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(Written for travelers tales)

### Prague, Hell and Angels

I've seen this place before. WWII is coming to a close. Everything is left barren, battered and broken. Dirty snow covers all, and a grey silhouette follows the snow. Under a lead colored sky, few trees, black and bare, are left standing. Everyone on the streets is an old Slavic man wearing rags, whose unshaven face is pale and thin. They sit on benches shaking, rubbing their faces in their gloved hands. Some walk around the silent streets, from the shabby liquor stores to their dilapidated apartment complexes, with their heads to the floor, like drug-addicted sleepwalkers. Usually there is a piano playing sad chords and a violin screeching somberly. It's the town every movie visits before the scene cuts to Auschwitz. Except this suburb of hell frozen over isn't in the Polish countryside, it's forty-five minutes outside of Prague. Nor is it 1945; it's December 2007.

I sat at a bench, for an hour and half, with a sign next to it of a picture of a bus. I wore only jeans, a cotton t-shirt and a thin fleece jacket. I felt the cold permeating through my bloodstream and into my bones. The two friends that I had made on the bus from the airport to our "complimentary" motel "near" Prague, both also on their winter breaks from college, had already forsaken our quest to make it into the city. After the first hour went by and no bus had come, they figured they could see Prague on their way back from Israel—our final destinations—when it would be less cold. Till this day, I can't understand what possessed me to remain sitting alone on that bench, watching those two walk together back to the motel. The lure of any city could not have been worth waiting for a bus, alone, on an empty street in frozen hellville. Why did I stay?

About twenty-five minuets later, I was joined by three female Russians: ~~A small~~ plump blonde woman, with short hair that stopped at her neck, who looked well into her fifties. She (lets call her Katrina) was wearing a heavy lime jacket and loose jeans. By Katrina's side was Sonya (also my nickname). Sonya was tall, mid-to-late-thirties, with black hair and purple bangs. She was wearing all black except two purple stripes on her short skirt, and a sparkling purple scarf. I hate to say it, but when I first saw her, I thought I was standing face to face with my first Russian prostitute. Walking hunchbacked behind them was Katrina's mother. Her grey hair was tucked into a red bandana, and she wore all black clothing. Picture an old peasant woman from 18<sup>th</sup> century Russia. That's her.

After five minutes of listening to the woman chat in Russian, a bus with a small white sign on its windshield with the word "*Praha*" pulled up by our bench. My mind scrambled to figure out whether *Praha* is Prague. Could I really risk missing the bus I have been torturing myself waiting for. On other hand, could I risk stranding myself in a place more wretched than my present location? As Katrina climbed the stairs into the bus, the last of her crew, I felt desperate enough to tap her on the shoulders. "Prague," I asked, looking up to her with a face of a man begging for food. "I sure hope so," she replied in confident English. Thus my dependence began.

I don't usually take advice from fictitious insane people, but I think Blanche DuBois, from the play *Street Car Named Desire*, said something of real value. As a doctor was convincing her to leave her home for the mental institute, she looked up to him and said, "Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Whenever I travel, I know that if things go wrong there will always be a stranger to help me on my way. Don't you?

I sat in the back of the bus, and I stared wide-eyed out the window. I was shocked by how depressing a place can look. Every thirty seconds or so, the bus would pass what looked like a scorched orange tree frosted with snow. That was all there was along the road: A vast snowy abyss.

I quickly began to bite my nails. Fear and a feeling of helplessness quenched my thirst for Prague. Beside for Katrina, I hadn't met anyone who spoke English who wasn't American. How would I ever return to my motel hidden away in frozen hell?

I was shocked by how relieved I felt, when at the height of my panic, Katrina asked me, "Are you here alone?" Before I could respond, she followed with, "Have you a better jacket than the one you are wearing? You should have a much thicker one." My consciousness of my solitude increased from these questions. I was left staring into the sky-blue eyes of Katrina, wordless, trying to show her my fear and loneliness.

"You know, if you're by yourself, you should spend the day with us?" Katrina asked.

I don't respond.

"We are thinking of doing a bus tour. My mother," here she pointed behind us to the peasant women, "can hardly walk, and it's cold like Moscow today."

The thought of a bus-tour hadn't crossed my mind, as it probably wouldn't any other person my age. But once I heard it, it seemed so fitting: if your hot and tired go the pool; if your freezing to death and your worried about getting lost, take a bus-tour. Not more than ten minutes after first meeting Katrina and her comrades, I had put my fate in their hands.

The day could not have gone any worse. We never made it onto a bus; the other tourists had acted quicker. Instead, I was forced to follow my new comrades on a 4-hour walking tour (in Russian) around Prague, on what was probably the foggiest and coldest day of the year. (I am still wondering, as you probably are, how Katrina's mother managed the walk.) We visited magnificent places: The Prauge catsle, the St. Vitus Cathedral, the home of Kafka, and the Charles Bridge. Had I not been trying so hard to stay warm, or maybe if the tour guide had spoken English, I might have enjoyed these sites. Alas, I haven't any fond memories of them.

Throughout the day, people on my tour were approaching me with rebuke for not having a winter jacket. I'm sure they figured out I didn't speak Russian, but they just went on yelling. Sometimes Katrina translated their comments to me, other times their body motions and expressions made it all too obvious. By nightfall, my hands had succumbed to minute frostbite.

I could end the story here. Call it a horror story. I could say the right decision was to go back to the motel. Yet in between all the coldness and fear, there was another story happening. It had nothing to do with Prague or the weather.

"Great perils have this beauty," said Victor Hugo, "that they bring to light the fraternity of strangers."

Sonya's first gesture to me was the offering of her purple scarf. When my shivering became too much for her to bear, she took my hand and walked me aside. "Tyake et," she said in a strong Russian accent, unwrapping the wool from her neck. Looking into her eyes, I could see how much she wished to see me warmer. Her gentle eyes, behind all the makeup, for just a moment, made me feel warm. Every negative

image I ever had of Russians ended right there, on a sidewalk somewhere in the center of Prague. Throughout the day she begged me to take her scarf.

Somewhere, in the expanse of Russia, there is a picture. In the picture is me, a very short man, standing about a head taller and with my arm around Katrina's mother. A huge smile is spread across each of our faces. Behind us is what would be the most spectacular view of the entire city of Prague, except a layer of thick fog is hiding most of the valley below. The Russian peasant who I had first met by the bus stop to Prague approached me with a yellow disposable camera in her hand. She stretched it out, and I tried to grab it from her. She jerked back, shook her head, and pointed back and forth between her, the camera and me. As I recognized what she wanted, I realized that even though we had not communicated all day, in her mind we had spent it together. She had waited until the nicest spot in Prague to immortalize us together in a picture.

Last but not least, Katrina had been by my side all day, telling me stories of her life in Moscow, and translating interesting lines the tour-guide had said. My own mother probably would not have gone to the great lengths she had for my safety. I felt like a child by her side. Scare and confused, but confident she would protect me. After the tour, Katrina helped me find my way back to my motel. She waited an hour with me in the cold at the bus stop, and she rode the bus with me back to the motel.

Though the day was spent in hell, I spent it in the company of angels. I really mean that. Call me crazier than Blance DuBios if you like, but I've learned this: When we take a trip, we don't just depend on the kindness of strangers, it's the reason we travel at all.