

Me, Myself &
PRAGUE

*An unreliable
guide to Bohemia*

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Prologue

At thirty-nine I took stock of my life. I am the eldest of three, with one sister and one brother. My sister is a fitness instructor, has her own dental practice and is the mother of two perfect children. My brother is a lawyer, a partner in his firm, and the father of three perfect children. Both are energetic and rich; they are a source of pride and joy to my parents. I, too, was once a source of pride and joy to my parents. I was six.

The school principal had just told my parents that tests revealed I was a gifted child. It seemed like a good thing at the time. They boasted of it to all their friends. They gazed on me with satisfied eyes; they'd known all along I was someone special and now 'tests,' 'scientists,' 'people who knew these things,' had proved it. My whole world looked down on me and said, 'Now our friends have no choice but to believe it—we got the best baby.' Shortly after this event my parents divorced, bitterly.

My brother and sister, not gifted, managed to live through the turmoil and come out the other end moderately normal. I, gifted,

did not. School, university and life seemed too much for me to comprehend, to the disappointment of my parents. They still told all their friends I was gifted—everyone hung on to that one with increasing obstinacy—but my giftedness never manifested itself again. Subsequent primary and high school tests relegated me to the B stream, my mother’s lips pursing at each fresh new evidence of the teachers’ blindness and incompetence. My giftedness came for one test when I was six, then left. Such is life.

Adulthood saw no improvement. Boyfriend after useless, bottle-wielding, unemployed boyfriend came and went, the average length of each relationship about six and a half months, unless he was married, in which case the affair dragged on for years. And I seemed unable to grasp the nature of working life. I got a lucky break straight after university where, by the simple method of choosing English as a major—since the one thing I do seem to be fitted for is reading and English required nothing more of me than that—I’d managed to pass. I was hired by a company of management consultants, but corporate life shredded me.

All around me thin women in spiky suits and beefy, rowing-blue men celebrated their successes in topless bars and roared and flourished. I gazed helplessly at company reports and market analyses and thought: *Surely this is all a crock? A giant con?* These people seemed to have invented a raft of meaningless jargon and strung it together to sound important. But I was the only one who thought so. Everyone else seemed endlessly enthusiastic. The company gave me less and less work until I fell on my own sword and resigned.

After that I had several stabs at corporate life, since that seemed to be what a white, educated, middle-class woman was supposed to do, but I failed every time. My God, those people

are tough—they ate me alive. At every defeat I blamed myself: *What was wrong with me? Why couldn't I make a career?* In my heart of hearts I really wanted to be a writer, but I felt that that was a frivolous, self-indulgent desire, so I suppressed it, never thinking that this might be what was wrong.

My parents were less concerned about my career and more concerned about my inability to fulfil the other tasks of the white, educated, middle-class woman—getting married and having children—although they each had different ways of expressing their dissatisfaction. My mother referred to me almost exclusively as ‘Poor Rachael’ and sighed a lot, but my father was more proactive, chivvying me to get on with it: ‘A woman is a hunter, darling.’

My relationship with my parents had settled into this state of affectionate despair after many years of difficulty. Six years after my parents had divorced, we children had been taken away from our father for good. It was a long and ghastly separation process, but by the time I was twelve it was complete—we no longer saw Dad on the weekends. It wasn't until I was twenty-eight (possibly in preparation for turning thirty, although I can't remember now) that I had gone looking for him. When Dad and I finally met up again it had been awkward at first—what do you say to a father you barely recognise? The most difficult part had been the first few months when we were ever so polite to each other. We were both relieved when, almost a year after we became re-acquainted, we had our first fight and our relationship began to feel more normal. I still enjoy the times we get snippy with each other—they seem more precious to me even than the love.

My relationship with my mother, however, swung the other way. We developed a friendly, but distant, relationship. She did not take well to my reconnection with my father. I think she

feared she would lose me and up to a point she was right. As I saw more of him, I saw less of her. I guess I figured she'd had my sole attention from when I was twelve to twenty-eight, so now it was his turn. I saw my father and my stepmother every Friday night, making up for lost time.

So this, then, was my situation at thirty-nine: I didn't have a career or goals or partner or dependents, or even white goods, but I had a few close friends and two loving, if disappointed, parents. The sum of my life seemed to me to be a pretty small thing; a life lived mostly in fear of doing what I wanted and trying to be good in the eyes of others. And then, out of the blue, a miracle happened. A publishing company put out a small book I'd written about two single women on a road trip. For the first time in my life an organisation devoted to profit thought I might be of use to them. More, they thought I might be of use to them as a writer. The words 'Seize the Day' kept coming to me.

The big advantage of having avoided success in life is you've got nothing to lose. With forty menacing, I felt an uncontrollable urge to change everything in my life. Heck, I'd published one book. Why not another? Well, why not? A searing tale of a woman whose parents divorce, bitterly, and who struggles to find her way...

My sister had moved to London the year before, to my mother's eternal misery, 'Just when I get grandchildren, she deprives me of them. What did I do to deserve that?' As I took stock, I thought, *Why shouldn't I do the same?* At first I considered going to France and living in lovely, romantic Paris, eating cheese and writing my novel in a sidewalk café, but then I did my sums. My only way of earning a living in a foreign country was either teaching English or doing temp work. London, Paris,

New York, none of these places would be easy on a small salary. Sydney was brutal on the poor and I saw little point in moving from one economically crushing situation to another. It was my father who suggested Prague, and when he did I immediately wondered why I hadn't thought of it myself.

My father is Czech, a refugee from the Second World War; in fact on my father's birth certificate the birthplace is given as Bohemia. *Bohemian. Me?* For the first time in my life it occurred to me that I am half Bohemian. And now that I had discovered my father and got to know him, I wanted to know more. I wanted to see where this Bohemian half of me came from. Where had the grandmother I had never known lived? Who were these relatives of mine who lived in a tiny village in South Bohemia? Just how much of me came from Bohemia?

I had a small amount of money saved up and Prague was cheap. Even the Australian dollar, plunging as it was at the time, could get you a long way in Prague. I quit my job as a secretary and bought a ticket to Prague and a life as a Bohemian writer. My father was thrilled: 'In Prague you will find a husband in three months'; my mother was devastated: 'First your sister deserts me and now you.' I didn't care. I smiled at my father, hugged my mother, and left.

Suddenly, forty wasn't looking so bad.

Chapter 8

A Brief History of Communism

The summer rolled on in this way and I began to feel that at last I was living the bohemian life. There were two bohemian activities, however, that I was missing out on. The first was hiking. I had discovered that hiking was a beloved pastime of the Czechs and I very much wanted to see the countryside, but I couldn't persuade any of my friends to join me. Sven's response was, 'Hmmm. Fresh air and exercise. Let me sink'. He raised his beer to his lips and took a swig: 'No.' Laura was equally dismissive, her weekends being full enough with her Act of Re/Creation. I thought Zuzana was a sure bet, but for some reason this aspect of Czech life didn't appeal to her. She was the sort of girl who was never without high heels and makeup, so maybe it just wasn't in her nature. Stumped, I gave up on going hiking. I wasn't brave enough to go by myself, my orienteering skills being in the toilet, and I was afraid of getting lost.

I was also getting no nearer to that other bohemian activity—the passionate love affair. I wanted to have sex but, more, I wanted to have a European lover, someone suave and handsome and young who'd whisper sweet nothings in broken English on the Charles Bridge and read poetry to me as we lay on his mattress in his artist's abode after a night of unbridled European passion. However, the only men I met were British and American expats, and the occasional Czech friend of Zuzana's or student of Laura's. The expats were on a planet of sleaze I could never visit and the Czechs, well I would have liked to have had an affair with one of them, but flirting with someone where the only vocabulary you have in common is, 'I'll have a *pivičku*' and 'I'm from Sydney/*Pisek*', means you both lapse into silence afterwards, which made progressing to an affair difficult, indeed, impossible. Not for Laura, who only needed to know how to say, 'How about it? No strings attached,' and possibly 'Do you mind if I leave the video camera running?' Her dance card was full. She archly tried to set me up from time to time: 'Pavel's cute and he does this really hot thing with his tongue. He...'

'That's okay! I don't need to know.'

'No, really, you wouldn't believe it. He takes your clit and...'

I could barely listen to it, and I certainly couldn't have slept with Pavel, or indeed any of her other lovers. I knew too much about them—way, way more than I wanted to. Laura had no sense of boundaries when it came to sex, and she regarded mine as quaint and unworthy of serious consideration. It seemed to her inexplicable that I should want a lover and not just take one, anyone. She was rather patronising about it, being so much hipper and more bohemian than me. Sometimes, after being joshed by her, I also wondered why I didn't just throw myself into a mean-

ingless affair, but not for long; even a casual lover has to have some degree of simpatico for me. I couldn't have sex with someone I couldn't talk to. I came to the conclusion that Sydney women are wrong—the men are as scarce on the ground in Europe as they are in Australia.

While I didn't get to see my family until later in summer, Mr Hrabal called on me regularly to make sure I was still alive. He brought his books as promised, the Czech original and the English translation, and I developed a bout of what Laura called 'Train Wreck Syndrome': I simply had to look. I opened the Czech book first and found that I could read the first sentence, mainly because I'd just learned numbers and colours and members of family. I was thus able to read, 'I have had them all, Chinese, Japanese, black, mother and daughter, mother and two daughters, two sisters...' For a moment I felt quite chuffed; *Look at me! I'm reading a book in Czech!* Then I realised what I was reading, and dropped it quickly. Apart from anything, I rather feared Mr Hrabal's copy may have been used on those occasions when Mr Hrabal wasn't paying for it but was providing the service to himself.

Tedious bodice-ripping episodes ('Her mother rang me in tears to thank me for having cured her daughter of her fear of sex') aside, Mr Hrabal's book was actually fascinating. Mr Hrabal had survived the war living in Czechoslovakia and, being a descendent of a war survivor, I was curious about that. Families of war survivors fall into two categories: those who know every tiny detail of the horrors their parents survived, and those who know almost nothing. My family is in the latter category. Dad, bless him, believes in leaving the past in the past. Small markers

stay with us, of course—we were never allowed to waste food, and Dad never buys anything German—but he never mentions the war. He did once buy me a German-made nail kit, saying, ‘It cut me to the core, darling, to give those bastards any money. I tried to find another one, but this one was the best.’ The odd result of all this silence is that I know very little about what it had been like for him. And a Jewish historian once told me that children of ‘forgetters’ have difficulty retaining the facts. This was definitely true of me. I had always been ashamed that I kept forgetting the concentration camp in which my grandfather had been interred. It was only when I saw the official notification to my grandmother that I’d found in the cupboard that the name Terezín (Theresienstadt) became fixed in my mind, forever.

Mr Hrabal wrote about how he and his mother had been extraordinarily poor in his early years, so poor that for much of his childhood he was unable to live with her as she couldn’t support them both. He was shipped from grandparents to aunts to cousins. During the times they were together, he would go with her to the markets to sell anything they could lay their hands on. It was at the markets, as a little boy of six years of age selling toffee to wealthy strangers, that he learned how to sell and how to make a profit. He sold more than his mother because he would offer more inducements: ‘For one crown I’ll give you a toffee cone, alright then, two toffee cones...you’re driving a hard bargain, three toffee cones, but that’s my last offer.’ When the wealthy patrons came back the next week they’d say to his mother, ‘No, not you. I want to buy from the boy.’

In his teenage years Mr Hrabal learned arbitrage on the black market and began to make his fortune, as clever, poor boys will. The war years came and he used his black money to get his

mother out of the country to England. His own war years were spent in hiding and at the end of the war, Mr Hrabal was in the Slovak east when the Russians came to liberate the Czechoslovakians. The Americans entered from the Czech side and the Russians from the Slovak side. What he saw of the Russians was terrible. Mr Hrabal was in hiding with a family, and when the Russians came they raped all the women of the family. The husband begged them not to, the women were screaming and crying. Mr Hrabal wrote that the more they screamed, the more Russians joined in. They gang raped them. All over Czechoslovakia, the liberating Russian troops were raping women—virgins, children, pregnant women.

I wondered, as I read his book, if it was this terrible childhood and youth that had created Mr Hrabal's obsession with sex. Later, when he came to get his books back, Mr Hrabal said to me, 'Alright, if you're invading a country you expect rape, but these pigs had come to liberate us. They were brutal. That's why we hate the Russians so much today. The Americans, they knew how to do it. They'd put up a banner announcing a dance, then they'd clean themselves up, put on some cologne, dance with a girl, and if she wanted to fuck, well alright, they'd fuck. That's the way to get sex. But the Russians...they'd come to liberate us—and this is what they did.'

I had to admire Mr Hrabal. How had he managed to go on after witnessing such brutality and carnage? How had any of them managed to carry on? How had Dad managed to carry on? I remember Dad once told me he and his mother had so little during the war they actually collected nuts in the forest to make coffee. I wondered if Dad's refusal to hear anything he didn't want to hear was a coping mechanism, learned during the war

and never discarded. I suppose we're all full of these coping mechanisms. His is to pretend bad things aren't happening and to forget about all disputes the second they're over. My stepmother and I are grudge-bearers. I once had an argument with Dad, I think it was about feminism because that's the one that can make me behave really badly and say sharp things I later regret. When I went around the next Friday, I could tell my stepmother hadn't forgiven me. She didn't say anything but she was unsmiling and overly polite, always an unmistakable sign. Because I'm me, I responded by being equally sniffy and sullen. There we were, the two of us, sitting across the table from each other, not speaking, arms folded, grudges at ten paces, when Dad came in, buttoning his pants because he'd been on the loo.

'Darling!' he cried. 'How good to see you!' He was so genuinely happy to see me, even though he sees me every Friday night, and had so clearly forgotten that we'd fought, that my stepmother and I were immediately disarmed. We glanced at each other in surprise. How could we keep fighting when he wasn't going to? Immediately we relaxed and things were back to normal. It can be annoying when he just won't hear my side of an issue, but it's a coping mechanism with more plusses than minuses: it got him through the war and he came out the other end a man capable of being positive about human beings. That's a miracle in itself.

After the war, the communist way of life had seemed like a pretty good idea to the Czechs. Communism was the polar opposite of fascism and people were beguiled by the ideals of comradeship and community. Dad signed up but luckily for him he left in 1946, because it didn't take long for the communist ideal to warp and only four years after the end of the war the Czechs found themselves saddled with rulers every bit as vicious

as the Nazis. By 1949 the Communist Party had demolished all political opposition. Any Czechs who disagreed with the party's decisions were committed to political trial, executed or sent to concentration camps, which had been thoughtfully established near uranium mines. Property was confiscated and farmers were forced into agriculture collectives. The economy was throttled and pretty soon there were two classes of people—powerful Communist Party officials who had big houses, holiday villas, cars and food; and the rest.

The rest had to queue for every daily staple whenever it happened to be released to the store—bread, toilet paper, shoes, soap—and the supplies were capricious. You never knew what was going to be made available or when, and you never knew how long it would be before the next release, so when something was in the shops everyone rushed to stock up, and if you were tied up doing something else, working for instance, you were out of luck. Mrs Jendliková told me that her daughter had once had to send her ten-year-old son to queue for tampons. He'd wanted to know what they were and his mother had hurriedly said, 'Never mind that, just get them.' He'd found out what they were for when he was in the line and twenty years later, Mrs Jendliková said, her daughter and grandson still recall the searing embarrassment of that incident. That's the thing about poverty—you've got no privacy.

In a totalitarian state you've got no safety either. Everyone is terrified that they'll be the next person to be taken away in the dead of night for questioning by the secret police, after having your door smashed down at three o'clock in the morning when you're asleep and in your pyjamas, confused and vulnerable. In a country where the state dictates how you will think and enforces

that with violence, people will turn you in out of fear or spite, and you never know which innocent word is going to get you beaten up by the authorities. In my grandmother's block of flats, the building supervisor was a spy for the Communist Party; but then again, 'All building supervisors were spies for the Communist Party,' Mrs Jendliková told me. She said that under communism, you weren't allowed to eat meat on Thursdays as there were shortages. 'My building supervisor used to walk down the corridors sniffing at the doors to make sure no-one was breaking the rules.'

I was astonished to learn that communism had been every bit as ghastly as we'd been led to believe in the west. I'd assumed some of my ideas of life behind the Iron Curtain must have been capitalist propaganda, but who needs propaganda when the real thing speaks for itself?

During the war, the Czechs had been ruled by Reich Protector Reinhard Heydrich, Hitler's number three man and a notorious bastard. They had a strong resistance movement, the Czechs, because they're brave...they're incredibly brave. One of their greatest literary works is about a soldier who subverts authority and avoids fighting and any unpleasantness, but put the Czechs to war and they fight as though they don't know what fear is.

One day in late summer, when the days were still long and warm, Danny took me on one of his spontaneous tours. It really was the best thing about Danny, his love of Prague and his desire to share it. We had just left Fraktal and were wondering if we should go to Letna Park, which is right behind Fraktal and where the Czechs hang out on a Sunday, drinking beer and smoking dope, when he suddenly said, 'Come with me. I'll show you one of my favourite places in Prague.' That, from Danny,

was an invitation I couldn't refuse. We walked through the park and back across the river, then south along the river through a maze of tiny, winding, cobblestone alleys lined with ancient houses, finally ending up on Resslová Street. Danny walked down the middle of the deserted road, looking to the left and right, searching for something. Finally, he stopped in front of an old, stone church.

'See those marks in the wall?' I looked to where he was pointing and saw that there were circular chunks pockmarked into the stone and some of the corner work had broken off, although the scars were weathered smooth.

'This is where the Nazis found the guys who killed Reinhard Heydrich. They were hiding in the basement of the church. The Nazis surrounded the church and opened fire. That's the gunshots you can see. The rebels shot themselves rather than surrender. The Czechs have left the marks in the walls so we'll never forget those guys were heroes.'

In 1942, Czech fighter pilots who risked all and escaped by flying their planes to England to fight for the British did an unthinkable courageous thing—they parachuted back into Czechoslovakia, behind enemy lines, to assassinate Heydrich. They were successful, and in revenge the Nazis liquidated two villages—Lidice and Ležáky—killing nearly all the inhabitants. In the five weeks of martial law imposed following the assassination, the regime murdered three thousand people until they found the seven Czech pilots.

The significance of the bullet holes on the Church of St Cyril and St Methodius on Resslová Street had a profound effect on me. They were a silent memorial to unthinkable bravery and an ending so sad I wanted to cry. Danny told me they'd been betrayed

by one of their own, too frightened to hold out any longer. I went home to look them up, so I'd never forget their names. I felt, being from a family of forgetters, that I needed to cement these men in my mind. The betrayer was Karel Čurda. The war heroes who died that day in the church were Jozef Gabčík, Jan Kubiš, Josef Valčík, Adolf Opálka, Josef Bublík, Jan Hrubý and Jaroslav Švarc.

You'd think that the communists would have venerated the Czech war heroes, but the opposite was true. When the communists seized total power in 1948, the heroes of the Second World War, who'd fought with the west, were declared traitors to the party and arrested, tortured and sent to concentration camps. Some twenty years later, in 1968, the Czechs tried to free themselves of the communists. Everyone knew Stalin was a criminal, and artists and economists alike were beginning to speak out. Khrushchev was being nice about the west, so the Czech government, led by Alexandr Dubček, began to gently ease up on the torture and state terrorism. It must have seemed as though the time for change was right. How terribly wrong Dubček was. The Soviets sent half a million troops into Prague, arrested Dubček, killed protestors and crushed the resistance.

I came across two accounts of the Prague Spring, one written under capitalism and one under communism, both wildly different from each other. Here's what Petr Čornej, writing in a 1992 pamphlet called *The Fundamentals of Czech History*, said about the Prague Spring:

The...Czechoslovakian model of 'Socialism with a human face'...allowed for progressive reforms in the areas of politics and the economy. The 'Prague Spring' lasted only until August 21,