

Intertext

Volume 15 *Intertext*

Article 5

5-15-2007

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Recommended Citation

Townsend, Virgie (2007) "Prague's Forty-Three Curses," *Intertext*: Vol. 15, Article 5.
Available at: <https://surface.syr.edu/intertext/vol15/iss1/5>

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Prague's 43 CURSES

By: Virgie Townsend

It is 12:40 P.M., two days before my twentieth birthday, and I don't want to die in the back of a Czech cab to the sound of the driver whistling ABBA's "Money, Money, Money."

THE LIGHTS IN THE CAB ARE DARK PERIWINKLE AND RED, AND INDICATE THAT we are going about ninety-five miles per hour in an eighty zone. My friend and I have only been in the cab fifteen minutes, but the driver has already terrified us with one sudden sharp right turn, his bad hairdo, tailgating large commercial trucks, and asking us with a chuckle if we're ashamed of being Americans.

Morgan and I had barely left my London flat when the Fates began sending us ominous warnings of our future in Prague. On the tube to Heathrow Airport I was hauling our unruly red suitcase up the Tube station stairs when I heard her hiss, "Oh shit," as she set her carry-on down on the floor. After thirty years of family use, her mother's beloved, hand-made backpack

from Guatemala had snapped under the pressure of traveling. With an arm strap broken there was nothing Morgan could do but haul it around on one shoulder and think of ways to explain the accident to her mother when she returned home.

My own warning came in the form of an angry, empty stomach at Heathrow, prompting me to scour the airport for the fast food restaurants that apparently do not exist at Terminal 2. By the time we received our dinners on the airplane two hours later I was tired, hungry and cranky.

Now we—Morgan and her wounded backpack, my hunger and I—are being driven to our hostel. Morgan stares blankly ahead of us as we speed into the depths of Prague.

Relief sets in as we move away from the city, and I sense that our ride is coming to a close. Yet within moments I realize our driver has turned onto an abandoned road and we are now slowly mounting a steep, rutted hill. Trees envelope us on both sides. A single streetlight casts a dull, orange glow on the road and the only sign of life is the sound of a dog howling behind a chain fence. Morgan's face remains vacant as I wonder if I should call my mother to say goodbye. Mom warned me about Prague.

“Do you know that Prague is the number one city in the world for sex slavery?” She asked, her eyebrows arched with concern. “Make sure you stay in a safe hostel! I’m really worried about you and Morgan going there alone. What if I paid for one night at a hotel? I just don’t want you getting killed ...”

The cab driver slowly turns into an empty lot shrouded by underbrush and their quaking leaves. A lingering wind has come up behind us. I think that if he’s going to kill us, he’s probably selected this spot just for atmosphere. Alfred Hitchcock couldn’t have chosen a better set-up.

But Morgan and I are not going to die tonight. The driver suddenly reverses and I sigh deeply, happily, as we head back down the hill. He’s supposed to take the *second* eerie abandoned road on the right, not the *first*! In the end Morgan and I are left at our hostel fully intact, albeit a little traumatized, and the driver pulls away forty bucks richer.

“My life flashed before my eyes about three times during that drive,” I tell Morgan as we wait on the hostel doorstep for the manager to let us in.

“My life only flashed before my eyes when we began driving up that abandoned road,” she solemnly replies.

Later, as we prepare for bed in our room, I tell Morgan I’m going to write a story about our cab drive: About how overpriced it was, the bad music, the driver’s hair and the terrifying driving. I tell her my opening paragraph and she jokingly corrects me.

“It should really begin: It is two days before my twentieth birthday *and my mullet-haired cab driver is chasing me up an abandoned road with his hack saw,*” she says.

Soon we’re both trying to fall asleep on what Morgan describes as “rock-hard flats on the ground in the dingiest hostel I’ve ever stayed at,” where the manager’s English is marginally better than our nonexistent Czech.

Morning comes too early, after too little sleep and even less rest, and we find neither of us has packed appropriately for the weather. The day is cold and gloomy and our hostel is located a little south of *nidke* (Czech for “nowhere”). We shiver as we wait for a bus to take us to the metro, we shiver waiting for the train to take us into the city, and we shiver when we emerge from the station to face the National Gallery.

“You know,” Morgan says as she surveys the Gallery’s gray architecture and the garish, juxtaposed McDonald’s, “The most beautiful city in the world? I’m just not seeing it.”

“No,” I respond with a shake of the head. “No, me neither.”

We begin walking down the road in search of the real Czech culture, but we don’t make it far when Morgan confesses that she’s half-tempted to just surrender and go to McDonald’s.

“Do you want to just do it?” she asks.

We yield to our Fate as lame American tourists and enthusiastically speed walk back to the comforting arms of the golden arches, where we can at least discuss our day out of the cold. Morgan wants to go to the Franz Kafka Museum; I’ll go anywhere as long as it involves staying warm. I am just beginning to get over a two week cold that is taking its final stand by holing up in my lungs, occasionally striking out in the form a violent,

chesty cough.

As we walk to the Kafka Museum I sing a ditty about how cold I am: It's cold, it's cold, it's really, *really* cold!

"It's not *that* cold," Morgan says, though the wind continues to blow.

"It's pretty damn cold for someone getting over a cold," I sharply point out, my arms tightly folded across my chest to conserve heat.

"That's true," she concedes. "I am worried about you, too. Every time you cough I think, 'Oh, no!' and my heart gives a little flutter."

Later, as we wander through an eerie maze of Kafka's life—of his lonely, self-loathing quotes, his Oedipal complex, and dark, hopeless novels—I realize I probably should not have come to a museum commemorating a misanthropic writer who died young of tuberculosis. I stifle a cough when I read the diary excerpt, "For each invalid his household God, for the tubercular the God of suffocation."

Despite my admiration for the artistic construction of the exhibit—the way they play with inky shadows, music and artifacts as art—I walk out depressed. Not all of life is what you make it, but if you're perfectly miserable and immortalize your misery on paper there may eventually be someone to adore you for it. I start to wonder if I'm too healthy to ever be a great writer.

Morgan gushes about the museum after the tour and jots down a note in the comment book. I admire the obscene fountain statues of two parallel men smiling at each other as they pee. Before going into the museum I took a photo of Morgan pondering the statues with her brow furrowed and index finger contemplatively resting against her lip.

It has not rained yet, despite the threatening clouds, so we decide to go to Prague Palace. I agree to do so because I haven't noticed it will mean fruitlessly climbing uphill for forty-five minutes, which I hate. Morgan loves walking tours, trooping tours, stomping up one side of a mountain for the sole purpose of marching down the other, and stretching her limbs. Because we are traveling together and because friendship means making sacrifices, I go along with it and think of ways she can repay me later.

The view of Prague from the palace is beautiful. Purple-tinged clouds still hover over the city, but the architecture is stunning. I admire the gargoyles that riddle the edifice's side. Morgan complains that it really is a palace and not a castle. She prefers castles to palaces because of their role as medieval military fortresses and not just ostentatious pads for rich bores.

My favorite sight at Prague Palace has nothing to do with the actual Palace, but the attractive monks who pass Morgan and me as we're taking pictures. We give each other a knowing look and nod. Besides the monks, we agree that Prague is a city with a conspicuous absence of eye candy.

Perhaps as punishment for our sinful thoughts about the luscious monks, the rain arrives as I wait in a long line to use the bathroom. The irony of this is not lost on me. I have been chugging liquids all day to fight my cold and now I am standing in a downpour with about fifteen Czech kids on a fieldtrip, waiting to pee in a bathroom the size of my kidney.

After this, Morgan and I agree that there's no point in prolonging our agony in Prague. We label ourselves defeatists and head back to the hostel. I promptly fall asleep around 8 P.M. and don't wake-up again until morning.

Maybe there's some truth to Annie's song "The Sun Will Come Out Tomorrow" because it did in Prague. When we got up in the morning (to the sound of a new roommate's obnoxious alarm clock), we found that light was filtering in through the curtains and, even more shocking, that the air was mild and warm at the bus stop.

Having learned our lesson from the day before, we decide to let the day unfold as it will. We wander around the Old Town Square, take pictures of cathedrals and search for a marionette show because Morgan loves them.

Our quest for marionettes leads us to a shop where hissing green dragons fly overhead, decapitated nobles hang from the walls and princesses, witches and monsters mingle unreservedly. Morgan and I giggle over some of the marionettes' anatomical details. Something about Prague's abundance of explicit statues and marionettes has brought out our inner 11-year-olds.

"I'm getting a marionette for my brother," I announce after finding a rack of smiling lions, fuzzy zebras and googly-eyed sheep. "He's a two-year-old boy so I know he'll ignore it because it's not a car or airplane, but maybe

by the time he's three he'll have developed a more complex imagination.”

Morgan nods before confessing that she wants a witch marionette. We proceed to rationalize our purchases for the next ten minutes.

“I should save my money for my car insurance when I get home,” she quietly says. “But my dad’s already said he’ll help and I still have enough *korunas* left.”

“This is true, this is true,” I respond with a sagacious nod. “And this may be your only opportunity to buy a real witch marionette in Prague. Everyone should occasionally get something they really want.”

Eventually, the question evolves from “should I buy a witch marionette?” to “which witch should I buy?” After my brother’s lion is safely bought and wrapped up for Christmas we debate the various merits of the two witch candidates.

We leave the shop with smiles and swollen bags. Outside, the sunshine is slanted against the buildings’ yellow walls and we find ourselves having lunch in a small courtyard behind a rundown café. Weeds grow between the cracks in the brick ground and last night’s raindrops cling to our chairs. The food is less charming. My sandwich is wet bread with tuna and corn scraped on it. Morgan wisely only orders some soup, coffee and a piece of cake we split.

We make our way to the National Gallery after our substandard lunch. Although The Czech National Gallery meets every national gallery’s quota of stuffed animals and fossilized fish, it is conspicuously free of Czech historical artifacts. A majority of the exhibits don’t translate the captions from Czech to English. Yet the city is bright and bustling when I look out an exhibit’s window. There’s a McDonald’s and a series of naked robot statues below me. Morgan and I have our marionettes in bags by our sides.

“What are you looking at?” Morgan asks as she comes over to the window.

“Nothing. I was just thinking that I made peace with Prague.”

“*We* made peace with Prague,” Morgan corrects before shaking her head and smiling. “And damn the weather for making such a difference.” §