The Unbearable Lightness of Being

It would be senseless for the author to try to convince the reader that his characters once actually lived. They were not born of a mother's womb; they were born of a stimulating phrase or two or from a basic situation. Tomas was born of the saying "Einmal ist keinmal." Tereza was born of the rumbling of a stomach.

The first time she went to Tomas's flat, her insides began to rumble. And no wonder: she had had nothing to eat since breakfast but a quick sandwich on the platform before boarding the train. She had concentrated on the daring journey ahead of her and forgotten about food. But when we ignore the body, we are more easily victimized by it. She felt terrible standing there in front of Tomas listening to her belly speak out. She felt like crying. Fortunately, after the first ten seconds Tomas put his arms around her and made her forget her ventral voices.

Tereza was therefore born of a situation which brutally reveals the irreconcilable duality of body and soul, that fundamental human experience.

A long time ago, man would listen in amazement to the sound of regular beats in his

chest, never suspecting what they were. He was unable to identify himself with so alien and unfamiliar an object as the body. The body was a cage, and inside that cage was something which looked, listened, feared, thought, and marveled; that something, that remainder left over after the body had been accounted for, was the soul.

Today, of course, the body is no longer unfamiliar: we know that the beating in our chest is the heart and that the nose is the nozzle of a hose sticking out of the body to take oxygen to the lungs. The face is nothing but an instrument panel registering all the body mechanisms: digestion, sight, hearing, respiration, thought.

Ever since man has learned to give each part of the body a name, the body has given him less trouble. He has also learned that the soul is nothing more than the gray matter of the brain in action. The old duality of body and soul has become shrouded in scientific terminology, and we can laugh at it as merely an obsolete prejudice.

But just make someone who has fallen in love listen to his stomach rumble, and the unity of body and soul, that lyrical illusion of the age of science, instantly fades away.

Tereza tried to see herself through her body. That is why, from girlhood on, she would stand before the mirror so often. And because she was afraid her mother would catch her at it, every peek into the mirror had a tinge of secret vice.

It was not vanity that drew her to the mirror; it was amazement at seeing her own I. She forgot she was looking at the instrument panel of her body mechanisms; she thought she saw her soul shining through the features of her face. She forgot that the nose was merely the nozzle of a hose that took oxygen to the lungs; she saw it as the true expression of her nature.

Staring at herself for long stretches of time, she was occasionally upset at the sight of her mother's features in her face. She would stare all the more doggedly at her image in an attempt to wish them away and keep only what was hers alone. Each time she succeeded was a time of intoxication: her soul would rise to the surface of her body like a crew charging up from the bowels of a ship, spreading out over the deck, waving at the sky and singing in jubilation.

At home, there was no such thing as shame. Her mother marched about the flat in her underwear, sometimes braless and sometimes, on summer days, stark naked. Her stepfather did not walk about naked, but he did go into the bathroom every time Tereza was in the bath. Once she locked herself in and her mother was furious. Who do you think you are, anyway? Do you think he's going to bite off a piece of your beauty?

Once her mother decided to go naked in the winter when the lights were on. Tereza quickly ran to pull the curtains so that no one could see her from across the street. She heard her mother's laughter behind her. The following day her mother had some friends over: a neighbor, a woman she worked with, a local schoolmistress, and two or three other women in the habit of getting together regularly. Tereza and the sixteen-year-old son of one of them came in at one point to say hello, and her mother immediately took advantage of their presence to tell how Tereza had tried to protect her mother's modesty. She laughed, and all the women laughed with her. Tereza can't reconcile herself to the idea that the human body pisses and farts, she said. Tereza turned bright red, but her mother would not stop. What's so terrible about that? and in answer to her own question she broke wind loudly. All the women laughed again.