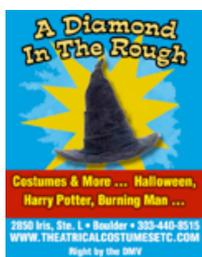


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The Great American Novelty
(or What I Learned From Czech Prostitutes About Art)
by Dale Bridges

When I was 26 years old, I decided to write the Great American Novel, and so I moved to Prague. My plan was to grow a beard, purchase a pipe and hang out in coffee shops all day, where I would sit in dark corners and compose stories on an old-timey typewriter, *tat-a-tat-tat-tat*, about gut-wrenching topics such as war, poverty, death and many other subjects that I didn't really know anything about. My favorite writers at that time were the kind of hyper-masculine dudes who could knock over a grizzly bear with their giant schlongs and then recite an evocative poem about it. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein. I wanted to be tough. I wanted to be introspective. I wanted to have sex with leggy, Eastern European women named Svetlana or Dixie, who would appreciate my brooding intellectual nature and make me pancakes.

The book started off strong — terse dialogue, scintillating romance, intense metaphors involving sunsets and bullfighters — but I made one fatal mistake: I based the main character on myself. Somewhere in the middle of chapter six, the protagonist inexplicably began smoking pot, eating Doritos and watching reruns of *Friends*. He didn't want to pursue his love interest or participate in any of the clever plot twists that I had so painstakingly outlined for him in a large, yellow notebook. Instead, he spent his days listening to Guns N' Roses albums and engaging in pointless conversations about the homoerotic relationship between Rocky Balboa and Apollo Creed in *Rocky III*. My protagonist was a lazy, good-for-nothing bastard, and I ended up killing him in chapter seven by dropping a piano on his head. Needless to say, the book was never published.

This is when I started drinking heavily and hanging out with off-duty prostitutes.

There was a decrepit, little bar next to my apartment building and I would sit there all night and drink Pilsner and eat these horribly addictive snacks that tasted like peanut butter-flavored Styrofoam and generally just feel sorry for myself. I lived smack dab in the middle of the city, about two blocks from Wenceslas Square, where dozens of prostitutes lined the streets after dark, chomping on giant wads of chewing gum and propositioning male tourists. Prostitution is not exactly legal in Prague, but the police turn a blind eye, primarily because the brothel owners pay them to remain blissfully ignorant. In many ways, Prague is the European equivalent of Las Vegas for uptight, British blowhards who take "business trips" to the Czech capital on the weekends and spend their time drunkenly stumbling around the cobblestone streets in one of the most beautiful cities in the world, shouting at the top of their lungs and paying attractive women to give them handjobs in the park.

I have always had a fascination with prostitutes. In fact, I'm intrigued by any kind of sexual deviance. My parents are both fundamentalist Christians, and when I was growing up, they basically taught me that if I so much as looked at a Lady of the Night, my wiener would fall off, and it would then be eaten by a pack of ravenous wolverines. This is why I have always been nervous around prostitutes. And wolverines.

At midnight on weekdays and 2 a.m. on weekends, some of the more "seasoned" prostitutes would trickle in for a few minutes of R&R. At first, they thought I was a possible john, and they propositioned me with compelling pick-up lines like, "Sex? Yes?" However, after realizing that I was far too uptight (and too cheap) to pay for their carnal carnival rides, their lines changed to, "Beer? Yes?"

My favorite prostitute was an elderly matron named Meg. (That wasn't her real name, of course. Like strippers and professional wrestlers, prostitutes adopt an alter ego while they're on the job. Meg's real name was one of those grandiose Slavic concoctions that, when pronounced properly, sounds not unlike a musk ox coughing up a lung. I think it was Kunderákafka?vejkérton. Or something like that.)

Meg was one of the best storytellers I've ever met. She could keep an audience captivated for hours with tales about her childhood in Slovakia and/or her legions of abusive ex-boyfriends and/or her dog, Santa. I have no idea how much money I spent on beer during the course of our conversations, but it was certainly a lot less than the cost of an MFA program.

When my savings finally ran out and it was time for me to go home, I asked Meg how I could become a great storyteller. She belched loudly and said, "Stop being so boring."

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