her sleep. After a while he felt her breath return to normal and her face rise unconsciously to meet his. He smelled the delicate aroma of her fever and breathed it in, as if trying to glut himself with the intimacy of her body. And all at once he fancied she had been with him for many years and was dying. He had a sudden clear feeling that he would not survive her death. He would lie down beside her and want to die with her. He pressed his face into the pillow beside her head and kept it there for a long time.

Now he was standing at the window trying to call that moment to account. What could it have been if not love declaring itself to him?

But was it love? The feeling of wanting to die beside her was clearly exaggerated: he had seen her only once before in his life! Was it simply the hysteria of a man who, aware deep down of his inaptitude for love, felt the self-deluding need to simulate it? His unconscious was so cowardly that the best partner it could choose for its little comedy was this miserable provincial waitress with practically no chance at all to enter his life!

Looking out over the courtyard at the dirty walls, he realized he had no idea whether it was hysteria or love.

And he was distressed that in a situation where a real man would instantly have known how to act, he was vacillating and therefore depriving the most beautiful moments he had ever experienced (kneeling at her bed and thinking he would not

survive her death) of their meaning.

He remained annoyed with himself until he realized that not knowing what he wanted was actually quite natural.

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

Was it better to be with Tereza or to remain alone?

There is no means of testing which decision is better, because there is no basis for comparison. We live everything as it comes, without warning, like an actor going on cold. And what can life be worth if the first rehearsal for life is life itself? That is why life is always like a sketch. No, sketch is not quite the word, because a sketch is an outline of something, the ground-work for a picture, whereas the sketch that is our life is a sketch for nothing, an outline with no picture.

Einmal ist keinmal, says Tomas to himself. What happens but once, says the German adage, might as well not have happened at all. If we have only one life to live, we might as well not have lived at all.

4

But then one day at the hospital, during a break between operations, a nurse called him to the telephone. He heard Tereza's voice coming from the receiver. She had phoned him from the railway station. He was overjoyed. Unfortunately, he had something on that evening and could not invite her to his place until the next day. The moment he hung up, he reproached himself for not telling her to go straight there. He had time enough to cancel his plans, after all! He tried to imagine what Tereza would do in Prague during the thirty-six long hours before they were to meet, and had half a mind to jump into his car and drive through the streets looking for her.

She arrived the next evening, a handbag dangling from her shoulder, looking more elegant than before. She had a thick book under her arm. It was Anna Karenina. She seemed in a good mood, even a little boisterous, and tried to make him think she had just happened to drop in, things had just worked out that way: she was in Prague on business, perhaps (at this point she became rather vague) to find a job.

Later, as they lay naked and spent side by side on the bed, he asked her where she was staying. It was night by then, and he offered to drive her there. Embarrassed, she answered that she still had to find a hotel and had left her suitcase at the station.

Only two days ago, he had feared that if he invited her to Prague she would offer him up her life. When she told him her suitcase was at the station, he immediately realized that the suitcase contained her life and that she had left it at the station only until she could offer it up to him.

The two of them got into his car, which was parked in front of the house, and drove to the station. There he claimed the suitcase (it was large and enormously heavy) and took it and her home.

How had he come to make such a sudden decision when for nearly a fortnight he had wavered so much that he could not even bring himself to send a postcard asking her how she was?

He himself was surprised. He had acted against his principles. Ten years earlier, when he had divorced his wife, he celebrated the event the way others celebrate a marriage. He understood he was not born to live side by side with any woman and could be fully himself only as a bachelor. He tried to design his life in such a way that no woman could move in with a suitcase. That was why his flat had only the one bed. Even though it was wide enough, Tomas would tell his mistresses that he was unable to fall asleep with anyone next to him, and drive them home after midnight. And so it was not the flu that kept him from sleeping with Tereza on her first visit. The first night he had slept in his large armchair, and the rest of that week he drove each night to the hospital, where he had a cot in his office.

But this time he fell asleep by her side. When he woke up the next morning, he found Tereza, who was still asleep, holding his hand. Could they have been hand

in hand all night? It was hard to believe.

And while she breathed the deep breath of sleep and held his hand (firmly: he was unable to disengage it from her grip), the enormously heavy suitcase stood by the bed.

He refrained from loosening his hand from her grip for fear of waking her, and turned carefully on his side to observe her better.

Again it occurred to him that Tereza was a child put in a pitch-daubed bulrush basket and sent downstream. He couldn't very well let a basket with a child in it float down a stormy river! If the Pharaoh's daughter hadn't snatched the basket carrying little Moses from the waves, there would have been no Old Testament, no civilization as we now know it! How many ancient myths begin with the rescue of an abandoned child! If Polybus hadn't taken in the young Oedipus, Sophocles wouldn't have written his most beautiful tragedy!

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

5

He lived a scant two years with his wife, and they had a son. At the divorce proceedings, the judge awarded the infant to its mother and ordered Tomas to pay a third of his salary for its support. He also granted him the right to visit the boy every other week.

But each time Tomas was supposed to see him, the boy's mother found an excuse to keep him away. He soon realized that bringing them expensive gifts would make things a good deal easier, that he was expected to bribe the mother for the son's love. He saw a future of quixotic attempts to inculcate his views in the boy, views opposed in every way to the mother's. The very thought of it exhausted him. When, one Sunday, the boy's mother again canceled a scheduled visit, Tomas decided on the spur of the moment never to see him again.

Why should he feel more for that child, to whom he was bound by nothing but a single improvident night, than for any other? He would be scrupulous about paying support; he just didn't want anybody making him fight for his son in the name of paternal sentiments!

Needless to say, he found no sympathizers. His own par-ents condemned him roundly: if Tomas refused to take an in-terest in his son, then they, Tomas's parents, would no longer take an interest in theirs. They made a great show of maintain-ing good relations with their daughter-in-law and trumpeted their exemplary stance and sense of justice.

Thus in practically no time he managed to rid himself of wife, son, mother, and father. The only thing they bequeathed to him was a fear of women. Tomas desired but feared them. Needing to create a compromise between fear and desire, he devised what he called erotic friendship. He would tell his mistresses: the only relationship that can make both partners happy is one in which sentimentality has no place and neither partner makes any claim on the life and freedom of the other.

To ensure that erotic friendship never grew into the aggres-sion of love, he would meet each of his long-term mistresses only at intervals. He considered this method flawless and propa-gated it among his friends: The important thing is to abide by the rule of threes. Either you see a woman three times in quick succession and then never again, or you maintain relations over the years but make sure that the rendezvous are at least three weeks apart.

The rule of threes enabled Tomas to keep intact his liaisons with some women while continuing to engage in short-term affairs with many others. He was not always understood. The woman who understood him best was Sabina. She was a paint-er. The reason I like you, she would say to him, is you're the complete opposite of kitsch. In the kingdom of kitsch you would be a monster.

It was Sabina he turned to when he needed to find a job for Tereza in Prague. Following the unwritten rules of erotic friendship, Sabina promised to do everything in her power, and before long she had in fact located a place for Tereza in the darkroom of an illustrated weekly. Although her new job did not require any particular qualifications, it raised her status from waitress to member of the press. When Sabina herself introduced Tereza to everyone on the weekly, Tomas knew he had never had a better friend as a mistress than Sabina.

The unwritten contract of erotic friendship stipulated that To-mas should exclude all love from his life. The moment he violated that clause of the contract, his other mistresses would assume inferior status and become ripe for insurrection.

Accordingly, he rented a room for Tereza and her heavy suitcase. He wanted to be able to watch over her, protect her, enjoy her presence, but felt no need to change his way of life. He did not want word to get out that Tereza was sleeping at his place: spending the night together was the corpus delicti of love. He never spent the night with the others. It was easy enough if he was at their place: he could leave whenever he pleased. It was worse when they were at his and he had to explain that come midnight he would have to drive them home because he was an insomniac and found it impossible to fall asleep in close proximity to another person. Though it was not far from the truth, he never dared tell them the whole truth:

after making love he had an uncontrollable craving to be by himself; waking in the middle of the night at the side of an alien body was distasteful to him, rising in the morning with an in-truder repellent; he had no desire to be overheard brushing his teeth in the bathroom, nor was he enticed by the thought of an intimate breakfast.

That is why he was so surprised to wake up and find Tereza squeezing his hand tightly. Lying there looking at her, he could not quite understand what had happened. But as he ran through the previous few hours in his mind, he began to sense an aura of hitherto unknown happiness emanating from them.

From that time on they both looked forward to sleeping together. I might even say that the goal of their lovemaking was not so much pleasure as the sleep that followed it. She especially was affected. Whenever she stayed overnight in her rented room (which quickly became only an alibi for Tomas), she was unable to fall asleep; in his arms she would fall asleep no matter how wrought up she might have been. He would whisper im-promptu fairy tales about her, or gibberish, words he repeated monotonously, words soothing or comical, which turned into vague visions lulling her through the first dreams of the night. He had complete control over her sleep: she dozed off at the second he chose. While they slept, she held him as on the first night, keeping a firm grip on wrist, finger, or ankle. If he wanted to move without waking her, he had to resort to artifice. After freeing his finger (wrist, ankle) from her clutches, a process which, since she guarded him carefully even in her sleep, never failed to rouse her partially, he would calm her by slipping an object into her hand (a rolled-up pajama top, a slipper, a book), which she then gripped as tightly as if it were a part of his body.

Once, when he had just lulled her to sleep but she had gone no farther than dream's antechamber and was therefore still responsive to him, he said to her, Good-bye, I'm going now. Where? she asked in her sleep. Away, he answered sternly. Then I'm going with you, she said, sitting up in bed. No, you can't. I'm going away for good, he said, going out into the hall. She stood up and followed him out, squinting. She was naked beneath her short nightdress. Her face was blank, expressionless, but she moved energetically. He walked through the hall of the flat into the hall of the building (the hall shared by all the occupants), closing the door in her face. She flung it open and continued to follow him, convinced in her sleep that he meant to leave her for good and she had to stop him. He walked down the stairs to the first landing and waited for her there. She went down after him, took him by the hand, and led him back to bed.

Tomas came to this conclusion: Making love with a woman and sleeping with a woman are two separate passions, not merely different but opposite. Love does not make itself felt in the desire for copulation (a desire that extends to an infinite number of women) but in the desire for shared sleep (a desire limited to one woman).

In the middle of the night she started moaning in her sleep. Tomas woke her up, but when she saw his face she said, with hatred in her voice, Get away from me!

Get away from me! Then she told him her dream: The two of them and Sabina had been in a big room together. There was a bed in the middle of the room. It was like a platform in the theater. Tomas ordered her to stand in the corner while he made love to Sabina. The sight of it caused Tereza intolerable suffering. Hoping to alleviate the pain in her heart by pains of the flesh, she jabbed needles under her fingernails. It hurt so much, she said, squeezing her hands into fists as if they actually were wounded.

He pressed her to him, and she gradually (trembling violently for a long time) fell asleep in his arms.

Thinking about the dream the next day, he remembered something. He opened a desk drawer and took out a packet of letters Sabina had written to him. He was not long in finding the following passage: I want to make love to you in my studio. It will be like a stage surrounded by people. The audience won't be allowed up close, but they won't be able to take their eyes off us....

The worst of it was that the letter was dated. It was quite recent, written long after Tereza had moved in with Tomas.

So you've been rummaging in my letters!

She did not deny it. Throw me out, then!

But he did not throw her out. He could picture her pressed against the wall of Sabina's studio jabbing needles up under her nails. He took her fingers between his hands and stroked them, brought them to his lips and kissed them, as if they still had drops of blood on them.

But from that time on, everything seemed to conspire against him. Not a day went by without her learning something about his secret life.

At first he denied it all. Then, when the evidence became too blatant, he argued that his polygamous way of life did not in the least run counter to his love for her. He was inconsistent: first he disavowed his infidelities, then he tried to justify them.

Once he was saying good-bye after making a date with a woman on the phone, when from the next room came a strange sound like the chattering of teeth. By chance she had come home without his realizing it. She was pouring something from a medicine bottle down her throat, and her hand shook so badly the glass bottle clicked against her teeth.

He pounced on her as if trying to save her from drowning. The bottle fell to the floor, spotting the carpet with valerian drops. She put up a good fight, and he had to keep her in a straitjacket-like hold for a quarter of an hour before he could calm her.

He knew he was in an unjustifiable situation, based as it was on complete inequality.

One evening, before she discovered his correspondence with Sabina, they had gone to a bar with some friends to celebrate Tereza's new job. She had been promoted at the weekly from darkroom technician to staff photographer. Because he had never been much for dancing, one of his younger colleagues took over. They made a splendid couple on the dance floor, and Tomas found her more beautiful than ever. He looked on in amazement at the split-second precision and deference with which Tereza anticipated her partner's will. The dance seemed to him a declaration that her devotion, her ardent desire to satisfy his every whim, was not necessarily bound to his person, that if she hadn't met Tomas, she would have been ready to respond to the call of any other man she might have met instead. He had no difficulty imagining Tereza and his young colleague as lovers. And the ease with which he arrived at this fiction wounded him. He realized that Tereza's body was perfectly thinkable coupled with any male body, and the thought put him in a foul mood. Not until late that night, at home, did he admit to her he was jealous.

This absurd jealousy, grounded as it was in mere hypotheses, proved that he considered her fidelity an unconditional postulate of their relationship. How then could he begrudge her her jealousy of his very real mistresses?

8

During the day, she tried (though with only partial success) to believe what Tomas told her and to be as cheerful as she had been before. But her jealousy thus tamed by day burst forth all the more savagely in her dreams, each of which

ended in a wail he could silence only by waking her. Her dreams recurred like themes and variations or television series. For example, she repeatedly dreamed of cats jumping at her face and digging their claws into her skin. We need not look far for an interpretation: in Czech slang the word cat means a pretty woman. Tereza saw herself threatened by women, all women. All women were potential mistresses for Tomas, and she feared them all. In another cycle she was being sent to her death. Once, when he woke her as she screamed in terror in the dead of night, she told him about it. I was at a large indoor swimming pool. There were about twenty of us. All women. We were naked and had to march around the pool. There was a basket hanging from the ceiling and a man standing in the basket. The man wore a broad-brimmed hat shading his face, but I could see it was you. You kept giving us orders. Shouting at us. We had to sing as we marched, sing and do kneebends. If one of us did a bad kneebend, you would shoot her with a pistol and she would fall dead into the pool. Which made everybody laugh and sing even louder. You never took your eyes off us, and the minute we did something wrong, you would shoot. The pool was full of corpses floating just below the surface. And I knew I lacked the strength to do the next kneebend and you were going to shoot me! In a third cycle she was dead. Lying in a hearse as big as a furniture van, she was surrounded by dead women. There were so many of them that the back door would not close and several legs dangled out.

But I'm not dead! Tereza cried. I can still feel!

So can we, the corpses laughed.

They laughed the same laugh as the live women who used to tell her cheerfully it was perfectly normal that one day she would have bad teeth, faulty ovaries, and wrinkles, because they all had bad teeth, faulty ovaries, and wrinkles. Laughing the same laugh, they told her that she was dead and it was perfectly all right! Suddenly she felt a need to urinate. You see, she cried. I need to pee. That's proof positive I'm not dead!

But they only laughed again. Needing to pee is perfectly normal! they said.

You'll go on feeling that kind of thing for a long time yet. Like a person who has an arm cut off and keeps feeling it's there. We may not have a drop of pee left in us, but we keep needing to pee.

Tereza huddled against Tomas in bed. And the way they talked to me! Like old friends, people who'd known me forever. I was appalled at the thought of having to stay with them forever.

9

All languages that derive from Latin form the word compassion by combining the prefix meaning with (corn-) and the root meaning suffering (Late Latin, passio). In other languages—Czech, Polish, German, and Swedish, for instance—this word is translated by a noun formed of an equivalent prefix combined with the word that means feeling (Czech, soucit; Polish, wspol-czucie; German, Mit-gefuhl; Swedish, med-kansia).

In languages that derive from Latin, compassion means: we cannot look on coolly as others suffer; or, we sympathize with those who suffer. Another word with approximately the same meaning, pity (French, pitie; Italian, pieta; etc.), connotes a certain condescension towards the sufferer. To take pity on a woman means that we are better off than she, that we stoop to her level, lower ourselves.

That is why the word compassion generally inspires suspicion; it designates what is considered an inferior, second-rate sentiment that has little to do with love. To love someone out of compassion means not really to love.

In languages that form the word compassion not from the root suffering but from the root feeling, the word is used in approximately the same way, but to contend that it designates a bad or inferior sentiment is difficult. The secret strength of its etymology floods the word with another light and gives it a broader meaning: to have compassion (co-feeling) means not only to be able to live with the other's misfortune but also to feel with him any emotion—joy, anxiety, happiness, pain. This kind of compassion (in the sense of souc/r, wspolczucie, Mitgefuhl, medkansia) therefore signifies the maximal capacity of affective

imagination, the art of emotional telepathy. In the hierarchy of sentiments, then, it is supreme.

By revealing to Tomas her dream about jabbing needles under her fingernails, Tereza unwittingly revealed that she had gone through his desk. If Tereza had been any other woman, Tomas would never have spoken to her again. Aware of that, Tereza said to him, Throw me out! But instead of throwing her out, he seized her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers, because at that moment he himself felt the pain under her fingernails as surely as if the nerves of her fingers led straight to his own brain.

Anyone who has failed to benefit from the Devil's gift of compassion (co-feeling) will condemn Tereza coldly for her deed, because privacy is sacred and drawers containing intimate correspondence are not to be opened. But because compassion was Tomas's fate (or curse), he felt that he himself had knelt before the open desk drawer, unable to tear his eyes from Sabina's letter. He understood Tereza, and not only was he incapable of being angry with her, he loved her all the more.

10

Her gestures grew abrupt and unsteady. Two years had elapsed since she discovered he was unfaithful, and things had grown worse. There was no way out. Was he genuinely incapable of abandoning his erotic friendships? He was. It would have torn him apart. He lacked the strength to control his taste for other women. Besides, he failed to see the need. No one knew better than he how little his exploits threatened Tereza. Why then give them up? He saw no more reason for that than to deny himself soccer matches.

But was it still a matter of pleasure? Even as he set out to visit another woman, he found her distasteful and promised himself he would not see her again. He constantly had Tereza's image before his eyes, and the only way he could erase it was by quickly getting drunk. Ever since meeting Tereza, he had been unable to make love to other women without alcohol! But alcohol on his breath was a sure sign to Tereza of infidelity.

He was caught in a trap: even on his way to see them, he found them distasteful, but one day without them and he was back on the phone, eager to make contact. He still felt most comfortable with Sabina. He knew she was discreet and would not divulge their rendezvous. Her studio greeted him like a memento of his past, his idyllic bachelor past.

Perhaps he himself did not realize how much he had changed: he was now afraid to come home late, because Tereza would be waiting up for him. Then one day Sabina caught him glancing at his watch during intercourse and trying to hasten its conclusion.

Afterwards, still naked and lazily walking across the studio, she stopped before an easel with a half-finished painting and watched him sidelong as he threw on his clothes.

When he was fully dressed except for one bare foot, he looked around the room, and then got down on all fours to continue the search under a table.

You seem to be turning into the theme of all my paintings, she said. The meeting of two worlds. A double exposure. Showing through the outline of Tomas the libertine, incredibly, the face of a romantic lover. Or, the other way, through a Tristan, always thinking of his Tereza, I see the beautiful, betrayed world of the libertine.

Tomas straightened up and, distractedly, listened to Sabina's words.

What are you looking for? she asked.

A sock.

She searched all over the room with him, and again he got down on all fours to look under the table.

Your sock isn't anywhere to be seen, said Sabina. You must have come without it.

How could I have come without it? cried Tomas, looking at his watch. I wasn't wearing only one sock when I came, was I?

It's not out of the question. You've been very absent-minded lately. Always rushing somewhere, looking at your watch. It wouldn't surprise me in the least if you forgot to put on a sock.

He was just about to put his shoe on his bare foot. It's cold out, Sabina said. I'll lend you one of my stockings.

She handed him a long, white, fashionable, wide-net stocking.

He knew very well she was getting back at him for glancing at his watch while making love to her. She had hidden his sock somewhere. It was indeed cold out, and he had no choice but to take her up on the offer. He went home wearing a sock on one foot and a wide-net stocking rolled down over his ankle on the other.

He was in a bind: in his mistresses' eyes, he bore the stigma of his love for Tereza; in Tereza's eyes, the stigma of his ex-ploits with the mistresses.

11

To assuage Tereza's sufferings, he married her (they could finally give up the room, which she had not lived in for quite some time) and gave her a puppy.

It was born to a Saint Bernard owned by a colleague. The sire was a neighbor's German shepherd. No one wanted the little mongrels, and his colleague was loath to kill them.

Looking over the puppies, Tomas knew that the ones he rejected would have to die. He felt like the president of the republic standing before four prisoners condemned to death and empowered to pardon only one of them. At last he made his choice: a bitch whose body seemed reminiscent of the German shepherd and whose head belonged to its Saint Bernard mother. He took it home to Tereza, who picked it up and pressed it to her breast. The puppy immediately peed on her blouse. Then they tried to come up with a name for it. Tomas wanted the name to be a clear indication that the dog was Tereza's, and he thought of the book she was clutching under her arm when she arrived unannounced in Prague. He suggested they call the puppy Tolstoy.

It can't be Tolstoy, Tereza said. It's a girl. How about Anna Karenina?

It can't be Anna Karenina, said Tomas. No woman could possibly have so funny a face. It's much more like Karenin. Yes, Anna's husband. That's just how I've always pictured him.

But won't calling her Karenin affect her sexuality?

It is entirely possible, said Tomas, that a female dog addressed continually by a male name will develop lesbian tendencies.

Strangely enough, Tomas's words came true. Though bitches are usually more affectionate to their masters than to their mistresses, Karenin proved an exception, deciding that he was in love with Tereza. Tomas was grateful to him for it. He would stroke the puppy's head and say, Well done, Karenin! That's just what I wanted you for. Since I can't cope with her by myself, you must help me.

But even with Karenin's help Tomas failed to make her happy. He became aware of his failure some years later, on approximately the tenth day after his country was occupied by Russian tanks. It was August 1968, and Tomas was receiving daily phone calls from a hospital in Zurich. The director there, a physician who had struck up a friendship with Tomas at an international conference, was worried about him and kept offer-ing him a job.

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If Tomas rejected the Swiss doctor's offer without a second thought, it was for Tereza's sake. He assumed she would not want to leave. She had spent the whole first week of the occupation in a kind of trance almost resembling happiness. After roaming the streets with her camera, she would hand the rolls of film to foreign journalists, who actually fought over them. Once, when she went too far and took a close-up of an officer pointing his revolver at a group of people, she was arrested and kept overnight at Russian military headquarters. There they threatened to shoot her, but no sooner did they let her go than she was back in the streets with her camera.

That is why Tomas was surprised when on the tenth day of the occupation she said to him, Why is it you don't want to go to Switzerland?

Why should I?

They could make it hard for you here.

They can make it hard for anybody, replied Tomas with a wave of the hand. What about you? Could you live abroad?