

jonny  
diamond



I grew up in the sub-  
urbs, occasionally  
menaced by  
teenagers, occasional-  
ly pleased with myself.  
My family is a nice  
family, and has not left  
me with more scars  
than I deserve.  
University was nice;  
Europe is nice. I like  
to write, and this what  
I have written.

## and so then he sat down

These old world bars are awful bright. They're lit like WW II prison yards so there's no place to hide for us new world types. So we pretend to read (I pretend to read) scanning the same sentence again and again and I'm actually listening to some Irishman tell some Englishman in the middle of Prague about the day he got so damn drunk in Italy because his Spanish girlfriend ran off with some Australian and the sentence I'm staring at is one of Auden's and it is about this very moment in this very bar in Prague: *o café where exiles have established a malicious village o café where SO I WOKE UP ON THE DOORSTEP THE NEXT DAY exiles have established a malicious village o café where exiles have AND THE LANDLADY WOULDN'T STOP YELL established a malicious vilage*. And I'm staring at this sentence and it's awful bright and so the café is malicious and the villagers are malicious and the whole bar is pinned down and made pale by the word malicious that appears perfectly in a poem by Auden written fifty years ago.

The men leave. I shut the book. All other conversations are in Czech. On the radio today there was a man with a 'million word' theory and this man said that on average it takes a million words passing between a man and a woman before the creation of a new life (before love) and maybe I can get a job as a word counter but then do Czech words equal English words and if I talk to myself enough will I fall in love? I think this man is worse than malicious and his theory makes me depressed.

But then I remember this morning just after sunrise and I'm leaving my place and there are six pint mugs sitting neatly on the little brick wall that separates my courtyard from the local beer garden and it is not uncommon in Prague to take

your pints home with you and return the glasses in the morning and it is still a little misty and there is ivy on the wall and roses and I'm alone and these mugs are sitting there emptied of conversation and confession and I can only think of six nuns in a row quietly facing Rome.

And so now maybe I'm ready for conversation and confession and the bar is less malicious though still bright and of course a woman sits down beside me. She digs through her purse in a mild panic and turns to me and asks have you a cigarette? and I say no and so she frowns deeply through another frenzied search and her hair is blonde but her eyebrows are black and I think she may be Hungarian. So she asks me to buy her cigarettes from the machine and I say no but she starts talking to me anyway and her name is Elena. She is Ukranian and at the end of the bar is her brother's friend Borja who may or may not be her bodyguard but who is definitely Bulgarian and sometimes she forgets to add the ex to husband and I'm starting to like her.

She drinks quickly and her upper lip is always wet and her head swings a little as she talks and she touches my right forearm many times. Borja joins us, does not shake my hand, and says nothing. Borja leaves, I become drunk and say nice things. I tell Elena I like her and she orders two vodkas. Borja comes back and makes me nervous and it is awful bright in this bar and I can't stop thinking about those stories of lonely western guys who get taken in bars and I'm too drunk to ask myself then why did Elena introduce me to Borja? but he still makes me nervous and so when she asks me will you accompany me to another bar? I ask what's wrong with this one? Oh but it is so bright! No I say. Then I say goodbye.

Sitting alone again in this prison yard bar staring at myself in the mirror beneath the liquor bottles and the music has stopped so now I'm really alone and I guess they want people to leave but then the mirror isn't a mirror anymore and it opens up on that afternoon in my neighbourhood and all the cobblestones are wet and these are some things I know about my neighbourhood:

- 1) It is called Žizkov
- 2) It has more bars per capita than any other urban district in Europe.
- 3) It has an enormous space-like TV tower covered in sculpted ceramic babies.
- 4) It has no trees.
- 5) Many of its cobblestones came from demolished Jewish cemeteries.
- 6) It has very steep streets.
- 7) Bohumil Hrabal wasn't allowed into any of the bars until he finished his novel.
- 8) His friends eventually locked him in his room.

I am walking to the pay phone beside the 16th century cathedral and there is a drunken Roma woman (I have learned not to say gypsy) screaming at God on the cathedral steps beside a nervous audience of four Czech teenagers and she is bare-foot in the rain as she gives her anger to God in staccatoed pantomime demanding reason for bare feet and broken teeth and why so much skin has been left raw to the world for so long. She needs desperately and moves from one foot to the other in tones of condemnation and entreatment and flirtation and she will accept simply God as a reason requiring neither redemption nor salvation only maybe some purpose in this suffering.

And so she dances up and down the street punctuating her bent step with bursts

of wrath and supplication and her bare feet slap on the uneven stone and God reveals himself as a balding priest barely strong enough to open the great wooden doors on the empty House of God and all this man/God can think to do is shush the woman and move her along and I think she has been looking for God in far too obvious a place. The teenagers get bored and leave. The great wooden doors swing slowly shut. It isn't even raining anymore and I am back staring at my own face and I can think of only her bare feet and the bar is awful bright and I have been in far too obvious a place for too long and so I leave.