

## The Unbearable Lightness of Being by Milan Kundera

### 1

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.

## Bowler hat

pulled Tomas down to the floor. The bowler hat rolled under the table, and they began thrashing about on the rug at the foot of the mirror.

But let us return to the bowler hat:

First, it was a vague reminder of a forgotten grandfather, the mayor of a small Bohemian town during the nineteenth century.

Second, it was a memento of her father. After the funeral her brother appropriated all their parents' property, and she, refusing out of sovereign contempt to fight for her rights, announced sarcastically that she was taking the bowler hat as her sole inheritance.

Third, it was a prop for her love games with Tomas.

Fourth, it was a sign of her originality, which she consciously cultivated. She could not take much with her when she emigrated, and taking this bulky, impractical thing meant giving up other, more practical ones.

Fifth, now that she was abroad, the hat was a sentimental object. When she went to visit Tomas in Zurich, she took it along and had it on her head when he opened the hotel-room door. But then something she had not reckoned with happened: the hat, no longer jaunty or sexy, turned into a monument to time past. They were both touched. They made love as they never had before. This was no occasion for obscene games. For this meeting was not a continuation of their erotic rendezvous, each of which had been an opportunity to think up some new little vice; it was a recapitulation of time, a hymn to their common past, a sentimental summary of an unsentimental story that was disappearing in the distance.

The bowler hat was a motif in the musical composition that was Sabina's life. It returned again and again, each time with a different meaning, and all the meanings flowed through the bowler hat like water through a riverbed. I might call it Heraclitus' ("You can't step twice into the same river") riverbed: the bowler hat was a bed through which each time Sabina saw another river flow, another *semantic river*: each time the same object would give rise to a new meaning, though all former meanings would resonate (like an echo, like a parade of echoes) together with the new one. Each new experience would resound, each time enriching the harmony. The reason why Tomas and Sabina were touched by the sight of the bowler hat in a Zurich hotel and made love almost in tears was that its black presence was not merely a reminder of their love games but also a memento of Sabina's father and of her grandfather, who lived in a century without airplanes and cars.

Now, perhaps, we are in a better position to understand the abyss separating Sabina and Franz: he listened eagerly to the story of her life and she was equally eager to hear the story of his, but although they had a clear understanding of the logical meaning of the words they exchanged, they failed to hear the semantic susurrus of the river flowing through them.

And so when she put on the bowler hat in his presence, Franz felt uncomfortable, as if someone had spoken to him in a language he did not know. It was neither obscene nor sentimental, merely an incomprehensible gesture. What made him feel uncomfortable was its very lack of meaning.

While people are fairly young and the musical composition of their lives is still in its opening bars, they can go about writing it together and exchange motifs (the way Tomas and Sabina exchanged the motif of the bowler hat), but if they meet when they are older, like Franz and Sabina, their musical compositions are more or less complete, and every motif, every object, every word means something different to each of them.

If I were to make a record of all Sabina and Franz's conversations, I could compile a long lexicon of their misunderstandings. Let us be content, instead, with a short dictionary.

### 3

#### A Short Dictionary of Misunderstood Words

##### WOMAN

Being a woman is a fate Sabina did not choose. What we have not chosen we cannot consider either our merit or our failure. Sabina believed that she had to assume the correct attitude to her unchosen fate. To rebel against being born a woman seemed as foolish to her as to take pride in it.

During one of their first times together, Franz announced to her, in an oddly emphatic way, "Sabina, you are a *woman*." She could not understand why he accentuated the obvious with the solemnity of a Columbus who has just sighted land. Not until later did she understand that the word "woman," on which he had placed such uncommon emphasis, did not, in his eyes, signify one of the two human sexes; it repre-

sented a *value*. Not every woman was worthy of being called a woman.

But if Sabina was, in Franz's eyes, a *woman*, then what was his wife, Marie-Claude? More than twenty years earlier, several months after Franz met Marie-Claude, she had threatened to take her life if he abandoned her. Franz was bewitched by the threat. He was not particularly fond of Marie-Claude, but he was very much taken with her love. He felt himself unworthy of so great a love, and felt he owed her a low bow.

He bowed so low that he married her. And even though Marie-Claude never recaptured the emotional intensity that accompanied her suicide threat, in his heart he kept its memory alive with the thought that he must never hurt her and always respect the woman in her.

It is an interesting formulation. Not "respect Marie-Claude," but "respect the woman in Marie-Claude."

But if Marie-Claude is herself a woman, then who is that other woman hiding in her, the one he must always respect? The Platonic ideal of a woman, perhaps?

No. His mother. It never would have occurred to him to say he respected the woman in his mother. He worshipped his mother and not some woman inside her. His mother and the Platonic ideal of womanhood were one and the same.

When he was twelve, she suddenly found herself alone, abandoned by Franz's father. The boy suspected something serious had happened, but his mother muted the drama with mild, insipid words so as not to upset him. The day his father left, Franz and his mother went into town together, and as they left home Franz noticed that her shoes did not match.