HITLER'S COUCH

When history makes an unexpected entrance

By Mark Slouka

This was the Angel of History! We felt its wings flutter through the room.
—Schwerin von Krosigk

I.

If Stephen Dedalus, that fearful Jesuit, was right, if history, in the century of Bergen-Belsen and Nanking and Democratic Kampuchea, is a nightmare from which we are all—even the most effectively narcotized among us—trying to awake, how then do we explain the dream that foreshadows the event, the actual nightmare that precedes the waking one?

When he was eight years old, my father was visited by a nightmare so powerful that half a century later the mere retelling of it would stipple his skin with gooseflesh and lift the hair on the back of his arms. He himself would wonder at his own bristling body, the shameless atavism of fear. "Look at this," he'd say when I was young, shoving one big arm across the table. "It never fails." And seeing the coarse, familiar fur rise as by some conjurer's trick to the memory of a dream decades gone, I'd know that the immaterial world was a force to be reckoned with.

In the dream (although nothing translates as badly as dreams—no grief, no scent, no earthly grammar), my eight-year-old father hurries, clockwise, down a white spiral staircase. The stairwell has no windows, no central shaft; its sides are as smooth as a chambered nautilus. Just ahead, the left-hand wall continuously extends itself, emerging out of the seam.

He stops, suddenly aware of a sound coming from far below. He can make it out clearly now: the heavy scrape of footsteps, as harsh as steel on marble; behind these, what he assumes at first is the suck and hiss of a factory steam engine, then realizes is actually the sound of huge, stentorian breathing. The man coming up the stairs, he knows, is gargantuan,

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grotesquely fat; he fills the stairwell plug-tight, like a moving wall of flesh. Getting past him is impossible; the corridor is sealed. Resistance is inconceivable; if my father remains where he is, he'll be crushed.

Turning, my father starts back up the stairs he just descended. He begins to run. Whenever he stops to catch his breath, he can hear the metronome tread, the fat man's breathing. He rushes on, confident of his speed. The man is slow, after all, barely moving. He'll simply outrun him, or keep ahead forever. The stairs unwind like a ribbon in the wind, rising into the dark. It's then that he remembers there is no exit; the stairwell ends in solid stone. Having entered the dream already descending the stairs, he can only return to where he began. Instantly sick with terror, my father turns toward the unseen thing heaving itself up the stairs behind him, toward the enormous bellows of the lungs, already filling the corridor with their sound, and his own scream wrenches him awake. The year is 1932.

II.

Seven years later, on March 18, 1939, my father, not yet sixteen, stood with his friend, Cyril Brana, peering excitedly through the heavy blue curtains of his friend's second-floor apartment onto Veveří Street, in Brno, Czechoslovakia. It had rained the night before. The dripping cables of the trolley cars, catching the light, looped thin and delicate across the city's drab pigment. Even though it was a weekday, my father said, there were no cars passing in the street below, no umbrellas hurrying down the cobbled drab pavement. Even though it was a weekday, my father said, there were no cars passing in the street below, no umbrellas hurrying down the cobbled drab pavement as if they were fissures into the earth, nor any crowding the midstreet islands to the clanging of the trolley bell, their number suddenly doubled like inkblots on an opened paper.

Three days earlier, in an official radio message that must have seemed as unbelievable to those listening to it as the formal announcement of their own deaths, Czechoslovakia had ceased to exist. The message was delivered, as all subsequent communications would be delivered, in the declarative, staccato tones of an authority accustomed to ruling by decree, to establishing fact by fiat: Bohemia and Moravia were now the Protektorat Böhmen und Mähren, under the control of the Reichspräsident; Slovakia, henceforth, would be an "independent" state under the German-backed Catholic clergyman Jozef Tiso.

Although the exact route the Führer's motorcade was to take through Brno had not been divulged, it was easy enough to figure out by the placement of the soldiers, my father said. Already that morning, in the drizzling half-light of dawn, long lines of dark forms could be seen along certain streets and avenues, slowly coalescing into human shapes.

The motorcade was to pass through Brno around eleven that morning. By eight, a deep, unnatural silence had settled over the city; all public transportation had been stopped, all automobile traffic forbidden. People lingered in the hallways of their apartment buildings, saying little. Military loudspeakers echoed outside, announcing that all windows onto the street were to remain closed until 2:00 P.M. By nine-thirty, Brno was deserted.

Tired of waiting, Cyril and my father went to the kitchen for a snack. Taking turns holding a crusty loaf tight against their stomachs, they cut thick slices that they then covered with butter and a generous sediment of sugar. Half an hour later, realizing that no one would stop them—neither Cyril's father, standing strangely still a step back from the curtains of the second window, nor his mother, sitting by the piano, soundlessly crying into a red handkerchief—they made themselves something more.

Returning to the window, the two boys looked through the crack in the curtains toward the square. In the building opposite, all the curtains were drawn. Directly in front of the bookseller's shop, a German soldier in a gray-green uniform stood beside a box of small German flags on round
wooden sticks. There had been no one to distribute them to. "Tak neplac"—don't cry—said Cyril's father at one point, without turning around, so that for a moment, my father said, he seemed to be speaking to the city before him as much as to the woman behind.

"Uj jedou"—here they come—said Cyril. The motorcade passed quickly, my father recalled, headed north, fifteen or even twenty black limousines surrounded by twice as many motorcycles, as tight as a swarm. Hitler's personal limousine, an open car, perhaps fifth in line, rode slightly apart from the others. Hitler himself, when my father saw him, was just sitting down, his features from that second-floor window—except for a quick glimpse of jaw and mustache—almost completely obscured under the visor of his military cap. He had been standing, though to what purpose, and for whose benefit, in that dead, unmoving city, one can only guess.

III.

NEARLY FIFTY MILLION SOULS DISAPPEARED INTO A FURNACE SO PROFOUND THAT THERE COULD BE NO ANALOGIES, NO SAVING TRUTH

dolf Hitler sat down.

The motorcade passed, disappearing into the curtain's edge. My father took a bite of bread. Over the next six years, nearly fifty million souls would disappear into a furnace so profound it would forever wither any attempts to reckon its magnitude, caking the brain, leaving only a still, unsounded dust for which there could be no analogies, no accounting, out of which could emerge no saving truth. All that remained were apparent facts, recorded dates, accounts of events and motivations so jarring, so emotionally dissonant that they seemed to refer to some other world, a realm from which both humanity and sense had been seamlessly removed.

During the last days of the Third Reich, for example, as the concussions of Russian heavy artillery jingled the crystal in the cabinets of the Reichschancellery in Berlin, Propaganda Minister Goebbels would while away the long after-dinner hours reading to Hitler from Thomas Carlyle's history of Frederick the Great. Imagine the scene: Hitler, perhaps, at one end of a plum-colored damask sofa, his head tilted to his right hand, absentmindedly running his middle finger along the center of his brow; Goebbels in a comfortable chair opposite, one leg draped over the other, the fire companionably puffing and spitting...

And there, in one of the well-furnished rooms of the armor-plated, concrete-reinforced bunker beneath the Chancellery (only six years after passing through the line of sight of a fifteen-year-old boy standing behind a thick blue curtain), Adolf Hitler wept, touched by Carlyle's apostrophe to the long-dead king in the moment of his greatest trial: "Brave King! Wait yet a little while, and the days of your suffering will be over. Already the sun of your good fortune stands behind the clouds and soon will rise upon you."

Sixty feet over their heads, the nine-hundred-room Chancellery, with its polished marble halls and hundred-pound chandeliers, was methodi-
Thirty-four years after Hitler put a gun in his mouth, on a drizzly New York afternoon, the Angel of History fluttered against me.

cally being pounded into dust and rubble: stacks and columns of books taken from the Chancellery libraries blocked the tall windows looking out onto the wrecked Wilhelmsstrasse, short, ugly barrels of machine guns poking between the spines; bulky crates of crosses and oak leaves barricaded the main entrance. A month earlier, Anglo-American armies had crossed the Rhine.

None of this mattered, apparently. Sensing a promise, an omen of redemption in Carlyle’s description of Frederick’s deliverance, Hitler and Goebbels sent a guard to retrieve the Reich’s official horoscopes. And there it was: proof that, just as Prussia had been saved in the darkest hours of the Seven Years’ War by the miraculous death of the Czarina, so the Third Reich would survive her harshest trials. History would save her. “Even in this very year a change of fortune shall come,” Goebbels proclaimed in an eleventh-hour message to the retreating troops. “The Führer knows the exact hour of its arrival. Destiny has sent us this man so that we...[can] testify to the miracle....”

A few days later, Goebbels had his miracle, his Czarina. Returning to Berlin late on the night of April 12, the capital around him rising in flames, he was approached by a secretary with urgent news: Franklin Roosevelt was dead. Phoning the news to Hitler in the bunker beneath the burning Chancellery, Goebbels was ecstatic. Here, blazingly revealed at last, was the power of Historical Necessity and Justice. The news, he felt, would revive the spirit of hope in the German people. His feelings seem to have been shared by most of the German Supreme Command. “This,” wrote Finance Minister Schwerin von Krosigk in his diary, “was the Angel of History! We felt its wings flutter through the room.”

Less than two weeks later, in the cramped air-raid shelter of the Ministry of the People’s Enlightenment and Propaganda, Goebbels’s six children lay dead, their lips, eyes, arms, and legs turned blue from the potassium cyanide pills given to them by their father. Goebbels’s wife, Magda, who had apparently dressed her children in their lace nightgowns and curled their hair for the occasion, was also dead, shot by her husband, who then poured gasoline on her and set fire to her skirt. Goebbels himself, after killing his family, poured gasoline on his clothes, set fire to a trouser leg, then turned the gun to his temple. Across the Wilhelmplatz, German gunners lay buried beneath the crumbled barricades of books, the high-ceilinged rooms behind them wavering in the heat of raging fires. In a small room in the bunker below, having rejected poison after watching the agonized deaths of the Chancellery dogs, Adolf Hitler sat down on a deep-cushioned, brocade sofa next to the body of his bride, Eva Braun, put a gun in his mouth, and pulled the trigger. Blood flowed down and coagulated on the brocade. The Angel of History fluttered its wings.

IV.

Thirty-four years later, on one of those drizzling October afternoons in New York City when dusk sets in at noon, they fluttered again. An undergraduate at Columbia College at the time, I’d found myself that fall more than usually broken, and reaching the limits of my inventiveness on the hot plate, I decided to find a job. In a small office off the claustrophobic circular hallway in the basement of Low Library, I answered an ad for something called Student Help for the Elderly. After filling out a long questionnaire, I was given the name of one Beatrix Turner, an address on 69th Street off Broadway, and told when to appear. The job paid $3.50 an hour.

I didn’t want it. Between classes and sleeping with a young woman I’d met at Barnard that fall (or rather not sleeping, never sleeping), I felt exhausted, perpetually late to everything, always sprinting bleary-eyed up Claremont Avenue or leaping puddles on the way to some
overheated classroom where a professor whose name I couldn’t remember would already be discussing whatever author—Hobbes or Locke, Nietzsche or Kant—I’d failed to finish reading the night before. When I added to this the hundred-block walk down Broadway and back (I begrudged the bus fare), the fact that it always seemed to be raining on the days I had to go, and, finally, that I’d be skipping two classes a week (I’d had to lie on my application to get the job), it seemed like a bad deal. I took the job anyway.

I don’t remember Beatrix Turner very well, just a small, well-kept woman in a bone-white dress given to straight talk and strong opinions. I remember that her apartment, small even by dormitory standards, was very cluttered, very still. Everything sounded louder there: the door down the hall, the spoon in the cup, the tiny steps of the minute hand drawing its harvest of days on the mantle. She showed me how to make tea for her with whole cinnamon, cloves, and ginger, and for years afterward, though I’d never particularly enjoyed being there (she was cranky and irritable; I, no doubt, sullen and impatient), these smells were my mildly unpleasant madeleines, dragging me, willy-nilly, back to that apartment on 69th Street, my unmourned Combray by the Hudson.

And so, on the misty, gray afternoon of October 2, I started down Broadway to Beatrix Turner’s apartment, moving quickly through the crowd, dodging trucks on 110th Street, checking out the nickel-and-dime bodegas where I bought the odds and ends I needed for my dormitory room. To compensate for my jeans and sneakers, I’d thrown on my one good jacket. Ten blocks north of Sherman Square, with the rain beginning to come down in earnest and umbrellas opening all around me like strange black blooms, I took it off, folded it under my arm, and sprinted for 69th Street.

I found Beatrix Turner in a reflective mood that afternoon. The tea, as I recall, had already been made; the chores, she said, could wait. Toweling off as best I could, I wiped my steaming glasses on a napkin and, balancing my cup and saucer awkwardly on my lap, sat down in the chair she indicated. I looked around the apartment. I’d never noticed the mementos before—the framed letters, the ribbons, the statuary. There was something oddly moving about that crowded menagerie. Everywhere I looked the small faces of men and women (many in British or American World War II uniforms, some with their arms around each other, all very young) smiled down out of the photographs that lined the bookshelves and the walls of that apartment, a tiny eternal audience come to witness the final act of Beatrix Turner’s long performance. A pretty young woman in an Air Force cap sat on the hood of a jeep. A rough-looking young man in a black sweater (his teeth closed tight and his brow furrowed as though he were squinting into the sun) looked out from what I took to be the loops and bars of his own over-bold signature, written across the sky.

The spiced tea tasted good that afternoon. Every now and again the radiator, as though harboring some furious apartment gnome, would begin to clang and ping and whine. Past the safety grates and the slowly rusting fire escape, I could see the rain. The blinds in the windows across the airshaft were shut. Inexplicably mellow that afternoon (or perhaps just resigned to my ignorance), Beatrix Turner began to talk. Her voice, ordinarily strong, decidedly ungentle, now softened. It seemed to me then, though the details are lost, that she’d been nearly everywhere, done almost everything—drank ouzo with Hemingway, danced with Dos Passos. Some of her accounts, admittedly, were more obscure, and for long stretches I listened to stories of people I’d never heard of, places that held no meaning for me, selfishly grateful that I didn’t have to scrub an already spotless sink or look, yet again, for the reading glasses that she had just had a second before; grateful too, I’ll admit now, for the fact that I was closing in on $10.50 without yet having done a stitch of work.
SENSING MY SKEPTICISM, BEATRIX TURNER PUT DOWN HER TEA AND WENT TO THE HALL CLOSET. "I HAVE SOMETHING TO SHOW YOU," SHE SAID

But then I started to listen. Beatrix Turner, I realized, had been a war correspondent through much of 1944 and 1945. She'd been with the American First Army when it met the Russians at Torgau on the Elbe River. And on May 3 or 4, traveling on foot, she'd entered Berlin.

The city had fallen the day before. Where the crumbling outlines of foundations and rooms showed through the piled rubble, they seemed, as though escaping their own reality, to hearken backward or forward to the very ancient or the purely ephemeral, to some Neolithic civilization, recently unearthed, or to a child's sandcastle, broken by the tide. On the bullet-chipped walls and columns of the Reichstag, now a blackened shell, Russian names, scrawled by the living, memorialized those who had died for victory. Somehow making her way to the Chancellery through that heaped, smoldering city—whether alone or accompanied I don't remember—Beatrix Turner arrived to discover that Russian engineers had already burned the hinges off the heavy steel doors facing the charred and smoking garden.

She leaned forward. "You know, of course, that Adolf Hitler shot himself in his bunker beneath the Chancellery."

I began to say something, but she waved it away.

"Oh, that's all bosh about Paraguay and Argentina," she said. "He shot himself. Eva Braun took arsenic."

I didn't say anything.

Beatrix Turner took a sip of tea.

"I was one of the first ones down," she said.

I don't remember if Beatrix Turner told me how she talked her way past the guards that day, nor can I be certain whether the image I have of her descending those endless pitch-black stairs by candlelight or flashlight is based on the description she gave me or the ones I've read since then. In the entry I wrote in my journal later that night, there's no mention of the cold, dank smell of extinguished fires, of the charred picture frames, like overdrawn metaphors, still hanging from the walls, of the black water, ankle deep, that covered the carpets.

But one memory remains as clear as on the night I wrote it down. Sensing my skepticism, perhaps, Beatrix Turner put down her cup and saucer and went to a closet near the front door. "I have something to show you," she said. "A little souvenir." I stood up, thinking to help her, but she was already carrying an ordinary cardboard carton. Placing it on the table, she opened it, removed another, smaller carton, and from this a carefully folded wad of tissue. Unwrapping this bundle, she revealed a fragile piece of cloth with a strange, almost Egyptian-looking pattern, marred by an ugly dark stain.

I looked at the thing, uncomprehending.

"I cut this piece out of the sofa in the bunker," Beatrix Turner said. She pointed. "That's Adolf Hitler's blood."

Before I could say anything, she was leafing through an old issue of Life she'd brought out of the closet with her, and suddenly there it was: a photograph of correspondents, one holding a candle, inspecting the richly
patterned brocade sofa on which Adolf Hitler and Eva Braun had committed suicide. In the photograph one could see the pattern of the sofa clearly, a repeating motif of male figures dressed in traditional folk garb standing next to huge, orchid-like blooms, or fanciful palms, or exploding fireworks. Each figure held a short leash that dipped in a lazy U to the neck of a prancing stag.

On the right armrest, a dark, vaguely phallic bloodstain had soaked the brocade, obliterating half a leash and half a stag. I looked at the piece of cloth I now held in my hand. The stag was nearly gone; only its hooves and hindquarters remained. The pattern matched.

I left the apartment soon afterward. Waiting for the elevator, I noticed a door at the far end of the hall. I pushed it open. Four flights down a badly lit stairwell brought me to a locked door. Looking around, I saw another, smaller door. Forcing it open, I saw that it let out onto a fire escape. A fixed steel ladder dropped twenty feet to the alley below. I climbed out, soiling my jacket against the rusting frame. Even today I can remember the good strong sting of the rain against my face. At the bottom of the unlit, cluttered alley rising like a canyon to the sky, I pushed open the heavy iron gate to 69th Street and started to run.

CODA

Pleasure and pain are immediate; knowledge, retrospective. A steel ball, suspended on a string, smacks into its brothers and nothing happens: no shock of recognition, no sudden epiphany. We go about our business, buttering the toast, choosing gray socks over brown. But here's the thing: just because we haven't understood something doesn't mean we haven't been shaped by it. Although I couldn't understand what I'd seen in Beatrix Turner's apartment that autumn afternoon in 1979, although I ran the way a child will run, stopping up its ears, from something dark and grotesque, something far beyond its years, the deed had been done. That cloth, in its own pathetic way, dealt a featuring blow to my life.

What I reacted to—instinctively, I suppose—was the terrible smallness of the thing, the almost vertiginous compaction of the symbol. Behind that ridiculous cloth with its vaguely shit-brown stain, I could sense the nations of the dead pushing and jostling for space, for room, for a voice; it was as though all the sounds of the world had been drawn into the plink of a single drop, falling from the lip of a loosened drain. One could resist the implicit lesson, recognize the obscenity of linking that worthless piece of fabric to the murder of millions, even note the small irony of it being preserved, like some unholy relic, from the disintegration it implied, and yet still be moved by an inescapable thought, a thought both unjust and unavoidable: that it should come to this, O God asleep in heaven, a tattered piece of cloth in an apartment on 69th Street.

But of course it didn't. History resists an ending as surely as nature abhors a vacuum; the narrative of our days is a run-on sentence, every full stop a comma in embryo. But more: like thought, like water, history is fluid, unpredictable, dangerous. It leaps and surges and doubles back, cuts unpredictable channels, surfaces suddenly in places no one would expect. How else can one explain the dream that foreshadows the event? Or a fear immaculately conceived? Or a will to resistance that reemerges, inexplicably, continents and generations from where it fell?

And so, perhaps, it comes down to this: that the irresistible march of events through time—the cup raised, the drink taken, the sudden knock on the door—is the only truth we have and yet, and I don't mean to be clever here, the greatest lie we tell. The empire of facts is irrefutable; death will have its dominion. Recognizing the limits of chronology, resisting its unforgiving dictates, is our duty and our right. There is no contradiction.

IN THAT PIECE OF CLOTH STAINED WITH HITLER'S BLOOD, I COULD SENSE THE NATIONS OF THE DEAD PUSHING FOR SPACE, FOR ROOM, FOR A VOICE