**Milan KUNDERA: *THE JOKE* (1967)**

There was only one thing I could not accept: that she should be so happy when I was missing her so much. So I bought a postcard and (to hurt, shock, and confuse her) wrote: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik…

And so I was very glad when September came at last, bringing classes and (several days before classes began) my work at the Students Union, where I had an office to myself and all kinds of things to keep me busy. The day after I got back, however, I received a phone call summoning me to the District Party Secretariat. From that moment I remember everything in perfect detail. It was a sunny day, and as I came out of the Students Union building I felt the grief that had plagued me all summer slowly dissipating. I set off with an agreeable feeling of curiosity. I rang the bell and was let in by the chairman of the Party University Committee, a tall thin-faced youth with fair hair and ice-blue eyes. I gave him the standard greeting, "Honor to Labor," but instead of responding he said, "Go straight back. They're waiting for you." In the last room of the Secretariat, three members of the committee awaited me. They told me to sit down. I did, and understood that this was out of the ordinary. These three Comrades, whom I knew well and had always bantered with, wore severe expressions.

Their first question was whether I knew Marketa. I said I did. They asked me whether I had corresponded with her. I said I had. They asked me whether I remembered what I wrote. I said I did not, but immediately the postcard with the provocative text materialized before my eyes and I began to have an inkling of what was going on…

And you, what do you think of optimism? they asked. Optimism? I asked. What should I think of it? Do you consider yourself an optimist? they went on. I do, I said timidly. I like a good time, a good laugh, I said, trying to lighten the tone of the interrogation. Even a nihilist can like a good laugh, said one of them. He can laugh at people who suffer. A cynic also can like a good laugh, he went on. Do you think socialism can be built without optimism? asked another of them. No, I said. Then you're opposed to our building socialism, said the third. What do you mean? I protested. Because you think optimism is the opium of the people, they said, pressing their attack. The opium of the people? I protested again. Don't try to dodge the issue. That's what you wrote. Marx called religion the opium of the people, and you think our optimism is opium! That's what you wrote to Marketa. I wonder what our workers, our shock workers, would say if they were to learn that the optimism spurring them on to overfulfill the plan was opium, another added. And the third: For a Trotskyite the optimism that builds socialism can never be more than opium. And you are a Trotskyite.

For heaven's sake, what ever gave you that idea? I protested. Did you write it or did you not? I may have written something of the kind as a joke, but that was two months ago, I don't remember. We'll be glad to refresh your memory, they said, and read me my postcard aloud: Optimism is the opium of the people! A healthy atmosphere stinks of stupidity! Long live Trotsky! Ludvik. The words sounded so terrifying in the small Party Secretariat office that they frightened me and I felt they had a destructive force I was powerless to counter.

They said I had written my sentences on an open postcard, there for everyone to see, that my words had an objective significance that could not be explained away by the state of my emotions.

Then they asked me how much Trotsky I had read. None, I said. They asked me who had lent me the books. No one, I said. They asked me what Trotskyites I had met with. None, I said. They told me they were relieving me of my post in the Students Union, effective immediately, and asked me to give them the keys to my office. I took them out of my pocket and handed them over. Then they said that the Party level at which my case would be handled was that of my own Organization at the university's Natural Sciences Division. They stood up and looked past me. I said "Honor to Labor" and left.