

“The Unbearable Lightness of Fighting for Freedom”

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Нема правда, нема мир. No justice, no peace. We all chanted ‘нема правда, нема мир’ as we stood in front of the new lavish government building which perches up in stark contrast to its surroundings, to the old, dull Socialist buildings with graffiti on them. I am Macedonian, and this was the Macedonia that I lived in at the start of my senior year in high school. Ten years of an ever-greedier despot sitting in the prime minister’s chair. Ten years of ever more vulgar propaganda on TV, in the newspapers. Ten years of dire unemployment and poverty. It took ten years, but people stood up. They left their homes, their offices, the bars. They gathered in front of the government building and chanted ‘нема правда, нема мир’. As a teenager at the time, I felt like this moment was monumental. I felt like I was part of something great, something worthy of history textbooks.

And yet here we are today, two years after the first protest, still in the same frustrating political deadlock. All the mechanisms of threatening, oppression and social control of the ruling party are still in place, albeit a little weaker. Somehow, the revolution got entirely lost in the petty partisan discourse, in the closed-door dealings, in the unbearable sadness of yet another failure of Macedonia to fight for its freedom. It was more comfortable for people to claim they are the descendants of Alexander the Great, thinking it will somehow compensate for the job they never had,

for the decent house they never lived in, for the child that left home in search of a better life.

When I came to Harvard, I had no dreams of saving the world. I was profoundly, utterly, indescribably disappointed in people, in political discourse, in the possibility of change. My inner idealist was completely shunned by all the rage produced by the fact that this thing, this movement that I wholeheartedly believed would be the grand democratic gesture my small country was waiting for, was nothing, just a glitch in the carefully controlled and monitored system. I felt like I could change nothing, like I was alone.

Little by little, somewhere between the pages of the book *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, somewhere along Mr. Milan Kundera's poetic prose, my anger started to dissipate. Mr. Kundera, a Czech author whose writing earned him an exile from his homeland's communist regime in the 70s, describes his protagonist Tomash as the most ordinary revolutionary in the world. Tomash is a neurosurgeon in Prague, has a wife, a dog, an intellectual relationship with Nietzsche, a physical one with his mistresses. Tomash refuses to sign for a party membership, feels quiet despair after he progressively gets demoted to a smaller hospital in Prague, then an even smaller one in a village, finally to being a wall painter in the same village. Hand on brush, Tomash ruminates over the weakness of his country, of his people, of his identity. Little by little, Tomash takes the burden of the world off my shoulders.

That is, I have found, one of the most profound ways in which literature is our friend - it gives us an understanding of ourselves and makes us feel less alone. I had felt so angry, powerless, and disappointed that I could do nothing, but should do everything, that I have no answers, but should have them all. Mr. Kundera's detailed and honest descriptions of Tomash and his quest to oppose the hegemonic forces of his government helped me understand my own. It helped me understand that I am just a freckle in history, just like Tomash, and that the power of fighting for change maybe does not lie in knowing everything and being a hero, but just like Tomash, trying to figure it out day by day.

And each day, I still do wonder. What can I do as a mere twenty-year-old to help Macedonia? Can I do anything meaningful from this far away, or should I come back to a place that has given me no reason to stay? Do I even have the right to hold this speech under the crystal chandeliers of Lowell House, while people back at home can barely afford to pay for electricity? Though I am daily crippled by the weight of these questions, I know that Mr. Kundera and all those other authors I have and will read will share a little bit of it with me.