

Creative Nonfiction

*Malostranska Beseda (Talk of the Little Town)*

Ms. Foustková led us into the gallery entrance, Marko following behind with one person between us. It was unusual to find myself walking ahead of him. I realized that I subconsciously always kept him within my field of vision. Positioning myself in the front row of the semi-circle around the curator, Ms. Foustková smiled at us, standing on her tiptoes to make sure the rest in the back were listening. I was glad at least she had an eye on him.

Marko and I split off from the class and walk towards the hands-on harmonics exhibition. Entering into a room made of wood from floor to ceiling, interactive musical art pieces are embedded into the architecture of the space and Marko insists on paying the extra fee for the both of us. I put my backpack and coat down next to a beam bolted into the ground by two giant iron latches. Marko sets down his book down on top of them.

“You don’t think someone’s going to take it, do you?” Marko gestures with an open hand.

“What, your book?” I ask.

He looks down at my backpack and laughs,

“It looks like you.” I scrunch up my face into an awkward smile.

“Why so heavy?” he posits into the silence.

“I dunno, I like to go out for the day with everything I need on me. My whole life in a backpack.”

“You look like the kid from *Up*. Heavy little thing.” He mumbles.

I don’t know whether to laugh or be offended. But I’m in love with him and assume he’s mistranslating his thoughts from Serbian. He rambles on.

“Ok so how about some random day when you’re back in America, you’ll take one of those stupid pictures with all your things from your backpack that day laid out in on the floor. And then I’ll send you mine.”

“So you’re gonna send me a picture of your floor. Maybe your phone on top of some epic Russian novel.” I say.

“*Elaška*, you don’t understand, this phone, it is my enemy. I hate this thing. I really do.” He mimics violently shaking his phone.

“Don’t pretend like I don’t know you. You’re a junkie, you’re always taking calls. I mean, really you’re spending most of the time pacing and listening, and talking like you’re backing someone down from a ledge.” I answer accusingly.

“It’s all these people. They’re wanting something from me this whole time. It’s incessant. But I can’t not pick up, I mean this is my mother, my uncle, sister, best friend, whatever. It’s for some reason necessary, but I hate it. Soon I’m going to go for a day without it.”

“Lemme know how that goes.”

We wander over to a bike contraption hooked up to a giant wooden fan in the middle of the room.

“Try it.” I insist.

“No, no.” Marko insists back.

I consider, knowing my other friends would never actually make me do it because they know I flash hot when I’m put on the spot and I hate making other people feel uncomfortable by my own uncomfortability. I mount the bike and start pedaling, avoiding Marko’s gaze. I begin to laugh maniacally in an attempt to hide my reddening face.

We both say nothing. I get off and wander up a small flight of stairs. Marko follows.

We unexpectedly enter into a small bell-tower like room completely covered in light wooden beams. It is surrounded by windows with a three hundred degree view looking down onto the lower town square. The orange rooftops across Prague, blossoming cherry trees under Petrin tower behind the American embassy, St. Peter’s Cathedral, and the castle above.

We grin silently outwards, standing an odd distance away from each other; not too close or far.

Marko points out the window, “My favorite park with my favorite bench. The lovers bench.”

“Petrin is?” I ask.

Marko takes a deep breeze and exhales his words quickly, “Remember when I said I would surprise you and take you somewhere, but not then because it was too dark?”

And then you cancelled because you were “sick”, I thought.

“That’s where.”

“I love it there. I really do.” I try to sound convincing.

“You know it?” Marko prods.

There are strange ropes hanging with sticks on the end, and I try pulling on one. I don’t know what on earth they’re supposed to be used for. Marko’s words dance over my shoulder.

“Last night I was super bored at the desk and then a big group of like twenty Americans checked into the hotel. I searched through their information and there was some Sarah Patterson from Cranbury, New Jersey and Alexis Smith from Fremont California for example. It’s funny, no Alaska though. Didn’t you say it was such a popular name? Oh but there was this Megan Harris, from Las Vegas. Remind me of how your friend calls you again? What nickname, like Ska.”

“Láska?” I already know it.

“Right. Know what that means?”

“Love.”

“Sure, in Czech.”

“What about in Serbian?” I ask.

“Your name means nothing.”

“No, love.” I clarify.

“Oh, *ljubav*. Know what Marko means?”

“No, what?”

“It must come from Saint Mark, but Marcus, Roman, comes from the God Mars, Man.”

“Virility.”

“Yes. I can only ever see you as Elaška. Like sometimes when the American professors calls for a Ay-la-ska I look around for some new student to the class. And then it’s you... And I’m glad.” I look out the window, frozen.

After a long pause I blurt out the first thing on my mind.

“How do I enjoy this moment to the greatest extent possible right now? I would be happy to live in it forever.”

“And maybe you can.” Marko asserts.

“It’s probably not linear. That’s what they all say at least. So we’ll always be living in this moment, here in this attic above Malostranske Namesti.”

Marko watches me as I speaks. For the first time, I don’t feel self conscious. He keeps his eyes on me long after I stop talking.

He continues.

“I have to tell you about this dream last night that I had about you. I saw you from a distance walking down the street with your backpack on and your arms back holding onto the straps. It was so enormous but you just kept trudging with your head up, and there were all of these people around you. But it looked different than real life, you were this sort of cartoon character. This is always how I imagine you, with all of your little mannerisms amplified. While you were made up of these colorful moving lines drawn in crayon, all the people that passed you were grays smudges that moved like sludge with their heads down. They couldn’t even look up at you because they were blinded by this bright light that shone from inside you, like a tiny sun where your heart was supposed to be.”

Marko and Alaska stand side by side waiting for the tram. It's raining lightly now.

“Where are you going?” I wonder genuinely.

“Home. You?” Marko says.

“Probably just back to school to do work. Hopefully a classroom is open. Wish I could go to the cafe I'm starving, but I got kicked out last week for stealing a spoon and... it's a long story.”--

“I have to tell you something.” He says under his breath.

“What?”

“I can't tell you now.”

“Why? You can't just say that Marko.” I laugh.

He is stoic and brushes a piece of hair out of my face.

“What? Tell me.”

“I can't now.” He's serious.

“Well when?”

“Next time I see you.”

“When will that be? I don't want to wait until class on Thursday, just tell me now we'll go somewhere.”

The tram arrives and he motions to get on. I follow him, grabbing his arm. We're smooshed in the back of the old round tin-can cars against the big window.

He sighs, “It's my problem. You're sort of involved, but not really. It's not really a problem, well”

“What? What is going on?”

Marko stares into my eyes.

“You're really not gonna tell me?” I ask in disbelief.

He looks away. We stand in silence for a full minute. The tram is already rounding the bend towards the school.

I am helpless. “What are you doing?”

He stares at me with his wide brown eyes. We brush lips and he tram stops. I hesitate, and jump off through the closing doors. I watch the tram take off and he doesn't look back. Tomorrow he tells me that he's going to Moscow for Spring Break to visit his girlfriend.