

## JAN PALACH IN PRAGUE

Thereza tells him to call her Jenny, her English name, the name she once chose from a list in a school workbook. In German class she was Hilda, she tells him—he should take what he can get. “Can I call you Theresa?” George bargains. “Tess?”

Thereza shakes her head. “I’m just—Jenny, in English. Jenny, when I’m with you.” She smiles and squeezes his leg under the table, as if he should feel honored that she has a name just for him, just for the person she is when she is with him. The restaurant has wide, wooden tables, and Jenny’s hand does not reach farther than his knee.

George wonders if this means that Thereza is really someone else entirely, someone she does not wish him to know or speak with or touch. He thought he was going on a dinner date with Thereza Lenhártova, and she turns out to be a Jenny. Bait and switch: George feels a little cheated. “What if I asked you to start calling me Jiří?”

“Jiří?” Jenny laughs. “Don’t be stupid.”

“It’s the Czech *George*. I know it is. My landlord told me.”

“You can’t even pronounce it. You are not allowed to have a name you can’t pronounce. There are rules.”

“Are there?”

“Definitely. Definitely rules.”

“Then who is this Jenny person?”

“Oh, she is very English. She drinks tea and eats biscuits and says, ‘How do you do?’ just like she learned in her lessons.”

“And who is George?” George asks her.

“He has a big American house, with a white fence, and a car he drives every day to work. He has a dog that is yellow and happy. So American! I think he has a wife, too—but she is not so happy.”

“The dogs are brown,” George says. “Two Airedales.”

“And the wife?”

“Oh, she’s happy sometimes. Just not with me.”

They’d met the night before, at the Chateau, a bar George’s landlord had suggested, pulling a pile of pamphlets and maps out of a drawer in the apartment kitchenette and penning little red Xs on popular expat clubs, *hospodas* and *restauraces*. The landlord was Austrian, friendly but businesslike; he knew how extortionate his weekly rates were for the studio apartment in the Malá Strana. He assumed George was a tourist, vacationing in style. George didn’t know what he was, what he was doing, or how long he might stay.

If he wanted a second week in the flat, the Austrian said, he should call by the end of the weekend. George said he’d have to get a phone. The Austrian said he might want one anyway, but George didn’t know what that meant until Thereza was handing him her business card in the basement of the Chateau. The room was packed, the music painful, and Thereza leaned forward to shout in his ear that the blood-red room was newly remodeled. “Before, there was nowhere to dance,” she said. “Do you like to dance?”

George did not like to dance, had never been able to dance, but was unsure how to explain that to this woman, half his age, fully his height, half again more attractive than anyone who’d ever stood this close to him at a bar. Her hair was long and brown and her eyes deliberately sleepy, outlined in dark makeup. He looked down at her business card but couldn’t read it in the dim light.

“Maybe I should go find my friends,” she said, not unkindly.

“I do—I will—” George lifted the business card in the air like an auction ticket and then brushed it past his ear, as if he meant to both call her and flag her down.

“Yes. Call me. We don’t have to dance,” she said, and eased her way around him into the crowd, her fingertips touching his arm and then sliding away in a whisper he imagined he could feel the rest of the night, when he staggered out of the Chateau into the chilly air of the Staré Město and found a street-light bright enough to read the card. *Thereza Lenhártova*, he read, *Feasibility Analyst*, the breathy T and Z sliding down his tongue like Thereza’s fingers on his arm. Walking back to his

apartment, marveling at the shapes of statues against the sky, the curls of baroque facades lit unevenly by streetlamps and moonlight, he kept an eye out for a cell phone store.

George's rental was wall-to-wall IKEA, new and pale and clean-lined. The front windows looked out on Kampa Island, the wooden waterwheel on the Čertovka Canal, trees with autumn's last leaves, dead, clinging to their branches. A rank of brocaded town houses stretched to the north and south of George's building. The air was fresh and very cold, and George opened the windows and pretended to be an exiled nobleman. He turned on the satellite television and pretended to be rich. He picked up his new, secondhand phone, loaded the credits from a plastic phonecard, and told himself: You are a rich, exiled nobleman. You are George of Nosticova Street. A beautiful girl gave you her phone number, and she is waiting for you to call her.

He told her that he had come to Prague, *Praha*, for a conference and now was playing tourist. She asked if he was American and when he said yes, she said, "I thought so." George asked if it was a good thing or a bad thing, and Thereza said it was just a thing.

"Would you like to have dinner sometime?" he asked. "A drink?"

"Sure," she said. "But you must choose the time. Germans, Americans, English, you all like to eat at different hours. I never know when."

George wondered how many men of how many different nationalities she was accustomed to entertaining. He wondered for the first time if she might be a prostitute, if this might all be a terrible misunderstanding. He wondered if, when she asked if he was American, he should have said something wittier, something rueful. He squared his shoulders, there in his apartment where no one could see him, and tightened the muscles of his runner's body, the legs he knew were lean and strong. On the weekends he ran 15-ks with graying men whose wiriness had stretched to gristle, bodies gone stringy or soft; that was not George, not yet, and he was proud that he could say so.

That afternoon George paid for ten minutes at an internet café, searched the firm on the business card, and found a staff page with thumbnail pictures. There she was, Thereza Lenhár-

tova in slightly pixilated glory, her shiny dark hair duotoned and her business degree and contact information listed below. Along with relief, George allowed a breath of excitement to enter into him, a sweaty-palmed, quick-hearted thrill for his first date in twelve years. Thereza Lenhártova was not a prostitute. She was a feasibility analyst with Novak/Hrbac and Associates, she was lovely and multilingual, and she wished to meet George for dinner.

At the Hostinec U Kocoura, as they wait for the waitress to bring George's change, Jenny-Thereza asks him how much he's seen of the city so far. "Would you like if I took you sightseeing tomorrow? I am a good guide. When I was a student I worked at the castle, giving tours."

George nods, folds an impressively large tip for the waitress under Thereza's pint glass and catches her hand in his. "I'd like that very much," he says, brushing his thumb across the tops of her knuckles. As they part ways at her tram stop, she kisses George on the tip of his nose. He allows himself to wonder for a moment if she has simply mis-aimed, but then she throws him a smile as sweet as a Jenny and as baffling as a Thereza over her shoulder as she climbs up into the streetcar.

The next morning, George stands shaving in front of his bathroom mirror and thinks, "You're making a fool of yourself." But it isn't an organic thought, a judgment he would pass on himself. He hears some other voice saying it, his mother, his wife. He stands in front of the bathroom mirror and holds out the razor and scolds his reflection, chides, "George. George George George. You are making a fool of yourself." Then he shrugs and notices a twist to his lips he isn't sure he's seen since he asked Marci to marry him, or maybe not since Steph Spetzer and the junior prom and the hotel after-party, his expression for an anticipation so acute it looks like it's making him a little bit ill. When he meets Thereza at the Metro station, she asks if he's feeling all right.

Jenny-Thereza pays attention to what interests him most, cutting short the intricacies of baroque architecture and pointing out instead the twenty-seven tiled crosses in the Old Town Square that commemorate the beheadings of twenty-seven

Protestant noblemen; she takes him to the church where the paratroopers who assassinated Heydrich took sanctuary until they were all shot to death by Nazis. They see the black cross bubbling out of the cobblestones at the foot of the National Museum, where a young man set himself on fire to protest the Soviet invasion.

“So this is where he died,” George whispers, inching his toes closer; he fights the urge to kneel.

“This is where he put himself on fire. He died later, in hospital. His friends, they were supposed to suicide too, and he told them no, please don’t, the pain is so much, we did not think it will be so much pain.”

George has already taken his camera from his pocket. He is looking at the charred cross through a viewfinder when Thereza says this, and then he can’t decide whether or not to take the picture.

They finish the day at the statue of the martyr John of Nepomuk, thrown off the Charles Bridge, where tourists close their eyes and make wishes. “Put your hand here and face north,” Thereza tells him. “And it is sure that you will return to Prague someday.” George has already laid his hand on the brass cross, thinking he gets his choice of wishes; he doesn’t know how he feels about returning to Prague. He has been here eleven days and some mornings he wakes up and never wants to leave. Other mornings he is convinced that this city has destroyed his life. He has to make a deliberate effort not to pull his hand away.

“Another day we can see pretty things,” Thereza says. “I would like to show you some. But you seemed more interested in political things. Dead things.”

George doesn’t know what to say. He feels embarrassed now, exposed as a historical voyeur. But she takes the tram home with him anyway. “Very posh,” she says, as he holds the door for her. “How much are you paying?”

George tells her, and she looks both amused and horrified. George takes her to his bedroom and she begins to undress. She is so pale he can see everywhere the webbing of her veins, trellised up her legs, down her arms, converging on the bottoms of her wrists, the backs of her hands. Her veins are dark blue and green and the effect is ghoulish, the web-marked white skin shining in the dark with what looks like some delicate disease.

George joins her in bed and touches her, closes his eyes and presses down on her skin with his palms, relieved that the feel of her is unmarred, smooth and anonymous and youthful. As they make love that night, George can barely breathe under a wave of what he tells himself is love and knows is gratitude.

The next morning, as Thereza is leaving, she notices the crumpled remnants of a foamcore poster display, catalogs and fliers stacked in a corner with a laptop computer and a stack of CD-ROMS.

“What’s all this?” she asks, paging through material about oxygen tanks, mobility aids, nebulizers, drug administration options.

“My work. My presentation for the conference I told you about.”

“Ježiš. No wonder you want to take a holiday. I am away, this week, for business. I am meeting clients in Passau. But next weekend? Maybe something fun. Like the zoo. Do you like zoos?”

George swallows, nods, calculates how much he will owe the Austrian for another week in the apartment.

George buys a guidebook, researches field trips to take while Thereza writes feasibility reports for German retailers considering expansion into the Czech Republic. He takes the bus to Lidice, where little bronze statues of long-dead schoolchildren huddle in the foundations of their ruined schoolhouse, to the Terezín concentration camp, where he watches vacationing couples try to decide whether they should smile in their photographs. George is not sure where his new concern with martyrdom has come from. Thereza asks him in front of the penguin exhibit at the zoo what he has done all week, and he is ashamed to answer. She seems visibly disconcerted that George is a man of such insatiable appetites, that the corpses she offered last weekend were insufficient.

George has no idea how to explain it to her, doesn’t think she’d understand. He has asked her what life was like before, under the Communists, and she told him that she was a child, that she remembers little, that life after the revolution is very nearly the only life she knows. “There was one kind of yogurt in the shops, and then there were eight,” she says. “It was hard

to choose.” She is impatient with the topic but he keeps asking. It is important to him to feel like he is making her life better, like he is an *after* rescuing her from an inclement *before*. In truth, he knows she does not need him. She wears clothes bought on Národní Třída, owns a cell phone the size of a credit card. George is unsure what he has to offer, and this seems like a test, a quiz question he can ace only if he has all the relevant information.

“But what else? What else is different now?”

“I don’t *know*. The shoes are better. What do you want me to say?”

What George really wants are answers to questions he doesn’t have the nerve to ask, either because Thereza would be angry or, worse, because she might just shrug, shake her head no. “Do you know anyone who was tortured?” he wants to ask. “Imprisoned? Informed on? Do you know anyone touched by fire?”

At the zoo Thereza tells him about the animals carried away in the summer floods three years ago, about the elephant who drowned with his trunk lifted high, his body already submerged, about the seal who was swept down the Vltava as far as Germany, followed by helicopter news crews and rescue teams. Thereza does her best, but these are not the kinds of deaths that interest George. After the zoo they take a tram to the Nové Město so Thereza can do some shopping. George pays for a blouse, a pair of shoes. She doesn’t ask and he doesn’t offer; he simply takes her selections out of her arms and carries them to the register. At the Metro station they hold hands in the middle of the platform, waiting for trains traveling in opposite directions. “I’d like to see you again,” George says. “Soon.” And it is only after Thereza says yes, after her train shouts out of the tunnel and opens its doors, that he hands her the shopping bags.

The evenings Thereza is busy, with work or with a life she does not care to tell George much about, he does not live in his apartment like a nobleman. He sits at his kitchen table with stacks of receipts, a calculator, his best guesses at the previous balance of his checking account, savings, the limits on his credit cards. He estimates the date SoluMed would have officially stopped paying him and adds in Marci’s November pay as an accounts receivable manager. He tracks the shifting exchange rate between dollars and crowns. It is slipping, constantly, in

favor of the crown. He looks around at his nobleman's apartment and no longer feels rich. He leaves the windows cracked open, the sharp air and the sounds of the river, and turns off the satellite television, Sparta Praha vs. Tottenham Hotspurs. He thinks maybe, if he stays in Europe long, he should try to get into soccer.

So maybe you're not a nobleman, George thinks. Maybe you're an oppressed citizen of a Communist regime. Maybe you spent an entire winter eating cauliflower and boiled potatoes. George has bought several memoirs from the Museum of Communism and read them carefully. He goes to the local market and buys a wedge of rye bread, white cheese, harsh, Turkish-style coffee. He eats and reads that night about traveling to East Germany to buy oranges for Christmas. He thinks about asking Thereza to take the train to Dresden with him. They will go to the German department stores, and while she shops he will take an elevator to the basement supermarket. He will take a single orange from the stacks of hundreds, cradle it in his pocket, and never tell her.

It has been two and a half weeks since George let British Airways Flight 807 leave Prague-Ruzyne without him, just let it plow up into the air and sail westward while he sat nursing a beer at the Holiday Inn–Congress Center hotel bar, his suitcase between his feet. When he finished the beer, he asked to check back in to his room. "I'd like to buy another night," he said, and another and another until the desk clerk suggested that that might not be the best idea, that after all the frantic calls from his wife, from his boss, from the Phoenix police department, from a Dr. Stein, whom George remembered his wife suggesting as a couples therapist, George had become something of a burden on the front-desk staff. "Perhaps you should make other arrangements," the concierge suggested, so George combed the *Prague Post* for listings, called the Austrian, counted his money and packed his suitcase. He sent an e-mail to his wife from an internet café on a square named after the boy who set himself on fire. "I'm fine," he wrote. "Please stop calling the hotel. I'm not staying there anymore. No phone at present. Love, George."

In his previous life, the one he spent as a medical equipment sales representative in Arizona, George had found himself vi-

brating. He would take a paper out of the fax machine and watch it tremble. His coffee shivered in his mug, and he wedged his knees under his desk like he might otherwise float into the air. His elbows quivered like dragonfly wings: his fingers twitched like antennas. He drafted catalog copy for the direct consumer mailing, gently describing devices that could help caregivers perform what a loved one's body no longer could. George did this so well SoluMed sent him to an industry conference in Prague to deliver a presentation on making the sale. He had counted the days until the trip. He was a bird, a mosquito, a balloon, a zeppelin. He was rising. There wasn't enough ballast in the sandbags to hold him to the ground. Still, it was only as soon as he'd decided that he wasn't going back—he couldn't possibly—that he felt finally, heavily, still.

One Sunday morning George goes for his run, down cobblestoned Nosticova Street and through the park on Kampa Island. Thereza is still in bed when he returns, and he showers and crawls back under the covers with her. George wishes he had coffee, a doughnut, the paper, in English. He settles for tracing the veins at Thereza's temples, the way they spread like fingers from the edge of her eyebrows into her hair. "Why?" he asks her. "Why are you with me?"

"I like you?" The question mark is palpable.

"I'm too old."

"You're not too old."

"I'm ugly."

"You're not ugly."

"I'm out of shape."

"Ha. You want compliments. You are so bad as a woman. Shall I tell you your legs, no, thighs, they are nice and slim?"

"Seriously. Why?"

"Men your age, you are always so polite."

"That's an explanation?"

"You like nice things. Good wine and food. Not always *pivo* and a *smaženy sýr* at two in the morning."

"I like fried cheese as much as the next guy."

"No, you don't. You like your clean apartment and your fine food. It's a good life, the things you like."

George makes lists in his head of things his life no longer contains: a wife, a job, a house, two dogs. In Arizona, at this

moment, a neighbor is saying, "Thank God there weren't any children." In Arizona, his mother-in-law is saying, "You were always too good for him." In Prague, George is thinking: good table manners, decent taste, the illusion of modest wealth. Was this really all it had ever taken?

George is disappointed in Letenska, where he has asked to meet. The world's largest statue of Stalin once stood on a concrete platform the size of a football field high above the city. Now it is simply a concrete platform the size of a football field, covered in graffiti and teenagers smoking weed. George and Thereza sit with their feet swinging off the end that overlooks the river. "My wife was having an affair," George confides in Thereza. "She barely bothered to hide it. She'd answer the phone and carry it to another room and I'd know."

"*Bohužel*," Thereza says, sarcastically. "So sad."

George is appalled.

"I don't believe in monogamy," she announces. "I don't think it is possible. Twelve years, and you really expect to have only the one person forever?"

*Monogamy*, George thinks. It always impresses him how good her English is, how the right words always come, specific and erudite.

"It is boring story, the man in middle life, unhappy with his wife, unhappy in his country, so he comes to Czech and everything is better. Snore snore."

"You've obviously never had your heart broken."

"Have you?" Thereza asks. "Really?"

George has to think about it, but the answer comes: "I have. Really."

"Then what does it feel like?"

"Like being set on fire."

"And this is what you do when you are on fire. Instead of finding a bucket of water, you run around the world in your little orange jog shorts. You stay all over with fire."

"Are you angry about something?"

Thereza shrugs, kicks her heels against the concrete like a child. "It just seems silly, to know of affairs and to be hurt and to live all the time on fire. You understand, that it makes you look very weak?"

"Staying with her or coming to Prague?"

“Neither. The way you are so hurt by it. You look very silly, you know? A silly man.” She looks at him, his gaze far off, across the city toward Žižkov Hill. “Sorry,” she says. “You are telling me because you want to be honest with me and I am being mean.”

“No, you’re right. It’s the embarrassment of being set on fire and not knowing how badly it would hurt. It’s knowing you’re a chump, being hurt so badly, when the whole rest of the world is waking up in other people’s beds and eating yogurt. Eight kinds.”

“You are making fun of me now? You wanted sympathy, I don’t give it. You can eat yogurt alone, OK?”

“Don’t,” George says, alarmed, and makes it up to her that night with dinner at an Icelandic restaurant, where they eat seafood flown fresh to the landlocked heart of Europe. He makes it up to her with coffee and pastries at the chandeliered café in the Obecní Dům. He makes it up to her with tickets to *Giselle*, orchestra seats front and center, but she is twenty minutes late and the ushers make them stand in an upper gallery until the intermission. They look down at the dancers from a dizzying angle that makes him sweat with vertigo. He sits on a plush ottoman in the lobby with his head between his knees. Thereza comes out at intermission. “That was really quite good. I did not think I will like the ballet, but this is nice. Are you feeling better?”

Five weeks after George arrives in Prague his ATM card stops working. The machine whirs and beeps and eats it. He goes to an internet café to confirm the balance of his checking account, the limit on his Visa. The pages refuse to load, the bank claiming he has a defunct user ID. He gives up and checks his e-mail, finds a message from his wife. She has closed the joint checking account, reopened one in her name only; she has emptied the savings account into a twelve-month CD under her name. *Come home and we’ll talk*, she has written. *I’m sorry for a lot of things. But I’m not financing your midlife crisis.*

Riding the tram back to his apartment, George is terrified of pickpockets. He eyeballs a scruffy, dark-haired kid near the door. A gypsy? He presses his wallet against his thigh, forgetting that almost everything inside it is now useless. At the apart-

ment, he returns a call from the Austrian. "I'm not sure I need a whole week this time. Would that be possible, to just buy a couple of days?"

"You have been a good tenant. Two days, we will say."

George asks if he can pay by credit card this time, gives him the number of the one card he's always held in his name only, asks if the Austrian might be able to process a larger amount, let George have the difference in cash. "I'm such an idiot, I've forgotten my PIN," George says. "And so many of the places around here only take cash."

"That's Prague for you. And the villages are worse. I'm afraid I can't help."

The only hobby Thereza has ever talked about is beach volleyball, of all things; she meets people once a week at BeachKlub-Praha, a few sandy courts and a plywood cabana wedged into the yard of a junior high school near Pankrác Prison. George waits for her evening practice, counts the money left in his wallet and doesn't eat that day. It takes him half an hour of walking to find the BeachKlub from the Pankrác Metro station, and his stomach growls audibly as he watches Thereza play. It's much too cold to be standing still outside, but the players are jumping and diving and Thereza sweats in shorts and a sports top. He hands her a water bottle as she comes off the court, and she begins to shiver almost immediately, gooseflesh flaring across her arms and legs. "What are you doing this weekend?" Thereza asks him, and George shrugs. "If you are free, I thought we might go to Dresden, maybe Berlin. Lots of sightseeing for you. Maybe some shopping?"

"Jenny. Thereza. I'm not a rich man," George says.

"I know, you are not made of money. Or you don't grow on trees, or something."

"It's not a joke. It's a—confession," he says, searching for the right word, and feeling a bit surprised that he's found it, he has: he has a secret to confess. "I'm broke."

"Really?"

George nods.

"Huh," Thereza says, one eyebrow raised. "Then I suppose we shouldn't go to Germany."

"I really can't afford it. I'm sorry."

“Will you go home now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Then where will you go?”

“I don’t know.”

“You need cheap places. Bratislava is very fine. Romania, Ukraine, the life there is very hard, so the prices very low. Go to the villages. My parents, they have a weekend house in Mokri. The restaurant there serves soup for eight crowns.”

“I’m really broke, Thereza. I don’t have the money to go anywhere else.”

Thereza stares at him. “You need money.”

“I’ll pay it back.”

“You have no job.”

“I’ll get one.”

“*Do prdele*. You are asking me for money.”

“If there were anyone else—”

“How about your *wife*? Maybe it is time you go home.”

“I can’t. I mean, maybe I would, at this point, but I can’t even get there.”

“She can wire you money. Buy your plane ticket online. You are not in Siberia.”

“My phone doesn’t make international calls.”

“So buy a phonecard. E-mail.”

“I won’t be able to until tomorrow morning.”

“So?”

“I haven’t eaten all day.”

“Your empty *břicho* is not my problem.”

“Thereza, please.”

“I told you to call me Jenny.”

The other players are pulling on coats and sweatpants, carefully looking away but standing close enough to hear. George wonders how much English they understand. Thereza grabs her bag, pulls him around a corner of the school until they are standing by themselves under a rusted basketball hoop. She pulls her wallet from her gym bag and takes out the cash. She counts it, hands it all to him. Three hundred crowns. Twelve dollars. “You can see,” she says. “All the cash I have this moment. You had better call your wife soon.”

“What if I don’t want to go back?” It isn’t until George says it aloud that he realizes how badly he wants Thereza to say, *Stay*

*in Prague. Stay with me. Stay in my apartment that you have never seen, and call me by my name, which I have never let you use.* He understands at the same time how impossible it is that she will say it, and how much he has wanted her to. It's not even that he thinks they could live well together. He can't picture himself looking for a job here, can't picture what he would be qualified for. Can't picture making pork and dumplings for Sunday dinners at home. He just wants to hear her say, *Stay*, and to feel as if there is still a choice to be made.

"You will be so hungry, the plane ride will be happier. You will be going back to America, but they will feed you. You will see her in Arizona and you will say, 'Wife! My stomach is full now of frozen chicken, thank you! Cruel Czech girl, she is *debil*, she gives only sandwich and bus fare to airport.'"

This much is true, George thinks: that as he gets on BA flight 807 two days from now with a ticket his wife has paid for, on the same flight he refused to board five weeks earlier, he will be thankful. He will soar toward London and Phoenix, and when they bring him a plastic-wrapped sandwich, a thin foil tray, a tiny cup of soda, he will be agonizingly grateful.