

1968: What I Wanted

by Andrew Stancek

Her smile dazzled me from across the room.

I was drying my glasses after the bus dropped me in front of the sanatorium, stumbled on the step, looked up expecting ridicule and instead saw...a dream.

The lightning bolt rooted me just inside the door, one hand on a battered suitcase, the rain slicker forming a puddle around my feet. She had a gap between her teeth, a dimple, red hair. I stared and she continued smiling. Another late arrival bumped me from behind; an adult voice muttered about laggards blocking doorways and I somehow picked up my belongings and began moving toward registration. My eyes remained on her and hers on me. She was laughing now, head thrown back. I felt the warmth of sunshine, heard the trill of a lark. I knew her; I had always known her; I was ready to die.

We were twelve years old.

After a barked order I was hustled off to the boys' dorm, to a physical, to the regimentation of a TB facility in a communist country.

The next time I saw her, two days later, across a crowded cafeteria, she was surrounded by a gaggle of squealing girls, gesticulating in animated conversation. Though I sent a ray of longing, she did not look up. I was back in the drab world of uniforms, institutional healthcare, treatments and routines.

Only a week later Czechoslovakia was invaded by the armies of five countries, shattering everything we knew. Most of the facility

patients were picked up by their parents; many, including me, were soon crossing the border to escape to another country.

I never learned her name. She gifted me with a moment of dazzling sunshine before I returned to the pounding rain.

