THE STUDY OF SLEEP

BRIAN HOWELL

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a novella

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Nabokov's *The Gift* is quoted (page 83) from Penguin U.K.'s 1981 edition. George Trakl's "Der Verfall" is quoted from *Georg Trakl: Das dichterische Werk* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998, 1972).

for

Anne Schaeffer

the study of sleep

I. Martin

The story I am about to tell is Martin's, and my function in his life should remain peripheral, as what I shall narrate would have happened regardless of any intervention I may have made during our short reunion. Yes, you may say that I had contact with him, that any one of my words, any one of my smallest actions, could have affected the outcome of his life. But then I would not be writing this if I felt any guilt, if I felt I could not maintain the precious position of observer that has been entrusted to me.

And my abstention in this matter should be all the more relevant, as the story we share could only really form the first two sections of a novel. The third part, a gap in time, is intimated, as absent musical notes can be suggested by those that are present. And perhaps absence and presence is at the heart of the matter, because what made Martin special was his ability to harness both, to make them co-depen-

dent and serve one aim. My regret lies in this area, as I believe I was the only one aware of this ability of his, and what was once foreshadowed became years later a reality which I re-entered and recognized as the persistent echo of a premonition neither pleasant nor truly terrifying, but simply logical.

The clues to Martin's ability were there to be found in their nuclear state at school, only we were all too involved in our wayward adolescences to notice them. I could quote a hundred instances of how Martin strained to understand the world, how he was at pains to live out his understanding so that it made sense, and how time and again he was brought down by what I now consider a congenital flaw which made him appear slow. For the same reason he could not understand how a plane flew or how a computer worked—he knew only that they *did*. And such an aspect in our lives is often confounding to those of us for whom such things are second nature.

In school Martin shone in arts subjects and scraped by in the sciences. He could, and perhaps should, have failed abysmally in the latter. He passed in geography, though he could not locate at any given time north or south. He had some success

in biology but could not tell an oak from an elm, nor identify a common family of plants. Even his slightly better performances in physics and mathematics astound me to this day, not least because he would double-check even the simplest arithmetical problems on a calculator, constantly getting the inputting wrong and then questioning his originally correct, albeit laboured, conclusions.

These details would not in themselves call for great incredulity or speculation; they require fleshing out with intimate instances of which I find myself in all too abundant possession.

Once, on a school outing, as we drove along winding roads to our camp site, our teacher mentioned that we'd have to fill up at some stage. The subject turned to petrol and Martin unfurled his ignorance like a flag for all to see by revealing that he was under the impression that petrol stations were all linked by an underground network of tunnels. Where did that leave petrol tankers? we taunted him. He was soon disabused of his notion.

Perhaps the ensuing ridicule was too great, perhaps he was just too proud to accept this damming-up of his peculiar view of things, but he could not stand being laughed at. I think by then I had

already noticed the onset of a retreat from reality, of a snail-like regression into his hardened shell.

And he was equally lost to the juvenile interplay of lost souls. While an assortment of raggedy, lanky boys were led to enjoy, unknown to the teachers, the dubious charms of sullen Tracy in some part of the school building, Martin would be drawn into a discussion of his favourite pop star's equally dubious sexuality, yet without comprehending the Belisha beacon message of his taunter. Martin flirted with gayness as no other schoolmate I had known, yet, it seemed, he remained unaware.

What I recall from childhood are areas in a badly mended quilt. There are still plenty of holes and frayed patches, and I sometimes think that Martin is watching me from behind them.

What happens to a person who gives up hope, who comes to an unavoidable conclusion about life via a set of coincidences that deprive his life of meaning and purpose? Was that element of doubt there from the beginning, a theme to be worked and varied till it was open like a wound that can no longer be ignored? What is missing in that person who allows beauty to be equipped as a weapon against him?

At this stage I begin to despair, reaching out for Julie's hand as she leans over me now and whispers enigmas in my ear.

"Go to him, go and find him. Let me have some rest for a while," she teases, and I suppress the urge to follow her into the bedroom.

But I did not start this obsession. Some months back I received a letter from an old friend of mine and Martin's. He said he had bumped into Martin in Prague, and encouraged me to visit him. Matthew had said Martin had seemed well, but our old friend had not been too communicative. He'd been able to find out little about what Martin had been doing all these years. Then I remembered one of those odd concatenations of events which, like a scene in a film that foreshadows something significant, would become meaningful only later in his story.

Martin was visiting me when we were in our third year at university. We'd been invited to a meal by Julie, who was not then my girlfriend. In the middle of the meal, the power went, and we were forced to eat by candlelight. As was usual with Julie and me at the time, we started talking about relationships, of our ideal partners. I think that Julie and I skirted the issue somewhat, describing

people who were sufficiently different from us to avoid stating our nascent attraction for one another, yet not so different as to derail it. We talked, too, of an ideal place and situation, the details of which I now forget, though I doubt it was very different to the one in which we now find ourselves. And then Martin said the first of two unnerving things that evening. He stated his preferences, and foresaw a situation where he would reject a woman out of spite against all those who had previously done the same to him. At random. We looked on appalled. I had never heard anything of this nature from him. Had he already had so much experience, and so bitter, at university?

Then somehow the discussion turned to the subject of death. One's ideal death. How would we die? And where? I'm afraid that Julie and I came up with mundane scenarios I can barely recall. Martin's, however, were intriguing. He would be in a foreign city (he had no idea which), and he would just disappear. Again, he did not know how. This in itself should have been enough to make an impression on me, but just as he was leaving that night, with just the two of us standing in the hallway (I was staying over), he told me that I would see him

in that foreign city one day. I made a remark and laughed it off; it was never mentioned again.

I had given all this little thought until recently, when I received the letter, so removed had it seemed from our lives then. But now this vision has come to haunt me as if it has already taken place: Martin in a distant city closed off from the world, about to disappear forever.

A week after this realization, I left for Prague.

I HAVE NEVER FELT so displaced. It is as if I were watching everything through a heavily-tinted, rufous filter. To be honest, I dawdled somewhat in my search for Martin. After all, I had the address and only needed to go straight there.

But I suppose I tried to imagine why he might have come here, what preoccupations he could have had. He was not political, nor was he easily impressed by fads. And women, he said, were the same everywhere—if they weren't English. I believe he meant that foreign women were more receptive to him, that they represented something positive in his life, whereas he had never had any success with women from his own country because of some inherent fault of theirs or of our culture.

And this last consideration was certainly true as far as it concerned Prague's superhennaed, bobbed waifs. Perhaps he had finally found what he was looking for. I felt suddenly like a child, missing Julie's touch.

I loitered some more. I stood on street corners as if these junctions and intersections promised to yield a secret about Martin. One girl caught my eye for some time. She paused at a traffic lights, poised to step across the road, but at each change of lights to green she stayed. Only when she finally moved and ran across the road to climb on a tram on my side of the street did I realize she had been standing there to keep warm while my side remained in shade. In such manner are mysteries easily deflated.

Perhaps I would be equally disillusioned about the mystery, or absence of one, surrounding Martin. I toyed with the idea of going home without even making the attempt to find him. The perfection of such an act, to wander and mingle in a strange town, to observe, and not be affected, was appealing for a brief, innocent moment. But I am suspicious of such things. The wrong decision now, and the course of my life, of Julie's, of Martin's, could be irrevocably changed.

Finally, I bought a map and deciphered the correct route. He lived some way out. I took the underground for a while, a beribboned terrier glaring accusingly at me from a woman's bag as if I were its long-lost original owner. It was easy to tell who had lived in the city for more than a few months, as the native Praguers knew how to handle the underground trains' cruel tendency to break suddenly, even mid-tunnel.

A wandering tram took me to a bleak island of tower blocks. They stood there as if there were nothing beyond this point. Here the Charles Bridge and the Castle were like the further, fish-eye reaches of another world, existing on the edge of others' lives, captured in the mind's snowy paperweight.

Mercifully, Martin's name had been stuck to one of the twenty or so rectangular buzzers. I pressed. After several attempts, the door was released for me and I went in. His flat was on the sixth floor.

Martin opened the door bleary-eyed, as if from a deep sleep. It was two in the afternoon.

"My God, Philip!" he shouted in astonishment as his eyes, in a slow double-take, focused and registered me in cartoonish, myopic exaggeration.

By the time we had reached the kitchen and he was making tea, he was totally awake.

He had not lost that naïve tone in his voice nor that constantly surprised expression, though for once he had good reason for the latter.

But these were just my initial impressions. I did not know him any longer, as I had presumed I still would. He was in the habit of breaking off mid-sentence and dissapearing elsewhere in the flat for some spurious reason. Despite these misgivings, I was pleased to accept his offer of staying with him for four or five days. He would be out a lot, teaching, he said, but we could meet in town. I rang Julie and told her the news and when I'd be back.

Within the course of the evening, we both made a précis of our lives till then. But it was evident that Martin was more interested in telling me his story than in hearing mine. I did not mind. I am tired of success stories. They are sapping me.

So I learned how Martin had been through a series of anonymous jobs in England, had met and married a Czech woman called Lenka, divorced, and stayed on there. The end of the marriage had been a disaster for him, but he had for a time felt reborn. He had started again to see the world in terms of his old obsessions.

He would like to have said that he had thought out a new regimen for his life. But this was not so. The regimen came in spite of him, and could not have been gleaned from any foreknowledge of the place he eventually decided upon.

Whereas his days before Lenka had been structured by flitting from one London bookshop to another, in Prague they were given form by a network of cafés and pubs. But if these two places resembled each other in their overall pattern and function as so many dots in his life to be joined up, they were dissimilar in the forces they housed. They were both receptacles for the passions that drove him away from people and into himself.

To be truthful, neither the old diversions offered by London nor the new ones of Prague resolved the emptiness left by his wife's departure. So in time a third alternative came to prevail, not replacing, but overlaying, his previous habits. And this was the dimension of sleep. What he did during his days became of secondary importance to the minimum one hour's sleep during the afternoon.

Yet such a highlight in his day had not been totally satisfying. There were still the evenings to be

filled, and here he alone was to blame for turning his life into a complex puzzle.

More and more, the thought of escape came to dominate, so that this became the highpoint of his days, their success proportional to the success of his escapes.

There was an additional problem.

"It's a question of words," he explained. "They've come to mean less and less out here. They won't do what you want them to."

He gave examples of how he would come across a text that he had to teach, a normally quite accesible piece of writing, yet which, on his examining it more closely, confounded his natural sense of optimism.

"I look up words I think I know the meaning of, just to double-check, but I find I only know the general sense, if at all.

"Take 'enervating', for example. I always thought it meant 'inspiring' or 'giving you energy', but in fact it means the opposite."

He wore a look of complete exasperation. It crossed my mind that I might be looking at a man who had come to the end of the road, who had been defeated by a solid block of incomprehension, built brick-by-brick by ill-fortune and unhappy coinci-

dence. Yet what of his talent? That was never spoken of directly, perhaps because I had never been fully convinced of its existence. This I wanted to communicate to him, but I could not.

"There's a second stage to this sleep thing," he told me the next evening by candlelight as we waited for his girlfriend to arrive. It's the when of it. It's not just any afternoon's kip we're talking about."

He shifted, becoming agitated.

"If it's going to work, it's best to lie down as it's getting dark outside. When that happens, I usually wake as if to a new day. I often think it's early morning. Then I check the clock and realize that I've only been out for one-and-a-half hours, two at most."

He had again that credulous look so characteristic of him, as if he were discovering some great truth as he was speaking.

"It's a way of gaining territory, of reclaiming part of the day. We're not given enough time, we all know that," he continued. "It's nothing to do with any mystic mumbo jumbo, any half-digested quack philosophy. I discover layers within the sleep that just don't exist in the day. I come up feeling their texture next to my skin."

I believed him.

That evening his girlfriend didn't turn up. Over the tapering vertex of the guttering candle flame our eyes entered into a strange game of back-and-forth echoing motion. When I finally got up and went out onto the balcony I was aware that, beyond that subtly waving carpet of concrete slab housing, motorway and tourist-thronged Old Town, there was Petrin Hill, which led off like an elegant slender arm from the Castle, where couples were describing circuits of as yet undeclared intention.

That weekend was passably pleasant. I met some of Martin's friends and he took me to some favourite haunts of his I would not otherwise have discovered. But once the working week began, things became more complicated.

Two days running he failed to turn up at unmistakeable meeting-points in town, and when I met him later he made weak excuses. I accepted these without any great show of rancour, but when the same thing happened the next day, I decided to go into the school where he worked in the hope that someone there might know where he was.

In the staffroom, a barely furnished space with a row of lonely tables along one side and a sofa and coffee table in the centre, I was told that I might try Martin's usual hangout, a coffee house around the corner. I sensed a kind of malevolent curiosity in the group's reaction to my predicament but did not feel in the position to confront strangers over what might be nothing more than my oversensitivity, outsider as I was to a covey of outsiders themselves.

The café was easy to find, its overt bohemianism a little less direct, a little less artificial than that of other such places in the city. At first I was disconcerted by the preponderance of mirrors and sanctioned graffiti. The majority of customers and all the waitresses were Czech; I breathed a sigh of relief.

I found him in a back room, talking to a young Czech girl, who, like most of the girls in the café, was serenely pale, wore black, and had long rust-coloured hair. She was doing little talking herself, which didn't surprise me. Her presence in his life was more lapidary than functional.

I hadn't rehearsed what I was going to say. I thought I was going to let rip, but when I saw him there, calmly expatiating to that quiet, nodding

creature, I was suddenly aware that there was a kind of contentment there, even if it was dubious.

He looked up, seeming tired but strangely pleased to see me.

"Martin, what happened?" I said, keeping my voice as level as I could.

"I'm sorry, Philip. I forgot I had this thing on."

I hoped he wasn't referring to the girl. I looked at her for an introduction. He laughed.

"Oh, this is Olga."

She smiled.

"Your thing?"

He laughed again, knowingly, as if I should have been able to guess.

"My disappearing act."

"Your what?"

"I have this act … there's a kind of cabaret a few blocks down from the school. You know, some read poems, perform songs. Mainly ex-pats."

"Really?" I said, unsure how I should react. "And you?"

"I disappear."

"You disappear?"

At this he stood up. "Coming?"

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