You Are Now Leaving Czech Soil

by Jerry Ratch

He leans forward across the cafe table,
holding both of her hands,
and tries to kiss her on the lips,
but she pulls back, making him beg for it.

Then she kisses the top of his downturned head.
Beg for it he will, and she knows it.

Now he's kissing her hand,
now all over her chest.
Now her lips, yes, her lips.
Then she smiles, at last.

You are now leaving Czech soil.
You were there for a thousand years.
That is where you met her once,
your great love, and now again,
after all these years.

You are now leaving Czech soil.
You were there for a thousand years.
Curses, at the beginning of time,
had no meaning, but now they do,
because you keep squeezing
the last strings of remorse
out of the human fiddle.

And now, even the Rajneesh have entered Prague,

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with dancing, and with tambourines!
And you are leaving Czech soil, again.

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My grandfather rode with the Czar's army. He was abducted from a village in Austria, trained to pillage and drink, plunder and rape, and ride the best horses that could be had. They were given the best vodka and the sharpest swords. They were all just boys, really. His name was Otto Joseph, the same as his first son, my father. They rode hard, partied all the time, and pillaged everything in their path, all for the glory of the Great Russian Bear. And they enjoyed the high life immensely until one day when he met and fell in love with a short, dark-haired Jewess during one of their pogroms in a little village in Bohemia. If it hadn't been for little Anna Kviz he might have died doing whatever the Czar wanted him to do, happily, without a thought for life, or family, or love at all. He might have died dumb and happy, as my own dad was fond of saying.

The Czar did not approve of the Jews, not at all. And he would send his army into the tiny villages of the Bohemian Empire as often as possible to root out that people, at the bidding of the Church. And so my grandfather fled to America like many did from 1903 to 1906, to escape those pogroms. But he had already learned how to laugh deeply at life, from the belly, just as he had learned how to drink at such a young age. And that unfortunately would be his ultimate downfall in the end.

But it was not until the Great San Francisco earthquake in April of 1906 that his calling and great opportunity came to him, and he

went west with his wife to make a great fortune re-roofing houses there after the quake. He became so wealthy that when he returned to Chicago and began a family there in the Bohemian ghetto on the South side, near the stockyards, he bought the very first automobile in Chicago and drove around that city with the top down, laughing that high-pitched laughter of his, showing off his first-born son Otto Joseph, Jr., my father, who was born in 1909 at their home on Honore Street. Assisted by the very same midwife, named Lizzie, who would go on to help with the birth of my mother Bessie in 1911, in a house at the other end of the same street. What are the chances of that, you might ask? Well, in those days, probably quite good.

So that was how Grandpa Otto Joseph Sr. sailed from rags to riches after coming to America. But then what could go wrong after that great American success story, you might ask? Well, plenty actually. Plenty.

But you could always hear that high-pitched, zany laughter of his, I am told, which was irrepressible. And yeah, I could have been a rich boy too. So close!

But then one of Otto Joseph's roofers fell off a roof in Chicago and was paralyzed. The worker sued and got the whole roofing empire my grandfather had created. There was apparently no insurance for that kind of thing in those days. And that was when Otto Joseph Sr. really took to drinking again. My dad told me he remembered his father sending him next door to the local pub with a nickel to fetch another bucket of beer. Bohemians really loved their beer. And when that was finished, yet another nickel was put into my dad's hand for another bucket. And so on, until Otto Joseph Sr. died from alcohol when my dad was only thirteen. At that point, in 1922, there were now six children, and my dad, being the oldest, had to quit eighth grade and go out and find work to help support the family.

My dad went to a barber training school near Maxwell Street, the skid-row area downtown. At that school the new trainees would give free haircuts to the bums who hung out nearby, just to get experience at cutting real hair. And one day one of the young

barbers-in-training accidently snipped off the tip of a bum's ear. Well, they hurriedly scotch-taped the snipped-off ear part back onto the bleeding bum and then shouted at him to leave, get the heck out of there before they called the police. And of course the confused bum left the shop, drunk and bleeding like a stuck pig. And my dad could still hear in his ear that zany, high-pitched laughter of his own father, as they fell from riches to rags in the heart of the Roaring 20's.

But my dad had been courting my mom, taking her for rides all over Chicago in the sidecar of his motorcycle. They both wrote “I love you” in the steam of her parent's parlor window while the parents were playing pinochle. My dad rode an Indian motorcycle in a motorcycle gang up to Wisconsin and got hit by a car making a left turn, that broadsided him, and got his leg crushed so bad they almost had to cut it off. My dad drove a Model A Roadster and had a photo taken of him on a hunting trip up in Wisconsin, with one leather boot up on the running board and a .22 caliber pistol in his hand, like Ernest Hemingway and Clark Gable rolled into one. And before that decade ended, the great Depression began with the stock market crash of 1929.

I remember how much it frightened my mom when I came home real drunk one time from a party. One of my old high school intellectual friends, Bill B, introduced me to what he called this real wild blonde girl named Sally or Marnie or something in the summer of 1964. She was tall and blonde and thin and looked like a model. Boys were usually afraid to even look at her. She looked hungry, and lonely, but had a haunted, sweet smile. I took her out on my dad's ski-boat on Fox River one night. We lay down with our heads on opposite sides of the front seat and she had short shorts on and I put my foot between her legs and rubbed her until she became wet, but we never went any further. I remember telling her, for some reason I can't understand to this day, that I wanted things to go slower. I think I said I like things to go slow. That was a new one for me. What the hell was I even thinking? (Although I was going out with another

girl from Villa Park at that time, and having enough sex that I wasn't perpetually hungry for it.)

So Sally (or Marnie) took me to a party downtown in Chicago, near Rush Street. It was upstairs at somebody's apartment, and I just kept drinking and drinking all night. Then I drove home somehow, all by myself. I only remember at some point seeing a street sign, but it was tilted about 30 degrees, and I had no idea where I was. Yet somehow I made it back home to Villa Park, and in the middle of the night, my mother found me standing stark naked, peeing in the bathtub. She had to take me by the arm and put me back in bed. “Oh, Jerry,” I remember her saying, “I don't know.” Her head shaking. “I don't know what's gotten into you, young man!”

And that was when my mom told me how much that frightened my dad, because it reminded him of how his own father would be when he came staggering home, drunk like that. And how my father religiously, from that point on, stuck to drinking just one beer at dinnertime, and never got drunk, ever.

But unfortunately that was not how it went for me. I guess I could always somehow hear that wild, crazy-drunk, high-pitched laughter of my grandfather in my inner ear. And I would come to relive a portion of his life as though it was taped in my genes, and I couldn't get near enough to heaven to hear it, without a drink under my belt. And I learned to outdrink all of those around me, as if it were a matter of pride that I could do so and remain standing upright.

My Brief History of Prague

Camille von Schvitzenhausen, life partner of Fyodor von Footitch of Fitzrovia, who wrote the Law of the Ramble and its sequel: the Law of the Long Ramble and finally the long-awaited Laws of the Ramble On and On and On while waiting for execution in the torture chamber of his erstwhile family castle in Bohemia, Krivoklat,

after being seized first by the nuts by Nazis, then Communists for participating in the less well-known Third Defenestration, by throwing some of the party members out of a second story window in Prague, into a large pile of haufen mist, as they say in Deutschland,

“Haufen mist? Haufen mist, ya, das ist ein Haufen mist.”
Left there by either a pack of very large hunds or one enormous Russian work horse, know one knows for sure.

But that was how the Communists managed to survive their fall from such a great height, even if a little smelly, but hey, they survived!