The Visible World

Mark Slouka

Published by Portobello Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

I

ONE NIGHT WHEN I WAS YOUNG MY MOTHER WALKED out of the country bungalow we were staying in in the Poconos. I woke to hear my father pulling on his pants in the dark. It was very late, and the windows were open. The night was everywhere. Where was he going? I asked. "Go back to sleep," he said. Mommy had gone for a walk. He would be right back, he said.

But I started to cry because Mommy had never gone for a walk in the forest at night before and I had never woken to find my father pulling on his pants in the dark. I did not know this place, and the big windows of moonlight on the floor frightened me. In the end he told me to be brave and that he would be back before I knew it and pulled on his shoes and went searching for his wife. And found her, eventually, sitting against a tree or by the side of a pond in her tight-around-the-calf slacks and frayed tennis shoes, twenty years too late.

My mother knew a man during the war. Theirs was a love story, and like any good love story, it left blood on the floor and wreckage in its wake.

It was all done by the fall of 1942. Earlier that year, in May, Czech partisans had assassinated Reichsprotektor Reinhard Heydrich in Prague, and the country had suffered through the

predictable reprisals: interrogations, purges, mass executions. The partisans involved in the hit were killed on June 18. In December of that year my parents escaped occupied Czechoslovakia, crossing from Bohemia into Germany, from Germany to France, then south to Marseille, where my mother nearly died of scarlet fever before they could sail for England, and where my father and a small-time criminal named Vladek (who had befriended my father because they were both from Brno) sold silk and cigarette lighters to the whores whose establishments tended to be in the same neighborhoods and who always seemed to have a bit of money to spend.

They were very young then. I have the documents from the years that followed: the foreign-worker cards and the soft, well-worn passports with their photos and their purple stamps, the information (hair: brown; face: oval) filled in with a fountain pen . . . I have pictures of them—in Innsbruck, in Sydney, in Lyon. In one, my father, shirtless and glazed with sweat, a handkerchief around his head, is standing on a chair, painting a small room white. The year is 1947. The sun is coming through a curtainless window to the left. My mother is holding the can of paint for him. Behind him, the unpainted wall above the brush strokes looks like the sky above a mountain range.

I was born, eight years later, into a world that felt just slightly haunted, like the faint echo of an earlier one. We were living in New York then. At night, high in our apartment in Queens, my mother would curl herself against my back and I would smell her perfume, her hair, the deep, cave-like warmth of her, and she would hum some Czech song or other until I pretended to be asleep. We always lay on our right sides, my head tucked under her chin and her left arm around me, and often—it's the thing I remember most clearly about her now—her fingers would twitch against my stomach or my chest as if she were playing the piano in her dreams, though she wasn't dreaming, or even asleep, and had never played the piano in her life.

• • •

Half a lifetime after the night my father left our cabin to look for my mother, long after they were both gone, I met a man in Prague who told me that the city I thought I'd come to know actually lay four meters under the earth; that the somewhat dank, low-ceilinged café we were sitting in at the time was not the first story, as I had assumed, but the second. To resist the flooding of the Vltava, he said, the streets of the Old Town had been built up with wagonloads of soil — gradually, over decades — and an entire world submerged.

He was a tall, well-dressed man with a crown of gray-white hair and a rumbling baritone voice, and he sat at the tiny glass table sipping his tea with such a straight-backed, sovereign air, such a natural attitude of authority and grace, that he might have been an exiled king instead of the retired director of the Department of Water Supply, which he was. In some of the buildings of the Old Town, he said, pausing to acknowledge the slightly desperate-looking waitress who had brought him a small cup of honey, one could descend into the cellars and find, still visible in the pattern of the brick, the outlines of windows and doors: a stone lintel, a chest-high arch, a bit of mouldered wood trapped between a layer of plaster and brick.

In the course of his work, he said, he had often been called to this building or that where some construction had accidentally unearthed something, and found himself wondering at the utter strangeness of time, at the gradual sinking away of all that was once familiar. He smiled. It could make one quite morbid, really. But then, if one considered the question rightly, one could see the same thing almost everywhere one looked. After all, twenty minutes from where we sat, travelers from a dozen countries stood bargaining for ugly gewgaws on the very stones that only a few centuries ago had been heaped with the dead. Certain things time simply buried more visibly than others. Was it not so?

The waitress came over with a black wallet open in her hand like a miniature bellows, or something with gills. She had

scratched herself badly on her calf, I noticed, and the blood had welled through the torn stocking and dried into a long, dark icicle. She seemed unaware of it. My companion handed her a fifty-crown note. And then, before I could say anything, he wished me a good day, slipped on his greatcoat, and left.

I walked for hours that night, among the crowds and up into the deserted orchards and past the king's gardens, still closed for the winter, where I stood for a while looking through the bars at the empty paths and the low stone benches. Along the far side, between the stands of birches whose mazework of spidery branches reminded me of the thinning hair of old ladies, I could see a long row of waterless fountains, like giant cups or stone flowers.

I was strangely untired. A fine mist began to fall, making the cobbles slippery, as if coated with sweat. I looked at the stone giant by the castle gates, his dagger forever descending but never striking home, then walked down the tilting stairs to a place where a crew of men, working in the white glare of halogen lamps, had opened up the ground. As I passed the pit, I glimpsed a foundation of some sort and what looked like a sewer of fist-sized stones, and struck by the connection to the man I had met in the café, for whom these men might once have worked, after all, I started for home. Everywhere I looked, along the walled streets and narrow alleys, above the cornerstones of buildings and under the vaulted Gothic arches, I saw plaster flayed to brick or stone, and hurrying now through the narrow little park along the river, I startled a couple embracing in the dark whom I had taken for a statue. I mumbled an apology, my heartbeat racing, and rushed on. Behind me I heard the man mutter something angrily, then a woman's low laugh, and then all was still.

That night I dreamed I saw him again in a house at the end of the world, and he looked up from the glass table to where I stood peering in through a small window and mouthed the words "Is it

not so?" I woke to the sound of someone crying in the courtyard, then heard pigeons scuttling on the shingles and a quick flurry of wings and the crying stopped.

And lying there in the dark, I thought, yes, that's what it had been like: beneath the world I had known — so very familiar to me, so very *American* — just under the overgrown summer lawn, or the great stone slab of the doorstep — another one lay buried. It was as though one morning, running through the soaking grass to the dock, I had tripped on an iron spike like a finger pointing from the earth and discovered it was the topmost spire of Hradčany Castle, or realized that the paleness under the water twenty yards out from the fallen birch was actually the white stone hair of Eliška Krásnohorská, whose statue stood in Karlovo náměstí, and that the square itself — its watery trolleys, its green-lit buildings, its men forever lifting their hats in greeting and its women reining in their shining hair — was right there below me, that an entire universe and its times, its stained-glass windows and its vaulted ceilings and its vast cathedral halls, were just below my oars.

But I could never go there. All I could do was peer from above as the people went about their day, unaware that with every step, every kiss, every tram ticket tossed to the curb, they were constructing the world that would shape my own.

2

WHEN I WAS A BOY WE LIVED IN A FIFTEENTH-FLOOR apartment in Queens, like an aerie above the world, and at night my father would read to me from a thick yellow volume of Czech fairy tales. In the book was a page with a kind of tissue over it. Under it was a picture of a beautiful girl in a dark forest. She had thin arms and she wore a white dress like one of my mother's scarves. She was leaning back against the trunk of a huge, mossed tree as though trying to protect it, a hunter's arrow buried deep in her breast.

I would look at that picture when I was alone. At the thin fingers of her left hand splayed like a starfish, grasping the bark. At the blood-red fletching, the stub of the wooden shaft. At the place where it disappeared — right there, just above that small, painful arc, that indescribable, exquisitely painful arc. There was a look on her face, caught between the strands of black, blowing hair, that I found shameful and disturbing and mysterious. I could never look at it for long. A look of shock, of course. And pain, yes. But something else, something I could not understand then — can barely understand now. A look of pleading, of utter renunciation, of love. Of love beyond all song and argument.

• • •

No one could tell you about my father without first telling you something about her. She made him, you see, shaped him, turned him into the man he was. She changed the course of his life as easily as a hill turns a meadow stream. And though you might think that, given enough time, the stream will move the hill, or cut it through, it's the stream that will twist in its bed, alter its course. The new comes to feel natural. Detour becomes destiny.

For twenty-two years, Antonín Sedlák was like every other mother's son in the city of Brno, Czechoslovakia—four rows up, three over—running his own particular course to the sea. Then he ran into her, and nothing was ever the same for him again.

What can I say about my father that isn't bent out of truth by hindsight, misshapen by love? My father was a good and decent man, I think, a man capable of outrage over the world he happened to have found himself in, but someone whose faith in reason, like some men's faith in God or love, remained intact long after his life had made it ridiculous. He couldn't help it. His every gesture departed from that well-lit station, and though he understood how quaint this was, he was powerless to change it. It was his nature, and he wore it with dignity, like a childhood hat one has long outgrown but can't remove for the rest of his life. And somehow I could never bring myself to hold it against him.

I have a small, square photograph of him I've always liked for some reason I can't quite explain. There he is—already tall at thirteen, handsome enough, seemingly comfortable in a collar as high and stiff as a whiplash brace—looking straight on. Not smiling. And yet there is something there—a touch of amusement perhaps, a calm recognition of the absurdity of the proceedings— that seems like a smile.

Everything that he accomplished in his life was a violence against that almost-smile. Against its generosity, its good-hu-

mored reasonableness and decency. Against his very nature. And that, too, the smile seems to anticipate, and accept for the irony it is.

I see him clearly now, like a house revealed by fallen leaves. My father, who fashioned himself over the years into a kind of load-bearing joint, braced up to his burden, and died six months after being relieved of it. Who didn't know how to be in a world so suddenly lightened. I remember the bumps of blue veins on the backs of his hands, the mole on his cheek. I can see him, his big warm forehead, his way of listening while lighting a cigarette or taking a slow sip from his glass, that gesture of his—a slight backward tilt of the head, an open hand—at once wry and unresigned, as if to say, So, what would you do? I see him sitting in the chair by the long, low bookshelf, his bow and his violin propped against the wood next to him. Clean shaven. The flat planes of his cheeks. It embarrassed me to kiss him in front of my friends. I can see him smile. When he reaches for his glass or turns toward where I am kneeling, hidden in the wall, spying through the crack in the door behind my bed, the lenses of his small, rimless glasses turn into coins.

It was my father who told me about Pythagoras. I was seven years old. Pythagoras, he explained, besides doing some very nice work on triangles, which I would someday have to learn about, had believed that the essence of all things was a number, that our souls migrated like finches from life to life until we were liberated from the cycle of birth, and that eating beans was a form of cannibalism. He had come to this last belief, he said, because a cut-open bean looked, and still looks, very much like a human embryo. My father lit a cigarette. And so, he said, since human beings must act on their convictions and, whenever they see a tragedy unfolding, throw themselves headlong under the wheels of history, Pythagoras did what his conscience demanded, and banned the eating of beans. As a result, in Crotona during those few years, among the Pythagoreans if no one else, beans were accorded the respect they deserved.

Which would have been poignant enough, but no, history could never resist the extra step, the peacock's turn — it would always sign with a flourish. Which was why, on a cloudy afternoon at the end of the fifth century before the birth of our lord and savior Jesus Christ, Pythagoras, fleeing Magna Graecia with a mob at his heels, came to the edge of a vast bean field sleeping peacefully under the sombrous sky and, rather than run through this tender nursery of souls, stopped, and was beaten to death with short sticks.

A sad story? Not at all, my father said. A story of courage and conviction, sacrifice and love. Pythagoras was a hero. He took a sip from his glass. A hero for our time.