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Translated from Czech by Peter Kussi



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A Novel

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Immortality

by Milan Kundera

1991

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PART ONE

The face

The woman might have been sixty or sixty-five. I was watching her from a deck chair by the pool of my health club, on the top floor of a high-rise that provided a panoramic view of all Paris. I was waiting for Professor Avenarius, whom I'd occasionally meet here for a chat. But Professor Avenarius was late and I kept watching the woman; she was alone in the pool, standing waist-deep in the water, and she kept looking up at the young lifeguard in sweat pants who was teaching her to swim. He was giving her orders: she was to hold on to the edge of the pool and breathe deeply in and out. She proceeded to do this earnestly, seriously, and it was as if an old steam engine were wheezing from the depths of the water (that idyllic sound, now long forgotten, which to those who never knew it can be described in no better way than the wheezing of an old woman breathing in

and out by the edge of a pool). I watched her in fascination. She captivated me by her touch-ingly comic manner (which the lifeguard also noticed, for the corner of his mouth twitched slightly). Then an acquaintance started talking to me and diverted my attention. When I was ready to observe her once again, the lesson was over. She walked around the pool toward the exit. She passed the lifeguard, and after she had gone some three or four steps beyond him, she turned her head, smiled, and waved to him. At that instant I felt a pang in my heart! That smile and that gesture belonged to a twenty-year-old girl! Her arm rose with bewitching ease. It was as if she were playfully tossing a brightly colored ball to her lover. That smile and that gesture had charm and elegance, while the face and the body no longer had any charm. It was the charm of a gesture drowning in the charmlessness of the body. But the woman, though she must of course have realized that she was no longer beautiful, forgot that for the moment. There is a certain part of all of us that lives outside of time. Perhaps we become aware of our age only at exceptional moments and most of the time we are ageless. In any case, the instant she turned, smiled, and waved to the young lifeguard (who couldn't control himself and burst out laughing), she was unaware of her age. The essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself for a second in that gesture and dazzled me. I was strangely moved. And then the word Agnes entered my mind. Agnes. I had never known a woman by that name.

2

-I'm in bed, happily dozing. With die first stirrings of wakefulness, around six in the morning, I reach for the small transistor radio next to my pillow and press die button. An early-morning news program comes on, but I am hardly able to make out the individual words, and once again I fall asleep, so that the announcer's sentences merge into my dreams. It is the most beautiful part of sleep, the most delightful moment of the day: thanks to the radio I can savor drowsing and waking, that marvelous swinging between wakefulness and sleep which in itself is enough to keep us from regretting our birth. Am I dreaming or am I really at the opera hearing two tenors in knightly costume singing about the weather? Why are diey not singing about love? Then I realize that they are announcers; they stop singing and interrupt each other playfully: "It's going to be a hot, muggy day, widi

possible thunderstorms," says the first, and the second chimes in, flirtatiously, "Really?" And the first voice answers, equally flirtatiously, "Mais out. Pardon me, Bernard. But that's the way it is. We'll just have to put up with it." Bernard laughs loudly and says, "We're being punished for our sins." And the first voice: "Bernard, why should I have to suffer for your sins?" At that point Bernard laughs even harder, in order to make it clear to all listeners just what kind of sin is involved, and I understand him: this is the one deep yearning of our lives: to let everybody consider us great sinners! Let our vices be compared to thunderstorms, tornadoes, hurricanes! When Frenchmen open their umbrellas later in the day, let them remember Bernard's ambiguous laugh with envy. I tune in to another station because I feel sleep coming on again and I want to invite into my dream some more interesting visions. On the neighboring station a female voice announces that it is going to be a hot, muggy day, with possible thunderstorms, and I'm glad that we have so many radio stations in France and that at precisely the same time they all say the same thing about the same things. A harmonious combination of uniformity and freedom—what more could mankind ask? And so I turn the dial back to where a moment ago Bernard was boasting about his sins, but instead of him I hear another voice singing about some new Renault, so I turn the dial and hear a choir of women's voices celebrating a sale of furs; I turn back to Bernard's station, catch the last two measures of a hymn to the Renault followed immediately by the voice of Bernard himself. In a singsong that imitates the fading melody, he announces the publication of a new biography of Ernest Hemingway, the one hundred and twenty-seventh, yet this time a truly significant one because it discloses that throughout his entire life Hemingway never spoke one single word of truth. He exaggerated the number of wounds he had suffered in the First World War, and he pretended to be a great seducer even though it was proved that in August 1944 and then again from July 1959 onward he had been completely impotent. "Oh really?" laughs the other voice, and Bernard answers flirtatiously, "Mais aui..." and once again all of us find ourselves on the operatic stage, along with the impotent Hemingway, and then suddenly some very grave voice comes on to discuss the trial that has been engrossing France for several weeks: in the course of a completely minor operation a young woman died, because of a carelessly administered anesthetic. In this connection, an organization formed to protect people it called "consumers" submitted a proposal that in future all

surgical operations be filmed and the films filed away. Only in this way, maintains the consumer-protection association, is it possible to guarantee that any Frenchman or Frenchwoman who dies on the operating table will be suitably avenged by the courts. Then I fall asleep again.

When I wake up, at almost eight-thirty, I try to picture Agnes. She is lying, like me, in a wide bed. The right side of the bed is empty. Who could her husband be? Clearly, somebody who leaves the house early on Saturday mornings. That's why she is alone, sweetly swinging between waking and sleeping.

Then she gets up. Facing her is a TV set, standing on one long, storklike leg. She throws her nightgown over the tube, like a white,

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tasseled theater curtain. She stands close to the bed, and for the first time I see her naked: Agnes, the heroine of my novel. I can't take my eyes off this beautiful woman, and as if sensing my gaze she hurries off to the adjoining room to get dressed.

Who is Agnes?

Just as Eve came from Adam's rib, just as Venus was born out of the waves, Agnes sprang from the gesture of that sixty-year-old woman at the pool who waved at the lifeguard and whose features are already fading from my memory. At the time, that gesture aroused in me immense, inexplicable nostalgia, and this nostalgia gave birth to the woman I call Agnes.

But isn't a person, and, to an even greater extent, a character in a novel, by definition a unique, inimitable being? How then is it possible that a gesture I saw performed by one person, a gesture that was connected to her, that characterized her, and was part of her individual charm, could at the same time be the essence of another person and my dreams of her? That's worth some thought:

If our planet has seen some eighty billion people, it is difficult to suppose that every individual has had his or her own repertory of gestures.

Arithmetically, it is simply impossible. Without the slightest doubt, there are far fewer gestures in the world than there are individuals. That finding leads us to a shocking conclusion: a gesture is more individual than an individual. We could put it in the form of an aphorism: many people, few gestures.

I said at the beginning, when I talked about the woman at the pool, that "the essence of her charm, independent of time, revealed itself for a second in that gesture and dazzled me." Yes, that's how I perceived it at the time, but I was wrong. The gesture revealed nothing of that woman's essence, one could rather say that the woman revealed to me the charm of a gesture. A gesture cannot be regarded as the expression of an individual, as his creation (because no individual is capable of creating a fully original gesture, belonging to nobody else), nor can it even be regarded as that person's instrument; on the contrary, it is gestures that use us as their instruments, as their bearers and incarnations.

Agnes, now fully dressed, went into the hall. There she stopped and listened. Vague sounds from the adjoining room made her realize that her daughter had just gotten up. As if to avoid meeting her, Agnes hurried out into the corridor. In the elevator she pressed the button for the lobby. Instead of going down, the elevator began to twitch like a person afflicted with Saint Vitus' dance. This was not the first time the elevator had startled her with its moods. On one occasion it began to go up when she wanted to go down, another time it refused to open and kept her prisoner for half an hour. She had the feeling that it wanted to reach some sort of understanding with her, to tell her something in its rough, mute, animal way. She complained several times to the concierge, but because the elevator behaved quite normally and decently toward the other tenants, the concierge considered Agnes's quarrel with it her own private matter and paid no attention. This time Agnes had no other choice but to get out and take the stairs. The moment the stairway door closed behind her, the elevator regained its composure and followed her down.

Saturday was always the most tiring day for Agnes. Paul, her husband, generally left before seven and had lunch out with one of his friends, while she used her free day to take care of a thousand chores more annoying than

the duties of her job: she had to go to the post office and fret for half an hour in line, go shopping in the supermarket, where she quarreled with an employee and wasted time waiting at the cash register, telephone the plumber and plead with him to be precisely on time so that she wouldn't have to wait the whole day for him. She tried to find a moment to squeeze in a bit of rest at the sauna, something she could not do during the week; in the late afternoon she would always find herself with a vacuum cleaner and duster, because the cleaning woman who came on Fridays was becoming more and more careless.

But this Saturday differed from other Saturdays: it was exactly five years since her father had died. A particular scene appeared before her eyes: her father is sitting hunched over a pile of torn photographs, and Agnes's sister is shouting at him, "Why have you torn up Mother's pictures?" Agnes takes her father's part and the sisters quarrel, overtaken by a sudden hatred.

She got into her car, which was parked in front of the house.

3

The elevator took her to the top floor of the high-rise that housed the health club with its big swimming pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, Turkish bath, and view of Paris. Rock music boomed from speakers in the locker room. Ten years ago, when she first started coming, the club had fewer members and it was quiet. Then, year by year, the club improved: more and more glass, more lights, more artificial flowers and cactuses, more speakers, more music, and also more and more people, further multiplied by the enormous mirrors that the management one day decided to spread across the walls of the gym.

She opened a locker and began to undress. Two women were chatting close by. One of them was complaining in a quiet, slow alto voice that her husband was in the habit of leaving everything lying on the floor: books, socks, newspapers, even matches and pipes. The other, in a soprano, spoke twice as fast; the French habit of raising the last syllable of a sentence an octave higher made the flow of her speech sound like the indignant cackling of a hen: "I'm shocked to hear you say that! I'm disappointed in you! I'm really shocked! You've got to put your foot down! Don't let him get away with it! It's your house, after all! You've got to put your foot down! Don't let

him walk all over you!" The other woman, as if torn between a friend whose authority she respected and a husband whom she loved, explained with melancholy, "What can I do? That's how he is! And he's always been like that. Ever since I've known him, leaving things all over the place!" "So then he's got to stop doing it! It's your house! You can't let him get away with it! You've got to make that crystal clear!" said the soprano voice.

Agnes never took part in such conversations; she never spoke badly of Paul, even though she sensed that this alienated her somewhat from other women. She turned her head in the direction of the alto: she was a young woman with light hair and the face of an angel.

"No, no! You know perfectly well you're in the right! You can't let him act like that!" continued the other woman, and Agnes noticed that as she spoke she kept rapidly shaking her head from left to right and right to left, at the same time lifting her shoulders and eyebrows, as if expressing indignant astonishment that someone had refused to respect her friend's human rights. Agnes knew that gesture: her daughter, Brigitte, shook her head and lifted her brows in precisely the same way.

Agnes undressed, closed the locker, and walked through the swinging doors into a tiled hall, with showers on one side and a glass-enclosed sauna on the other. There, women sat squeezed together on long wooden benches. Some were wrapped in special plastic sheets that formed an airtight cover around their bodies (or certain parts of the body, most often the belly and behind), so that the skin perspired all the more readily and the women would lose weight more quickly, or so they believed.

She climbed to the highest bench, where there was still some room. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes. The noise of music did not reach this far, but the voices of the women, who chattered away at full blast, were just as loud. An unfamiliar young woman entered the sauna and the moment she walked through the door began to order everyone about; she made them all sit closer together, then she picked up a pitcher and poured water on the stones. With much hissing, hot steam started to rise, making the woman sitting next to Agnes wince with pain and cover her face. The newcomer noticed it, declared, "I like hot steam; it gives me that real sauna feeling," squeezed herself between two naked bodies, and at once began to

talk about yesterday's television talk show featuring a famous biologist who had just published his memoirs. "He was terrific," she said.

Another woman nodded in agreement: "Oh yes! And how modest!"

The newcomer said, "Modest? Didn't you realize how extremely proud that man was? But I like that kind of pride! I adore proud people!" She turned to Agnes: "Did you find him modest?"

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Agnes said that she hadn't seen the program. As if interpreting this remark as veiled disagreement, the newcomer repeated very loudly, looking Agnes straight in the eye: "I detest modesty! Modesty is hypocrisy!"

Agnes shrugged, and the newcomer said, "In a sauna I've got to feel real heat. I've got to work up a good sweat. But then I must have a cold shower. A cold shower! I adore that! Actually I like my showers cold even in the morning. I find hot showers disgusting."

Soon she declared that the sauna was suffocating; after repeating once more how she hated modesty, she got up and left.

As a little girl, Agnes used to go for walks with her father, and once she asked him whether he believed in God. Father answered, "I believe in the Creator's computer." This answer was so peculiar that the child remembered it. The word "computer" was peculiar, and so was the word "Creator," for Father would never say "God" but always "Creator," as if he wanted to limit God's significance to his engineering activity. The Creator's computer: but how could a person communicate with a computer? So she asked Father whether he ever prayed. He said, "That would be like praying to Edison when a light bulb burns out."

Agnes thought to herself: the Creator loaded a detailed program into the computer and went away. That God created the world and then left it to a forsaken humanity trying to address him in an echoless void—this idea isn't new. Yet it is one thing to be abandoned by the God of our forefathers and another to be abandoned by God the inventor of a cosmic computer. In

his place, there is a program that is ceaselessly running in his absence, without anyone being able to change anything whatever. To load a program into the computer: this does not mean that the future has been planned down to the last detail, that everything is written "up above." For example, the program did not specify that in 1815 a battle would be fought near Waterloo and that the French would be defeated, but only that man is aggressive by nature, that he is condemned to wage war, and that technical progress would make war more and more terrible. Everything else is without importance, from the Creator's point of view, and is only a play of permutations and combinations within a general program, which is not a prophetic

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anticipation of the future but merely sets the limits of possibilities within which all power of decision has been left to chance.

That was the same with the project we call mankind. The computer did not plan an Agnes or a Paul, but only a prototype known as a human being, giving rise to a large number of specimens that are based on the original model and haven't any individual essence. Just like a Renault car, its essence is deposited outside, in the archives of the central engineering office. Individual cars differ only in their serial numbers. The serial number of a human specimen is the face, that accidental and unrepeatable combination of features. It reflects neither character nor soul, nor what we call the self. The face is only the serial number of a specimen.

Agnes recalled the newcomer who had just declared that she hated hot showers. She came in order to inform all the women present that (1) she likes saunas to be hot (2) she adores pride (3) she can't bear modesty (4) she loves cold showers (5) she hates hot showers. With these five strokes she had drawn her self-portrait, with these five points she defined her self and presented that self to everyone. And she didn't present it modestly (she said, after all, that she hated modesty!) but belligerently. She used passionate verbs such as "adore" and "detest," as if she wished to proclaim her readiness to fight for every one of those five strokes, for every one of those five points.

Why all this passion? Agnes asked herself, and she thought: When we are thrust out into the world just as we are, we first have to identify with that particular throw of the dice, with that accident organized by the divine computer: to get over our surprise that precisely this (what we see facing us in the mirror) is our self. Without the faith that our face expresses our self, without that basic illusion, that archillusion, we cannot live, or at least we cannot take life seriously. And it isn't enough for us to identify with ourselves, it is necessary to do so passionately, to the point of life and death. Because only in this way can we regard ourselves not merely as a variant of a human prototype but as a being with its own irreplaceable essence. That's the reason the newcomer needed not only to draw her self-portrait but also to make it clear to all that it embodied something unique and irreplaceable, something worth fighting or even dying for.

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After spending a quarter of an hour in the heat of the sauna, Agnes rose and took a dip in a small pool filled with ice-cold water. Then she lay down to rest in the lounge, surrounded by other women who even here never stopped talking.

She wondered what kind of existence the computer had programmed for life after death.

Two possibilities came to mind. If the computer's field of activity is limited to our planet, and if our fate depends on it alone, then we cannot count on anything after death except some permutation of what we have already experienced in life; we shall again encounter similar landscapes and beings. Shall we be alone or in a crowd? Alas, solitude is not very likely; there is so little of it in life, so what can we expect after death! After all, the dead far outnumber the living! At best, existence after death would resemble the interlude she was now experiencing while reclining in a deck chair: from all sides she would hear the continuous babble of female voices. Eternity as the sound of endless babble: one could of course imagine worse things, but the idea of hearing women's voices forever, continuously, without end, gave her sufficient incentive to cling furiously to life and to do everything in her power to keep death as far away as possible.

But there is a second possibility, beyond our planet's computer there may be others that are its superiors. Then, indeed, existence will not need to resemble our past life and a person can die with a vague yet justified hope. And Agnes imagined a scene that had lately been often on her mind: a stranger comes to visit her. Likable, cordial, he sits down in a chair facing her husband and herself and proceeds to converse with them. Under the magic of the peculiar kindliness radiating from the visitor, Paul is in a good mood, chatty, intimate, and fetches an album of family photographs. The guest turns the pages and is perplexed by some of the photos. For example, one of them shows Agnes and Brigitte standing under the Eiffel Tower, and the visitor asks, "What is that?"

"That's Agnes, of course," Paul replies. "And this is our daughter, Brigitte!"

"I know that," says the guest. "I'm asking about this structure."

Paul looks at him in surprise: "Why, that's the Eiffel Tower!"

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"Oh, that's the Eiffel Tower," and he says it in the same tone of voice as if you had shown him a portrait of Grandpa and he had said, "So that's your grandfather I've heard so much about. I am glad to see him at last."

Paul is disconcerted, Agnes much less so. She knows who the man is. She knows why he came and what he was going to ask them about. That's why she is a bit nervous; she would like to be alone with him, without Paul, and she doesn't quite know how to arrange it.

4

AGNES's father had died five years ago. She had lost Mother a year before that. Even then Father had already been ill and everyone had expected his death. Mother, on the contrary, was still quite well, full of life; she seemed destined for a contented, prolonged widowhood, so Father was almost embarrassed when it was she, not he, who suddenly died. As if he were

afraid that people would reproach him. "People" meaning Mother's family. His own relatives were scattered all over the world, and except for a distant cousin living in Germany, Agnes had never met any of them. Mother's people, on the other hand, all lived in the same town: sisters, brothers, cousins, and a lot of nephews and nieces. Mother's father was a farmer from the mountains who had sacrificed himself for his children; he had made it possible for all of them to have a good education and to marry comfortably.

When Mother married Father, she was undoubtedly in love with him, which is not surprising, for he was a good-looking man and at thirty already a university professor, a respected occupation at that time. It pleased her to have such an enviable husband, but she derived even greater pleasure from having been able to bestow him as a gift upon her family, to which she was closely tied by the traditions of country life. But because Agnes's father was unsociable and taciturn (nobody knew whether it was because of shyness or because his mind was on other things, and thus whether his silence expressed modesty or lack of interest), Mother's gift made die family embarrassed rather than happy.

As time passed and both grew older, Mother was drawn to her family more and more; for one thing, while Father was eternally

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locked up in his study she had a hunger for talking, so that she spent long hours on the phone to sisters, brothers, cousins, and nieces and took an increasing interest in their problems. When she thought about it now, it seemed to Agnes that Mother's life was a circle: she had stepped out of her milieu, courageously coped with an entirely different world, and then began to return: she lived with her husband and two daughters in a garden villa and several times a year (at Christmas, for birthdays) invited all her relatives to great family celebrations; she imagined that after Father's death (which had been expected for so long that everyone regarded him indulgently as a person whose officially scheduled period of stay had expired) her sister and niece would move in to join her.