

JOHN  
UPDIKE

BECH:  
A BOOK



# Books by John Updike

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## POEMS

*The Carpentered Hen* (1958) • *Telephone Poles* (1963) • *Midpoint* (1969) • *Tossing and Turning* (1977) • *Facing Nature* (1985) • *Collected Poems 1953–1993* (1993) • *Americana* (2001) • *Endpoint* (2009)

## NOVELS

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## SHORT STORIES

*The Same Door* (1959) • *Pigeon Feathers* (1962) • *Olinger Stories* (a selection, 1964) • *The Museum School* (1966) • *Bech: A Book* (1970) • *Museums and Women* (1972) • *Problems* (1979) • *Too Far to Go* (a selection, 1979) • *Bech Is Back* (1982) • *Trust Me* (1987) • *The Afterlife* (1994) • *Bech at Bay* (1998) • *Licks of Love* (2000) • *The Complete Henry Bech* (2001) • *The Early Stories: 1953–1975* (2003) • *My Father's Tears* (2009) • *The Maples Stories* (2009)

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## PLAY

*Buchanan Dying* (1974)

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## CHILDREN'S BOOKS

*The Magic Flute* (1962) • *The Ring* (1964) • *A Child's Calendar* (1965) • *Bottom's Dream* (1969) • *A Helpful Alphabet of Friendly Objects* (1996)

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*John Updike*

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BECH: A BOOK



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## FOREWORD

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DEAR JOHN,

Well, if you must commit the artistic indecency of writing about a writer, better I suppose about me than about you. Except, reading along in these, I wonder if it is me, enough me, purely me. At first blush, for example, in Bulgaria (eclectic sexuality, bravura narcissism, thinning curly hair), I sound like some gentlemanly Norman Mailer; then that London glimpse of *silver* hair glints more of gallant, glamorous Bellow, the King of the Leprechauns, than of stolid old homely yours truly. My childhood seems out of Alex Portnoy and my ancestral past out of I. B. Singer. I get a whiff of Malamud in your city breezes, and am I paranoid to feel my “block” an ignoble version of the more or less noble renunciations of H. Roth, D. Fuchs, and J. Salinger? Withal, something Waspish, theological, scared, and insulantly ironical that derives, my wild surmise is, from you.

Yet you are right. This monotonous hero who disembarks from an airplane, mouths words he doesn't quite mean, has vaguely to do with some woman, and gets back on the airplane, certainly one Henry Bech. Until your short yet still not unlongish collection, no revolutionary has concerned himself with our oppression, with the silken mechanism whereby America reduces her writers to imbecility and cozenage. Envied like Negroes, disbelieved in like angels, we veer between the harlotry of the lecture platform and the torture of the writing desk, only to collapse, our five-and-dime Hallowe'en priests' robes a-rustle with economic class jet-set tickets and honorary certificates from the Cunt-of-the-Month Club, amid a standing crowd of rueful, Lilliputian obituaries. Our language degenerating in the mouths of broadcasters and pop yellers, our formal designs crumbling like sand castles under the feet of beach bullies, we nevertheless and incredibly support with our desperate efforts (just now, had to look up “desperate” in the dictionary for the ninety-ninth time, forgetting again if it spelled with two “a”s or three “e”s) a flourishing culture of publishers, agents, editors, tutors, *Timeniks*, media personnel in all shades of suavity, *chic*, and sexual gusto. When I think of the matings, the moaning, jubilant fornications between ectomorphic oversexed junior editors and svelte hot-from-Wellesley majored-in-English-minored-in-philosophy female coffee fetchers and receptionists that have been engineered with the lever of some of my post-scratched-up and pasted-over pages (they arrive in the editorial offices as stiff with Elmer's glue as a masturbator's bedsheet; the office boys use them for tea-trays), I could mutilate myself like sainted Origen, I could keen like Jeremiah. Thank Jahweh these bordellos in the sky can soon dispense with the excuse of us entirely; already the contents of a book count as little as the contents of a breakfast-cereal box. It is all a matter of the premium, and the sheen of the site, and the amount of air between the corn flakes. Never you mind. I'm sure that when with that blithe goyish brass I will never cease to test with my teeth you approached me for “word or two by way of preface,” you were bargaining for a benediction, not a curse.

Here it is, then. My blessing. I like some of the things in these accounts very much. The Communists are all good—good *people*. There is a moment by the sea, I've lost the page, the rang true. Here and there passages seemed overedited, constipated; you prune yourself too hard. With prose, there is no way to get it out, I have found, but to let it run. I liked some

the women you gave me, and a few of the jokes. By the way, I never—unlike retired light  
verse writers—make puns. But if you [*here followed a list of suggested deletions, falsifications,  
suppressions, and rewordings, all of which have been scrupulously incorporated—ED.*], I don't  
suppose your publishing this little *jeu* of a book will do either of us drastic harm.

HENRY BECH

Manhattan,  
Dec. 4th–12th, 1969

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*About the Author*

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## RICH IN RUSSIA

**S**TUDENTS (not unlike yourselves) compelled to buy paperback copies of his novels—notably the first, *Travel Light*, though there has lately been some academic interest in his more surrealist and “existential” and perhaps even “anarchist” second novel, *Brother Pig*—or encountering some essay from *When the Saints* in a shiny heavy anthology of mid-century literature costing \$12.50, imagine that Henry Bech, like thousands less famous than he, is rich. He is not. The paperback rights to *Travel Light* were sold by his publisher outright for two thousand dollars, of which the publisher kept one thousand and Bech’s agent one hundred (10% of 50%). To be fair, the publisher had had to remainder a third of the modest hard-cover printing and, when *Travel Light* was enjoying its vogue as the post-Golding pre-Tolkien fad of college undergraduates, would amusingly tell on himself the story of Bech’s given-away rights, at sales meetings upstairs in “21.” As to anthologies—the average permissions fee, when it arrives at Bech’s mailbox, has been eroded to \$64.73, or some such suspiciously odd sum which barely covers the cost of a restaurant meal with his mistress and a medium wine. Though Bech, and his too numerous interviewers, have made a quixotic virtue of his continuing to live for twenty years in a grim if roomy Riverside Drive apartment building (the mailbox, students should know, where his pitifully nibbled checks arrive has been well-scarred by floating urban wrath, and his last name has been so often ballpointed by playful lobby-loiterers into a somewhat assonant verb that Bech has left the name plate space blank and depends upon the clairvoyance of mailmen), he in truth lives there because he cannot afford to leave. He was rich just once in his life, and that was in Russia, in 1964, a thaw or so ago.

Russia, in those days, like everywhere else, was a slightly more innocent place. Khrushchev, freshly deposed, had left an atmosphere, almost comical, of warmth, of a certain fitful openness, of inscrutable experiment and oblique possibility. There seemed no overweening reason why Russia and America, those lovable paranoid giants, could not happily share a globe so big and blue; there certainly seemed no reason why Henry Bech, the recherché but amiable novelist, artistically blocked but socially fluent, should not be flown into Moscow at the expense of our State Department for a month of that mostly imaginary activity termed “cultural exchange.” Entering the Aeroflot plane at Le Bourget, Bech thought it smelled like his uncles’ backrooms in Williamsburg, of swaddled body heat and proximate potatoes, boiling.\* The impression lingered all month; Russia seemed Jewish to him, and of course he seemed Jewish to Russia. He never knew how much of the tenderness and hospitality he met related to his race. His contact man at the American Embassy—a prissy, doleful ex-basketball-player from Wisconsin, with the all-star name of “Skip” Reynolds,—assured him that two out of every three Soviet intellectuals had suppressed a Jew in the



ancestry; and once Bech did find himself in a Moscow apartment whose bookcases were lined with photographs (of Kafka, Einstein, Freud, Wittgenstein) pointedly evoking the glory of pre-Hitlerian *Judenkultur*. His hosts, both man and wife, were professional translators, and the apartment was bewilderingly full of kin, including a doe-eyed young hydraulics engineer and a grandmother who had been a dentist with the Red Army, and whose dental chair dominated the parlor. For a whole long toasty evening, Jewishness, perhaps also pointedly, was not mentioned. The subject was one Bech was happy to ignore. His own writing had sought to reach out from the ghetto of his heart toward the wider expanses across the Hudson; the artistic triumph of American Jewry lay, he thought, not in the novels of the Fifties but in the movies of the Thirties, those gargantuan, crass contraptions whereby Jewish brains projected Gentile stars upon a Gentile nation and out of a simple immigrant joy gave formless land dreams and even a kind of conscience. The reservoir of faith, in 1964, was just going dry; through depression and world convulsion the country had been sustained by the *arriviste* patriotism of Louis B. Mayer and the brothers Warner. To Bech, it was one of history's great love stories, the mutually profitable romance between Jewish Hollywood and bohunk America, conducted almost entirely in the dark, a tapping of fervent messages through the wall of the San Gabriel Range; and his favorite Jewish writer was the one who turned his back on his three beautiful Brooklyn novels and went into the desert to write scripts for Doris Day. This may be, except for graduate students, neither here nor there. There, in Russia five years ago, when Cuba had been taken out of the oven to cool and Vietnam was still coming to a simmer, Bech did find a quality of life—impoverished yet ceremonial, shabby yet ornate, sentimental, embattled, and avuncular—reminiscent of his neglected Jewish past. Virtue, in Russia as in his childhood, seemed something that arose from men, like a comforting body odor, rather than something from above, which impaled the struggling soul like a moth on a pin. He stepped from the Aeroflot plane, with its notable hefty stewardesses, into an atmosphere of generosity. They met him with arms heaped with cold roses. On the first afternoon, the Writers' Union gave him as expense money a stack of ruble notes, pink and lilac Lenin and powder-blue Spasskaya Tower. In the following month, in the guise of "royalties" (in honor of his coming they had translated *Travel Light*, and several of his *Commentary* essays ["M-G-M and the U.S.A."; "The Moth on the Pin"; "Daniel Fuchs: An Appreciation"] had appeared in *I Nostrannaya Literatura*, and since no copyright agreement pertained the royalties were arbitrarily calculated, like showers of manna), more rubles were given to him, so that by the week of his departure Bech had accumulated over fourteen hundred rubles—by the official exchange rate, fifteen hundred and forty dollars. There was nothing to spend it on. All his hotels, his plane fares, his meals were paid for. He was a guest of the Soviet state. From morning to night he was never alone. That first afternoon, he had also been given, along with the rubles, a companion, a translator-escort: Ekaterina Alexandrovna Ryleyeva. She was a notably skinny red-headed woman with a flat chest and paper-colored skin and a translucent mole above her left nostril. He grew to call her Kate.

"Kate," he said, displaying his rubles in two fistfuls, letting some drift to the floor, "I have robbed the proletariat. What can I do with my filthy loot?" He had developed, in this long time in which she was always with him, a clowning super-American manner that disguised all complaints as "acts." In response, she had strengthened her original pose—of school teacherish patience, with ageless peasant roots. Her normal occupation was translating

English-language science fiction into Ukrainian, and he imagined this month with him was relatively a holiday. She had a mother, and late at night, after accompanying him to a morning-brandy session with the editors of *Yunost*, to lunch at the Writers' Union with its shark-mouthed chairman,\* to Dostoevski's childhood home (next to a madhouse, and enshrining some agonized crosshatched manuscripts and a pair of oval tin spectacles, tiny, and if fashioned for a dormouse), a museum of folk art, an endless restaurant meal, and a night of ballet, Ekaterina would bring Bech to his hotel lobby, put a babushka over her bushy orange hair, and head into a blizzard toward this ailing mother. Bech wondered about Kate's sex life. Skip Reynolds solemnly told him that personal life in Russia was inscrutable. He also told Bech that Kate was undoubtedly a Party spy. Bech was touched, and wondered what in his life would be worth spying out. From infancy on we all are spies; the shame is not this but that the secrets to be discovered are so paltry and few. Ekaterina was perhaps as old as forty, which could just give her a betrothed killed in the war. Was this the secret of her vigil, the endless paper-colored hours she spent by his side? She was always translating for him, and this added to her neutrality and transparency. He, too, had never been married, and imagined that this was what marriage was like.

She answered, "Henry"—she usually touched his arm, saying his name, and it never ceased to thrill him a little, the way the "H" became a breathy guttural sound between "G" and "K"—"you must not joke. This is your money. You earned it by the sweat of your brain. A thousand over Soviet Union committees of people sit in discussion over *Travel Light*, its wonderful qualities. The printing of one hundred thousand copies has gone *poof!* in the bookstores." The comic-strip colors of science fiction tinted her idiom unexpectedly.

"Poof!" Bech said, and scattered the money above his head; before the last bill stopped fluttering, they both stooped to retrieve the rubles from the rich red carpet. They were in his room at the Sovietskaya, the hotel for Party bigwigs and important visitors; all the suites were furnished in high czarist style: chandeliers, wax fruit, and brass bears.

"We have banks here," Kate said shyly, reaching under the satin sofa, "as in the capitalist countries. They pay interest, you could deposit your money in such a bank. It would be here enlarged, when you returned. You would have a numbered bankbook."

"What?" said Bech, "And help support the Socialist state? When you are already years ahead of us in the space race? I would be adding thrust to your rockets."

They stood up, both a little breathless from exertion, betraying their age. The tip of her nose was pink. She passed the remainder of his fortune into his hands; her silence seemed embarrassed.

"Besides," Bech said, "when would I ever return?"

She offered, "Perhaps in a space-warp?"

Her shyness, her pink nose and carrot hair, her embarrassment were becoming oppressive. He brusquely waved his arms. "No, Kate, we must spend it! Spend, spend. It's the Keynesian way. We will make Mother Russia a consumer society."

From the very still, slightly tipped way she was standing, Bech, bothered by "space-warp" received a haunted impression—that she was locked into a colorless other dimension from which only the pink tip of her nose emerged. "Is not so simple," she ominously pronounced.

For one thing, time was running out. Bobochka and Myshkin, the two Writers' Union

officials in charge of Bech's itinerary, had crowded the end of his schedule with compulsory cultural events. Fortified by relatively leisured weeks in Kazakhstan and the Caucasus,\* Bech was deemed fit to endure a marathon of war movies (the hero of one of them had lost his Communist Party member's card, which was worse than losing your driver's license; and another a young soldier hitched rides in a maze of trains only to turn around at the end ["See Henry," Kate whispered to him, "now he is home, that is his mother, what a good face, so much suffering, now they kiss, now he must leave, oh—" and Kate was crying too much to translate further]) and museums and shrines and brandy with various writers who uniformly adored Gernsbacker. November was turning bitter, the Christmassy lights celebrating the Revolution had been taken down, Kate as they hurried from appointment to appointment had developed a sniffle. She constantly patted her nose with a handkerchief. Bech felt a guilty pang, sending her off into the cold toward her mother before he ascended to his luxurious hotel room, with its parqueted foyer stacked with gift books and its alabaster bathroom and its great brocaded double bed. He would drink from a gift bottle of Georgian brandy and stand by the window, looking down on the golden windows of an apartment building where young Russians were Twisting to Voice of America tapes. Chubby Checker's chicken-plucker voice carried distinctly across the crevasse of sub-arctic night. In an adjoining window, a couple courteously granted isolation by the others was making love; he could see knees and hands and then a rhythmically kicking ankle. To relieve the pressure, Bech would sit down with his brandy and write to distant women boozy, reminiscent letters that in the morning would be handed solemnly to the ex-basketball-player, to be sent out of Russia via diplomat's pouch.\* Reynolds, himself something of a spy, was with them whenever Bech spoke to a group, whether of translators (when asked who was America's best living writer, Bech said Nabokov, and there was quite a silence before the next question) or of students (whom he assured that Yevtushenko's *Precocious Autobiography* was a salubrious and patriotic work that instead of being banned should be distributed free to Soviet schoolchildren). "Did I put my foot in it?" Bech would ask anxiously afterward—another "act."

The American's careful mouth twitched. "It's good for them. Shock therapy."

"You were charming," Ekaterina Alexandrovna always said loyally, jealously interposing herself, and squeezing Bech's arm. She could not imagine that Bech did not, like herself, loathe all officials. She would not have believed that Bech approached Reynolds with an intellectual's reverence for the athlete, and that they exchanged in private not anti-Kremlin vitriol but literary gossip and pro football scores, love letters and old copies of *Time*. Now, in her campaign to keep them apart, Kate had been given another weapon. She squeezed his arm smugly and said, "We have an hour. We must rush off and *shop*."

For the other thing, there was not much to buy. To begin, he would need an extra suitcase. He and Ekaterina, in their chauffeured Zil, drove to what seemed to Bech a far suburb, past flickerings of birch forest, to sections of new housing, perforated warehouses the color of wet cement. Here they found a vast store, vast though each salesgirl ruled as a petty tyrant over her domain of shelves. There was a puzzling duplication of suitcase sections; each displayed the same squarish mountain of dark cardboard boxes, and each pouting princess responded with negative insouciance to Ekaterina's quest for a leather suitcase. "I know there have been some," she told Bech.

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I want a cardboard one. I love the metal studs and the little

chocolate handle.”

“You have fun with me,” she said. “I know what you have in the West. I have been to the Science-Fiction Writers’ Congress in Vienna. This great store, and not one leather suitcase. It is a disgrace upon the people. But come, I know another store.” They went back into the Zil, which smelled like a cloakroom, and in whose swaying stuffy depths Bech felt squeamish and chastened, having often been sent to the cloakroom as a child at P.S. 87, on West 77th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. A dozen stuffy miles and three more stores failed to produce a leather suitcase; at last Kate permitted him to buy a paper one—the biggest, with gay plaids on the sides, and as long as an oboe. To console her, he also bought an astrakhan hat. It was not flattering (when he put it on, the haughty salesgirl laughed aloud) and did not cover his ears, which were cold, but it had the advantage of costing all of fifty-four rubles. “Only a *boyar* could wear such a wow of a hat,” said Kate, excited to flirtation by his purchase, “would wear such a wow of a hat.”

“I look like an Armenian in it,” Bech said. Humiliations never come singly. On the street with his suitcase and hat, Bech was stopped by a man who wanted to buy his overcoat. Kate translated and then scolded. During what Bech took to be a lengthy threat to call the police on the offender, a morose bleary-eyed man costumed like a New York chestnut vender, stared stubbornly at the sidewalk by their feet.

As they moved away, he said in soft English to Bech, “Your shoes. I give forty rubles.”

Bech pulled out his wallet and said, “*Nyet, nyet*. For your shoes I give fifty.”

Kate with a squawk flew between them and swept Bech away. She told him in tears, “Had the authorities witnessed that scene we would all be put in jail, biff, bang.”

Bech had never seen her cry in daylight—only in the dark of projection rooms. He climbed into the Zil feeling especially sick and guilty. They were late for their luncheon, with the cherubic museum director and his hatchet-faced staff. In the course of their tour through the museum, Bech tried to cheer her up with praise of Socialist realism. “Look at that turbine. Nobody in America can paint a turbine like that. Not since the thirties. Every part so distinctive you could rebuild one from it, yet the whole thing romantic as a sunset. Mimesis—you can’t beat it.” He was honestly fond of these huge posterish oils; they reminded him of magazine illustrations from his adolescence.

Kate would not be cheered. “It is stupid stuff,” she said. “We have had no painters since Rublyov. You treat my country as a picnic.” Sometimes her English had a weird precision. “It is not as if there is no talent. We are great, there are millions. The young are burning up with talent, it is annihilating them.” She pronounced it *anneeheel*—a word she had met only in a newspaper print, connected with ray guns.

“Kate, I *mean* it,” Bech insisted, hopelessly in the wrong, as with a third-grade teacher, yet also subject to another pressure, that of a woman taking sensual pleasure in refusing to be consoled. “I’m telling you, there is artistic passion here. This bicycle. Beautiful impressionism. No spokes. The French paint apples, the Russians paint bicycles.”

The parallel came out awry, unkind. Grimly patting her pink nostrils, Ekaterina passed into the next room. “Once,” she informed him, “this room held entirely pictures of *him*. At least that is no more.”

Bech did not need to ask who *he* was. The undefined pronoun had a constant value. The name was unspeakable. In Georgia Bech had been shown a tombstone for a person described simply as Mother.

The next day, between lunch with Voznesensky and dinner with Yevtushenko (who both flatteringly seemed to concede to him a hemispheric celebrity equivalent to their own, and who feigned enchantment when he tried to explain his peculiar status, as not a lion, with a lion's confining burden of symbolic portent, but as a graying, furtively stylish rat indifferent to the permitted to gnaw and roam behind the wainscoting of a fire-trap about to be demolished anyway), he and Kate and the impassive chauffeur managed to buy three amber necklaces and four wooden toys and two very thin wristwatches. The amber seemed homely to Bech—melted butter refrozen—but Kate was proud of it. The wristwatches he suspected would soon stop; they were perilously thin. The toys—segmented Kremliks, carved bears chopping wood—were good, but the only children he knew were his sister's in Cincinnati, and the youngest was nine. The Ukrainian needlework that Ekaterina hopefully pushed at him his imagination could not impose on any woman he knew, not even his mother; since his "success," she had her hair done once a week and wore her hems just above the knee. Back in his hotel room, the ten minutes before an all-Shostakovich concert, while Kate sniffled and sloshed in the bathroom (how could such a skinny woman be displacing all that water?), Bech counted his rubles. He had spent only a hundred and thirty-seven. That left one thousand two hundred and eighty-three, plus the odd kopecks. His heart sank; it was hopeless. Ekaterina emerged from the bathroom with a strange, bruised stare. Little burnt traces, traces of ashen tears lingered about her eyes, which were by nature a washed-out blue. She had been trying to put on eye makeup, and had kept washing it off. Trying to be a rich man's wife. She looked blank and wounded. Bech took her arm; they hurried downstairs like criminals on the run.

The next day was his last full day in Russia. All month he had wanted to visit Tolstoy's estate, and the trip had been postponed until now. Since Yasnaya Polyana was four hours from Moscow, he and Kate left early in the morning and returned in the dark. After miles of sleepy silence, she asked, "Henry, what did you like?"

"I liked the way he wrote *War and Peace* in the cellar, *Anna Karenina* on the first floor, and *Resurrection* upstairs. Do you think he's writing a fourth novel in Heaven?"

This reply, taken from a little *Commentary* article he was writing in his head (and would never write on paper), somehow renewed her silence. When she at last spoke, her voice was shy. "As a Jew, you believe?"

His laugh had an ambushed quality he tried to translate, with a shy guffaw at the end, into self-deprecation. "Jews don't go in much for Paradise," he said. "That's something you Christians cooked up."

"We are not Christians."

"Kate, you are saints. You are a land of monks and your government is a constant penance." From the same unwritten article—tentatively titled "God's Ghost in Moscow." He went on, with Hollywood, Martin Buber, and his uncles all vaguely smiling in his mind, "I think the Jewish feeling is that wherever they happen to be, it's rather paradisiacal, because they're there."

"You have found it so here?"

"Very much. This must be the only country in the world you can be homesick for while you're still in it. Russia is one big case of homesickness."

Perhaps Kate found this ground dangerous, for she returned to earlier terrain. "It

strange,” she said, “of the books I translate, how much there is to do with supernatural immaterial creatures like angels, ideal societies composed of spirits, speeds that exceed the speed of light, reversals of time—all impossible, and perhaps not. In a way it is terrible, to look up at the sky, on one of our clear nights of burning cold, at the sky of stars, and think of creatures alive in it.”

“Like termites in the ceiling.” Falling so short of the grandeur Kate might have had a right to expect from him, his simile went unanswered. The car swayed; dark gingerbread villages swooped by; the back of the driver’s head was motionless. Bech idly hummed a bit of “Midnight in Moscow,” whose literal title, he had discovered, was “Twilit Evenings in the Moscow Suburbs.” He said, “I also liked the way Upton Sinclair was in his bookcase, and how his house felt like a farmhouse instead of a mansion, and his grave.”

“So super a grave.”

“Very graceful, for a man who fought death so hard.” It had been an unmarked oval of earth, rimmed green with frozen turf, at the end of a road in a birchwood where night was sifting in. It had been here that Tolstoy’s brother had told him to search for the little green stick that would end war and human suffering. Because her importunate silence had begun to nag unbearably, Bech told Kate, “That’s what I should do with my rubles. Buy Tolstoy’s tombstone. With a neon arrow.”

“Oh those rubles!” she exclaimed. “You persecute me with those rubles. We have shopped more in one week than I shop in one year. Material things do not interest me, Henry. In the war we all learned the value of material things. There is no value but what you hold with yourself.”

“O.K., I’ll swallow them.”

“Always the joke. I have one more desperate idea. In New York, you have women for friends?”

Her voice had gone shy, as when broaching Jewishness; she was asking him if he were homosexual. How little, after a month, these two knew each other! “Yes. I have *only* women for friends.”

“Then perhaps we could buy them some furs. Not a coat, the style would be wrong. But furs we have, not leather suitcases, no, you are right to mock us, but furs, the world’s best, and dear enough for even a man so rich as you. I have often argued with Bobochka, he says authors should be poor for the suffering, it is how capitalist countries do it; and now I see he is right.”

Astounded by this tirade, delivered with a switching head so that her mole now and then darted into translucence—for they had reached Moscow’s outskirts, and street lamps—Bech could only say, “Kate, you’ve never read my books. They’re *all* about women.”

“Yes,” she said, “but coldly observed. As if extraterrestrial life.”

To be brief (I saw you, in the back row, glancing at your wristwatch, and don’t think the glance will sweeten your term grade), fur it was. The next morning, in a scrambled hour before the ride to the airport, Bech and Ekaterina went to a shop on Gorky Street where a diffident Mongolian beauty laid pelt after pelt into his hands. The less unsuccessful of his uncles had been for a time a furrier, and after this gap of decades Bech again greeted the frosty luxuriance of silver fox, the more tender and playful and amorous amplitude of re-

fox, mink with its ugly mahogany assurance, svelte otter, imperial ermine tail-tipped in black like a writing plume. Each pelt, its soft tingling mass condensing acres of Siberia, cost several hundred rubles. Bech bought for his mother two mink still wearing their dried snarls, and two silver fox for his present mistress, Norma Latchett, to trim a coat collar in (her firm which Saxon chin *drowned* in fur, is how he pictured it), and some ermine as a joke for his house slave sister in Cincinnati, and a sumptuous red fox for a woman he had yet to meet. The Mongolian salesgirl, magnificently unimpressed, added it up to over twelve hundred rubles and wrapped the furs in brown paper like fish. He paid her with a salad of pastel notes and was clean. Bech had not been so exhilarated, so aerated by prosperity, since he sold his first short story—in 1943, about boot camp, to *Liberty*, for a hundred and fifty dollars. It had been humorous, a New York Jew floundering among Southerners, and is omitted from most bibliographies.\*

He and Ekaterina rushed back to the Sovietskaya and completed his packing. He tried to forget the gift books stacked in the foyer, but she insisted he take them. They crammed them into his new suitcase, with the furs, the amber, the wristwatches, the infuriatingly knobby and bulky wooden toys. When they were done, the suitcase bulged, leaked fur, and weighed more than his two others combined. Bech looked his last at the chandelier and the empty brandy bottle, the lovesick window and the bugged walls, and staggered out the door. Kate followed with a book and a sock she had found beneath the bed.

Everyone was at the airport to see him off—Bobochka with his silver teeth, Myshkin with his glass eye, the rangy American with his air of lugubrious caution. Bech shook Skye Reynolds's hand goodbye and abrasively kissed the two Russian men on the cheek. He went to kiss Ekaterina on the cheek, but she turned her face so that her mouth met his and he realized, horrified, that he should have slept with her. He had been expected to. From the complacent tiptoe smiles of Bobochka and Myshkin, they assumed he had. She had been provided to him for that purpose. He was a guest of the state. "Oh Kate, forgive me; of course," he said, but so stumbingly she seemed not to have understood him. Her kiss had been colorless but moist and good, like a boiled potato.

Then, somehow, suddenly, he was late, there was panic. His suitcases were not yet in the airplane. A brute in blue seized the two manageable ones and left him to carry the paper on himself. As he staggered across the runway, it burst. One catch simply tore loose at the staples, and the other sympathetically let go. The books and toys spilled; the fur began to blow down the concrete, pelts looping and shimmering as if again alive. Kate broke past the gate guard and helped him catch them; together they scooped all the loot back in the suitcases but for a dozen fluttering books. They were heavy and slick, in the Cyrillic alphabet, like high-school yearbooks upside down. One of the watches had cracked its face. Kate was sobbing and shivering in excitement; a bitter wind was blowing streaks of grit and snow off of the coming long winter. "Genry, the books!" she said, needing to shout. "You must have them! They are souvenirs!"

"Mail them!" Bech thundered, and ran with the terrible suitcase under his arm, fearful of being burdened with more responsibilities. Also, though in some ways a man of our time, he has a morbid fear of missing airplanes, and of being dropped from the tail-end lavatory.

Though this was six years ago, the books have not yet arrived in the mail. Perhaps Ekaterina Alexandrovna kept them, as souvenirs. Perhaps they were caught in the cultur

freeze-up that followed Bech's visit, and were buried in a blizzard. Perhaps they arrived in the lobby of his apartment building, and were pilfered by an émigré vandal. Or perhaps (you may close your notebooks) the mailman is not clairvoyant after all.

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\* See Appendix A, [section I](#).

\* See Appendix A, [section II](#).

\* See Appendix A, [section III](#).

\* See Appendix A, [section IV](#).

\* See [Appendix B](#).



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## BECH IN RUMANIA; OR, THE RUMANIAN CHAUFFEUR

DEPLAINING IN BUCHAREST wearing an astrakhan hat purchased in Moscow, Bech was not recognized by the United States Embassy personnel sent to greet him, and, rather than identify himself, sat sullenly on a bench, glowering like a Soviet machinery importer, while these young men ran back and forth conversing with each other in dismayed English and shouting at the customs officials in what Bech took to be pidgin Rumanian. At last, one of these young men, the smallest and cleverest, Princeton '51 or so, noticing the rounded toes of Bech's American shoes, ventured suspiciously, "I beg your pardon, *pazhalusta*, but are you—?"

"Could be," Bech said. After five weeks of consorting with Communists, he felt himself increasingly tempted to evade, confuse, and mock his fellow Americans. Further, after attuning himself to the platitudinous jog of translatoresque, he found rapid English idiomatics exhausting. So it was with some relief that he passed, in the next hours, from the conspiratorial company of his compatriots into the care of a monarchial Rumanian hotel and a smiling Party underling called Athanase Petrescu.

Petrescu, whose oval face was adorned by constant sunglasses and several round sticking-plasters placed upon a fresh blue shave, had translated into Rumanian *Typee*; *Pierre*; *Life on the Mississippi*; *Sister Carrie*; *Winesburg, Ohio*; *Across the River and Into the Trees*; and *On the Road*. He knew Bech's work well and said, "Although it was *Travel Light* that made your name illustrious, yet in my heart I detect a very soft spot for *Brother Pig*, which your critics did not so much applaud."

Bech recognized in Petrescu, behind the blue jaw and sinister glasses, a man humbly in love with books, a fool for literature. As, that afternoon, they strolled through a dreamlike Bucharest park containing bronze busts of Goethe and Pushkin and Victor Hugo, beside a lake wherein the greenish sunset was coated with silver, the translator talked excitedly of a dozen things, sharing thoughts he had not been able to share while descending, alone at his desk, into the luminous abysses and profound crudities of American literature. "With Hemingway the difficulty of translating—and I speak to an extent of Anderson also—is to prevent the simplicity from seeming simple-minded. For we do not have here such a tradition of belle-lettrist fancifulness against which the style of Hemingway was a rebel. Do you follow the difficulty?"

"Yes. How did you get around it?"

Petrescu did not seem to understand. "Get around, how? Circumvent?"

"How did you translate the simple language without seeming simple-minded?"

"Oh. By being extremely subtle."

"Oh. I should tell you, some people in my country think Hemingway was simple-minded."

is actively debated.”

Petrescu absorbed this with a nod, and said, “I know for a fact, his Italian is not always correct.”

When Bech got back to his hotel—situated on a square rimmed with buildings made, seemed, of dusty pink candy—a message had been left for him to call a Mr. Phillips at the U.S. Embassy. Phillips was Princeton ’51. He asked, “What have they got mapped out for you?”

Bech’s schedule had hardly been discussed. “Petrescu mentioned a production of *Desire Under the Elms* I might see. And he wants to take me to Brasov. Where is Brasov?”

“In Transylvania, way the hell off. It’s where Dracula hung out. Listen, can we talk frankly?”

“We can try.”

“I know damn well this line is bugged, but here goes. This country is hot. Anti-Socialism is busting out all over. My inkling is they want to get you out of Bucharest, away from all the liberal writers who are dying to meet you.”

“Are you sure they’re not dying to meet Arthur Miller?”

“Kidding aside, Bech, there’s a lot of ferment in this country, and we want to plug you in. Now, when are you meeting Taru?”

“Knock knock. Taru. Taru Who?”

“Jesus, he’s the head of the Writers’ Union—hasn’t Petrescu even set up an appointment? Boy, they’re putting you right around the old mulberry bush. I gave Petrescu a list of writers for you to latch on to. Suppose I call him and wave the big stick and ring you back. Got it?”

“Got it, tiger.” Bech hung up sadly; one of the reasons he had accepted the State Department’s invitation was that he thought it would be an escape from agents.

Within ten minutes his phone rasped, in that dead rattly way it has behind the Iron Curtain, and it was Phillips, breathless, victorious. “Congratulate me,” he said. “I’ve been making like a thug and got *their* thugs to give you an appointment with Taru tonight.”

“This very night?”

Phillips sounded hurt. “You’re only here four nights, you know. Petrescu will pick you up. His excuse was he thought you might want some rest.”

“He’s extremely subtle.”

“What was that?”

“Never mind, *pazhalusta*.”

Petrescu came for Bech in a black car driven by a hunched silhouette. The Writers’ Union was housed on the other side of town, in a kind of castle, a turreted mansion with a flaring stone staircase and an oak-vaulted library whose shelves were twenty feet high and solid with leather spines. The stairs and hallways were deserted. Petrescu tapped on a tall paneled door of blackish oak, strap-hinged in the sombre Spanish style. The door opened soundlessly, revealing a narrow high room hung with tapestries, pale brown and blue, whose subjects involved masses of attenuated soldiery unfathomably engaged. Behind a huge polished desk, quite bare of furnishings sat an immaculate miniature man with a pink face and hair as white as a dandelion poll. His rosy hands, perfectly finished down to each fingernail, were folded on the shiny desk, reflected like water flowers; and his face wore a smiling expression that was also, in each neat crease, beyond improvement. This was Taru.

He spoke with magical suddenness, like a music box. Petrescu translated his words to Bech as, "You are a literary man. Do you know the works of our Mihail Sadoveanu, of our noble Mihai Beniuc, or perhaps that most wonderful spokesman for the people, Tudor Arghezi?"

Bech said, "No, I'm afraid the only Rumanian writer I know at all is Ionesco."

The exquisite white-haired man nodded eagerly and emitted a length of tinkling sounds that was translated to Bech as simply "And who is he?"

Petrescu, who certainly knew all about Ionesco, stared at Bech with blank expectancy. Even in this innermost sanctum he had kept his sunglasses on. Bech said, irritated, "Playwright. Lives in Paris. Theatre of the Absurd. Wrote *Rhinoceros*," and he crooked his forefinger beside his heavy Jewish nose, to represent a horn.

Taru emitted a dainty sneeze of laughter. Petrescu translated, listened, and told Bech, "He is very sorry he has not heard of this man. Western books are a luxury here, so we are not able to follow each new nihilist movement. Comrade Taru asks what you plan to do while in the People's Republic of Rumania."

"I am told," Bech said, "that there are some writers interested in exchanging ideas with an American colleague. I believe my embassy has suggested a list to you."

The musical voice went on and on. Petrescu listened with a cocked ear and relayed: "Comrade Taru sincerely wishes that this may be the case and regrets that, because of the lateness of the hour and the haste of this meeting urged by your embassy, no secretaries are present to locate this list. He furthermore regrets that at this time of the year so many of our fine writers are bathing at the Black Sea. However, he points out that there is an excellent production of *Desire Under the Elms* in Bucharest, and that our Carpathian city of Brasov is indeed worthy of a visit. Comrade Taru himself retains many pleasant youthful memories concerning Brasov."

Taru rose to his feet—an intensely dramatic event within the reduced scale he had established around himself. He spoke, thumped his small square chest resoundingly, spoke again, and smiled. Petrescu said, "He wishes you to know that in his youth he published many books of poetry, both epic and lyric in manner. He adds, 'A fire ignited here'"—and here Petrescu struck his own chest in flaccid mimicry—" 'can never be quenched.' "

Bech stood and responded, "In my country we also ignite fires *here*." He touched his head. His remark was not translated and, after an efflorescent display of courtesy from the brilliant-haired little man, Bech and Petrescu made their way through the empty mansion down to the waiting car, which drove them, rather jerkily, back to the hotel.

"And how did you like Mr. Taru?" Petrescu asked on the way.

"He's a doll," Bech said.

"You mean—a puppet?"

Bech turned curiously but saw nothing in Petrescu's face that betrayed more than puzzlement over meaning. Bech said, "I'm sure you have a better eye for the strings than I do."

Since neither had eaten, they dined together at the hotel; they discussed Faulkner and Hawthorne while waiters brought them soup and veal a continent removed from the cabbage cuisine of Russia. A lithe young woman on awkwardly high heels stalked among the tables singing popular songs from Italy and France. The trailing microphone wire now and then became entangled in her feet, and Bech admired the sly savagery with which she would

while not altering an iota her enameled smile, kick herself free. Bech had been a long time without a woman. He looked forward to three more nights sitting at this table, surrounded by traveling salesmen from East Germany and Hungary, feasting on the sight of this lithesome chanteuse. Though her motions were angular and her smile was inflexible, her high rounded bosom looked soft as a soufflé.

But tomorrow, Petrescu explained, smiling sweetly beneath his sad-eyed sunglasses, they would go to Brasov.

Bech knew little about Rumania. From his official briefing he knew it was “a Latin island in a Slavic sea,” that during World War II its anti-Semitism had been the most ferocious in Europe, that now it was seeking economic independence of the Soviet bloc. The ferocity especially interested him, since of the many human conditions it was his business to imagine the murderousness was among the more difficult. He was a Jew. Though he could be irritable and even vengeful, obstinate savagery was excluded from his budget of emotions.

Petrescu met him in the hotel lobby at nine and, taking his suitcase from his hand, led him to the hired car. By daylight, the chauffeur was a short man the color of ashes—white ash for the face, gray cigarette ash for his close-trimmed smudge of a mustache, and the dark residue of a tougher substance for his eyes and hair. His manner was nervous and remote and fussy; Bech’s impression was of a stupidity so severe that the mind is tensed to sustain the simplest tasks. As they drove from the city, the driver constantly tapped his horn to warn pedestrians and cyclists of his approach. They passed the prewar stucco suburbs, suggestive of southern California; the postwar Moscow-style apartment buildings, rectilinear and airless; the heretical all-glass exposition hall the Rumanians had built to celebrate twenty years of industrial progress under Socialism. It was shaped like a huge sailor’s cap, and before it stood a tall Brancusi column cast in aluminum.

“Brancusi,” Bech said. “I didn’t know you acknowledged him.”

“Oh, much,” Petrescu said. “His village is a shrine. I can show you many early works in our national museum.”

“And Ionesco? Is he really a non-person?”

Petrescu smiled. “The eminent head of our Writers’ Union,” he said, “makes little jokes. He is known here but not much produced as yet. Students in their rooms perhaps read aloud and play like *The Singer Devoid of Hair*.”

Bech was distracted from the conversation by the driver’s incessant mutter of tooting. They were in the country now, driving along a straight, slightly rising road lined with trees whose trunks were painted white. On the shoulder of the road walked bundle-shaped old women carrying knotted bundles, little boys tapping donkeys forward, men in French-blue work clothes sauntering empty-handed. At all of them the driver sounded his horn. His stubby gray-nailed hand fluttered on the contact rim, producing an agitated stammer beginning perhaps a hundred yards in advance and continuing until the person, who usually moved on to turn and scowl, had been passed. Since the road was well traveled, the noise was practically uninterrupted, and after the first half hour nagged Bech like a toothache. He asked Petrescu, “Must he do that?”

“Oh, yes. He is a conscientious man.”

“What good does it do?”

Petrescu, who had been developing an exciting thought on Mark Twain's infatuation with the apparatus of capitalism, which had undermined his bucolic genius, indulgently explained, "The bureau from which we hire cars provides the driver. They have been precisely trained for this profession."

Bech realized that Petrescu himself did not drive. He reposed in the oblivious trust of an airplane passenger, legs crossed, sunglasses in place, issuing smoother and smoother phrases while Bech leaned forward anxiously, braking on the empty floor, twitching a wheel that was not there, trying to wrench the car's control away from this atrociously unrhythmic and brutal driver. When they went through a village, the driver would speed up and intensify the mutter of his honking; clusters of peasants and geese exploded in disbelief, and Bech felt as if his gears, the gears that regulate and engage the mind, were clashing. As they ascended into the mountains, the driver demonstrated his technique with curves: he approached each like an enemy, accelerating, and at the last moment stepped on the brake as if crushing a snake underfoot. In the jerking and swaying, Petrescu grew pale. His blue jaw acquired a moist sheen and issued phrases less smoothly. Bech said to him, "This driver should be locked up. He is sick and dangerous."

"No, no, he is a good man. These roads, they are difficult."

"At least please ask him to stop twiddling the horn. It's torture."

Petrescu's eyebrows arched, but he leaned forward and spoke in Rumanian.

The driver answered; the language clattered in his mouth, though his voice was soft.

Petrescu told Bech, "He says it is a safety precaution."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!"

Petrescu was truly puzzled. He asked, "In the States, you drive your own car?"

"Of course, everybody does," Bech said, and then worried that he had hurt the feelings of this Socialist, who must submit to the aristocratic discomfort of being driven. For the remainder of the trip, he held silent about the driver. The muddy lowland fields with their Mediterranean farmhouses had yielded to fir-dark hills bearing Germanic chalets. At the highest point, the old boundary of Austria-Hungary, fresh snow had fallen, and the car pressed ruthlessly through the ruts, brushed within inches of some children dragging sleds. There was a short downhill distance from there to Brasov. They stopped before a newly built pistachio hotel. The jarring ride had left Bech with a headache. Petrescu stepped carefully from the car, licking his lips; the tip of his tongue showed purple in his drained face. The chauffeur, as composed as raked ashes no touch of wind has stirred, changed out of his gray driving coat, checked the oil and water, and removed his lunch from the trunk. Bech examined him for some sign of satisfaction, some betraying trace of malice, but there was nothing. His eyes were living smudges, and his mouth was the mouth of the boy in the class who, being neither strong nor intelligent, has developed insignificance into a character trait that does him some credit. He glanced at Bech without expression; yet Bech wondered if the man did not understand English a little.

In Brasov the American writer and his escort passed the time in harmless sightseeing. The local museum contained peasant costumes. The local castle contained armor. The Lutheran cathedral was surprising; Gothic lines and scale had been wedded to clear glass and an austerity of decoration, noble and mournful, that left one, Bech felt, much too alone with

God. He felt the Reformation here as a desolating wind, four hundred years ago. From the hotel roof, the view looked sepia, and there was an empty swimming pool, and wet snow on the lacy metal chairs. Petrescu shivered and went down to his room. Bech changed neckties and went down to the bar. Champagne music bubbled from the walls. The bartender understood what a Martini was, though he used equal parts of gin and vermouth. The clientele was young, and many spoke Hungarian, for Transylvania had been taken from Hungary after the war. One plausible youth, working with Bech's reluctant French, elicited from him that he was *un écrivain*, and asked for his autograph. But this turned out to be the prelude to a proposed exchange of pens, in which Bech lost a sentimentally cherished Esterbrook and gained a nameless ballpoint that wrote red. Bech wrote three and a half postcards (to his mistress, his mother, his publisher, and a half to his editor at *Commentary*) before the red pen went dry. Petrescu, who neither drank nor smoked, finally appeared. Bech said, "My hero, where have you been? I've had four Martinis and been swindled in your absence."

Petrescu was embarrassed. "I've been shaving."

"Shaving!"

"Yes, it is humiliating. I must spend each day one hour shaving, and even yet it does not look as if I have shaved, my beard is so obdurate."

"Are you putting blades in the razor?"

"Oh, yes, I buy the best and use two upon each occasion."

"This is the saddest story I've ever heard. Let me send you some decent blades when I get home."

"Please, do not. There are no blades better than the blades I use. It is merely that my beard is phenomenal."

"When you die," Bech said, "you can leave it to Rumanian science."

"You are ironical."

In the restaurant, there was dancing—the Tveest, the Hully Gullee, and chain formation that involved a lot of droll hopping. American dances had become here innocently birdlike. Now and then a young man, slender and with hair combed into a parrot's peak, would leap into the air and seem to hover, emitting a shrill palatal cry. The men in Transylvania appeared lighter and more fanciful than the women, who moved, in their bell-skirted cocktail dresses, with a wooden stateliness perhaps inherited from their peasant grandmothers. Each girl who passed near their table was described by Petrescu, not humorously at first, as "typical Rumanian beauty."

"And this one, with the orange lips and eyelashes?"

"A typical Rumanian beauty. The cheekbones are very classical."

"And the blonde behind her? The small plump one?"

"Also typical."

"But they are so different. Which is more typical?"

"They are equally. We are a perfect democracy." Between spates of dancing, a young chanteuse, more talented than the one in the Bucharest hotel, took the floor. She had learned, probably from free-world films, that terrible mannerism of strenuousness whereby every note, no matter how accessibly placed and how flatly attacked, is given a facial aura of immense accomplishment. Her smile, at the close of each number, combined a conspiratorial

twinkle, a sublime humility, and an element of dazed self-congratulation. Yet, beneath the artifice, the girl had life. Bech was charmed by a number, in Italian, that involved much animated pouting and finger-scolding and placing of the fists on the hips. Petrescu explained that the song was the plaint of a young wife whose husband was always attending soccer matches and never stayed home with her. Bech asked, "Is she also a typical Rumanian beauty?"

"I think," Petrescu said, with a purr Bech had not heard before, "she is a typical little Jewess."

The drive, late the next afternoon, back to Bucharest was worse than the one out, for it took place partly in the dark. The chauffeur met the challenge with increased speed and redoubled honking. In a rare intermittence of danger, a straight road near Ploesti where only the oil rigs relieved the flatness, Bech asked, "Seriously, do you not feel the insanity in the man?" Five minutes before, the driver had turned to the back seat and, showing even greater teeth in a tight tic of a smile, had remarked about a dog lying dead beside the road. Bech suspected that most of the remark had not been translated.

Petrescu said, crossing his legs in the effete and weary way that had begun to exasperate Bech, "No, he is a good man, an extremely kind man, who takes his work too seriously. I think that he is like the beautiful Jewess whom you so much admired."

"In my country," Bech said, "'Jewess' is a kind of fighting word."

"Here," Petrescu said, "it is merely descriptive. Let us talk about Herman Melville. Is it possible to you that *Pierre* is a yet greater work than *The White Whale*?"

"No, I think it is yet not so great, possibly."

"You are ironical about my English. Please excuse it. Being prone to motion sickness he had discollected my thoughts."

"Our driver would discollect anybody's thoughts. Is it possible that he is the late Adolf Hitler, kept alive by Count Dracula?"

"I think not. Our people's uprising in 1944 fortunately exterminated the Fascists."

"That is fortunate. Have you ever read, speaking of Melville, *Omoo*?"

Melville, it happened, was Bech's favorite American author, in whom he felt united the strengths that were later to go the separate ways of Dreiser and James. Throughout dinner and back at the hotel, he lectured Petrescu about him. "No one," Bech said—he had ordered a full bottle of white Rumanian wine, and his tongue felt agile as a butterfly—"more courageously faced our native terror. He went for it right between its wide-set little pig eyes, and shattered his genius like a lance." He poured himself more wine. The hotel chanteuse, who Bech now noticed had buck teeth as well as gawky legs, stalked to their table, untangled her feet from the microphone wire, and favored them with a French version of "Some Enchanted Evening."

"You do not consider," Petrescu said, "that Hawthorne also went between the eyes? And the laconic Ambrose Bierce?"

"*Quelque soir enchanté,*" the woman sang, her eyes and teeth and earrings glittering like the facets of a chandelier.

"Hawthorne blinked," Bech pronounced, "and Bierce squinted."

"*Vous verrez l'étranger ...*"

"I worry about you, Petrescu," Bech continued. "Don't you ever have to go home? Isn't

there a Frau Petrescu, Madame, or whatever, a typical Rumanian, never mind.” Abruptly he felt steeply lonely.

In bed, when his room had stopped the gentle swaying motion with which it had greeted his entrance, he remembered the driver, and the man’s neatly combed death-gray face seemed the face of everything foul, stale, stupid, and uncontrollable in the world. He had seen that tight tic of a smile before. Where? He remembered. West 86th Street, coming back from Riverside Park, Mickey Schwartz, a child with whom he always argued, and was always right, and always lost. Their ugliest quarrel had concerned comic strips, whether or not the artist—Segar, say, who drew Popeye, or Harold Gray of Little Orphan Annie—whether or not the artist, in duplicating the faces from panel to panel, day after day, traced them. Bech had maintained, obviously, not. Mickey had insisted that some mechanical process had to be used. Bech tried to explain that it was not such a difficult feat, that just as a person’s handwriting was always the same—Mickey, his face clouding, said it wasn’t possible. Bech explained, what he saw so clearly, that everything was possible for human beings with a little training and talent. Mickey, that the ease and variation of each panel proved his point. Just learn to look, you dummies. Mickey’s face had become totally closed, with a pig-eyed density quite inhuman, as it steadily shook “No, no, no,” and Bech, becoming frightened and furious, tried to behead the other boy with his fists, and the boy in turn pinned him and pressed his face into the bitter grit of pebbles and glass that coated the cement passageway between two apartment buildings. These unswept jagged bits, a kind of city topsoil, had enlarged under his eyes, and through experience, the magnification amidst pain of those negligible mineral flecks, had formed perhaps, a vision. At any rate, it seemed to Bech, as he skidded into sleep, that his artistic gifts had been squandered in the attempt to recapture that moment of stinging precision.

The next day was his last full day in Rumania. Petrescu took him to an art museum where amid many ethnic posters posing as paintings, a few sketches and sculpted heads by the young Brancusi smelled like saints’ bones. The two men went on to the twenty-year-old industrial exhibit and admired rows of brightly painted machinery—gaudy counters in some large international game. They visited shops, and everywhere Bech felt a desiccated pinkish elegance groping, out of eclipse, through the murky hardware of Sovietism, toward a rebirth of style. Yet there had been a tough and heroic naïveté in Russia that he missed here, where something shrugging and effete seemed to leave room for a vein of energetic evil. In the evening, they went to *Patima de Sub Ulmi*.

Their driver, bringing them to the very door of the theatre, pressed his car forward through the bodies, up an arc of driveway crowded with pedestrians. The people caught in the headlights were astonished; Bech slammed his foot on a phantom brake and Petrescu grunted and strained backward in his seat. The driver continually tapped his horn—a demented, persistent muttering—and slowly the crowd gave way around the car. Bech and Petrescu stepped, at the door, into the humid atmosphere of a riot. As the chauffeur, his childish small-nosed profile intent, pressed his car back through the crowd to the street, fists thumped on the fenders.

Safe in the theatre lobby, Petrescu took off his sunglasses to wipe his face. His eyes were tender bulging blue, with jaundiced whites; a scholar’s tremor pulsed in his left lower lip. “You know,” he confided to Bech, “that man our driver. Not all is well with him.”

“That’s what I keep telling you,” Bech said.



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