

Frances Wiese

## A Beautiful Joke

I remember the night it all changed. The night Hannah and Zoe pulled me aboard the bar, out of the sea that was everyone else. I admit I may have looked a little lost at the moment. My native Prague roommate was chasing an old flame working the coat check, while the Christians were assisting each other in examining the bathroom mirror. Hannah and Zoe worked their humble stage, swaying from the ceiling fixtures more for balance than sex appeal, sending me the same playful wink as the nearby 7-foot Russian. I thought that wink was a mutual understanding – a polite acknowledgement to be gotten over with – when they grabbed my hand and hoisted me onto the bar. It made my skin tense, the way they moved around my body, sliding their hands down my hips and pressing their pelvises to me. They were Sirens; alluring Harley’s crowd of ruddy, old men with their rolling bodies and seductive stares. Then there was me, fumbling between them, already trapped.

I’m not sure why I stayed up there. It was easier just to give in to it all: the music, the booze, the eyes and the twirling. I performed under Hannah and Zoe, watching the mingling drool of Slovakian, Bosnian, and Czech men accumulate at our heels.

“How much?” He had asked. Grey hair, boyish-face, and French accent. Zoe bent over and pulled his silk pocket square from his jacket, dangling it in front of his nose.

“You tell me.” Hannah said, popping her hip out, pursing her lips. She had it down to a practice.

“I mean her.” He looked at me. “8,000 crowns?”

Hannah and Zoe watched in wait, faces of wry amusement.

“8,000 crowns? That’s insulting,” I said, waving him off with a wrist flick, not recognizing the contemptuous laugh as mine.

“We knew we’d like you,” Hannah said. And I drank it all in. An elixir of shame, promiscuity, and confidence: bittersweet and intoxicating.

We danced until sunrise.

I had wanted to know no one.

“Why *Prague?*” everyone asked – and occasionally -- “Where is *Prague?*” Depending on my audience, I had told people the city was beautiful or the beer was cheap. Both true. But mostly because everyone I knew had a gone to Florence or London or Madrid, or stayed comfortably playing beer die under the California sun. They all took the easy way out. I wanted the unknown and I wanted excitement. Prague was the only study abroad program where I could follow no one and nothing I did could follow me.

Before that night at Harley’s, I had been hanging around with two girls from a Christian college I always forgot the name of in Philadelphia. I had a Czech roommate too, but she’d take me out and just dump me at the first sight of someone she knew, not so eager to play translator. The Christians weren’t much better, posting things on Facebook like “Ring By Spring” and telling me about the times they had touched their boyfriends’ hard-on over jeans.

I only knew of Hannah and Zoe from Czech class at Charles University or occasional run-ins in our apartment building. Hannah had pouty lips, blonde hair, and a resting bitch face that wasn’t always unintentional like mine. She was from South Carolina and liked to remind everyone. Once when the teacher had asked her to name the Czech president, she responded, “how should I know – women can’t vote where I’m from,” only to follow up with his name along with the two presidents before that. I remember being impressed by the ferocious way she wielded her intelligence. Zoe on the other hand was more reserved, with long brown hair and a beautifully defined jaw. She would just look around the room dispassionately, her mouth a thin line, relishing in her own mysteriousness. But underneath her shy girl façade she was a fucking vixen; stacked men up like baseball cards; lady on the streets, freak in the sheets.

Now I hadn’t considered myself a saint in the first couple weeks of abroad. I had been mildly successful at dragging the Christians into the world of Prague’s club scene. But Hannah and Zoe were a

different strain of crazy and they didn't go out of their way to hide it. All I first knew about them came in the form of loud whispers during class, where they'd brag to each other about rendezvous with Czech policemen, Portuguese bankers, and Slovakian DJ's. Some days they'd shamelessly show up in the outfit they wore out the night before. They had found it all funny, scandalizing the most innocent subjects. When weekend trips were announced, Hannah and Zoe said they couldn't afford to travel like the rest of us abroad. "So we just sleep with men from different countries," Hannah would say laughing. I had thought it all audaciously off-putting.

No one craves heroine before they taste it.

That night at Harley's sparked an unlikely allegiance between me to them, where my wariness of Hannah and Zoe had morphed into a growing intoxication.

"Sedonaaa," Hannah had sung my name out when I entered class the next morning. Zoe just sat next to her smirking. "Sounds like a stripper name," she said as I sat next to them. I was relieved that they hadn't written off the night before as a meaningless drunken encounter.

"Are you named after the girl in the song?" Zoe asked.

"No, the town," I said.

"Oh, there's a song you know."

"Yeah, about the town, Sedona." Zoe looked at me thoughtfully, but not embarrassed like most people who make that mistake.

"So you're saying 'Little Hollywood' is a town and not a girl?"

"Unfortunately."

"You look like a Hollywood," Hannah responded. "Blonde and tan and shit."

Across the room the Christians stared gaping at us. Zoe looked over, giggled and turned back to me. "We thought you might need some saving." She was right. I had found those girls exhaustingly safe, unwilling to dance the night away like my friends at home.

"Yeah, everyone here's a fucking narc," Hannah said, unconcerned by who heard. "So, we getting fucked up tonight?"

I looked at the Christians across the room and then thought about the shameless liberation I had felt standing up on that bar. When in Rome, I thought.

I wasn't really sure what I had sold myself into. As a bystanding eavesdropper, their stories had scandalized me. But my tastes matured upon our new friendship. I ate every detail they dished onto my plate, satisfying my hunger for the new and exotic – satisfying their hunger for an audience.

"I've already hooked up with two Czech men," Zoe bragged to me over our first meal together, "One was married." Nearly choking on my vodka Fanta, I managed to ask where she did it. "In his office building..." she laughed, "He's so hot though, I want to do it again." At the time, I probably hadn't spoken to a bonafide Czech yet and she had already fucked two men and corrupted an entire family.

Even more impressively, that same night Zoe explored another man's cubicle, Hannah slept on our dog shit ridden steps, having returned to the apartment without her keys. "It was so fucking cold," she complained in the tone one might use to complain about a too firm pillow.

They would take breaks in between reminiscing to look at each other and laugh. Dignity preserved in the deliberateness of it all. I'd watch in admiration, thinking about the time I was found behind the frat house with Johnny, how I allowed the slut shaming to follow me around like a ghost. It all would have been nothing to them – another scratch on the scorecard.

One morning I caught Hannah walking in the door as I was walking out for class. Her blonde hair was dreaded and eye make up everywhere except her eyes.

"Met this 50-year-old cocaine dealer at Roxy last night," she said. "We did a shit ton of coke in his car and drove all over Prague looking for a hotel room. They all thought I was a hooker though, so we couldn't get a room." She opened her purple clutch and started shuffling through it. "At least I think that's why – he didn't speak English."

"Fuck," she had said. "Lost his number." She snapped her clutch closed and walked past me. "There goes my sugar daddy."

I turned to watch in awe as she climbed all the way up the first staircase, swinging each hip to the click of her red heels. A few minutes later down the street, I caught Zoe hopping off bus 51. She was subtler, just curling up one side of her mouth, letting her eyes linger in my direction before walking on.

They were unstoppable – the sexiest rabbit hole I’d ever fallen into.

And still, amidst all this craziness, they rarely missed a class. That was part of their allure – their confidence that they could do it all. “People are all like ‘time is money,’” Hannah said, “but I got a lot more time than money, so fuck me if I don’t spend it right.”

The three of us would walk for hours. Through Zizkov, into Namesti Miru, past Charles University all the way to Vhinorady, we’d walk and walk until we were lost and then walk more until we weren’t lost. Hannah and Zoe had it already mapped out by the time I entered the picture. They showed me which Lékárna sold Plan B on Sunday, where to find a Bloody Mary, and which bars sold weed in Zizkov.

“You know, Zizkov used to be it’s own town before the 1920s,” Hannah said as we traversed the cobblestone alleyways of our beautiful, worn-down neighborhood. “This guy told me it was all vineyards and mostly owned by the Proletariat.” Hannah reminded me of a Native American the way she used every part of a man: his body, his money, and his brain. Lying naked in bed, she’d probe strangers over the Soviet empire, the fall of communism, the work of Hašek and Kafka.

“And now it’s a Gypsy ghetto,” Zoe replied. She had learned that after telling a Prague native she was a Gypsy. While “Gypsies” to her meant Free People and Coachella, to every European it meant the dirty Romani: drunks, beggars and thieves.

Most walks we spent hopping into every antique store and marveling at all the junk: dishes, children toys, propaganda posters, vases, furniture, jewelry. Each shop was like an over-crammed graveyard of forgotten lives; taken from homes and thrown into piles just like the Jews filling the lumpy stacks of the Jewish cemetery.

“My dad would like this,” Hannah said one day, holding up a copper medallion from World War II. “My dad’s a history buff like me – knows like every answer on jeopardy. I even convinced him to go out for the show once.” She was polishing Stalin’s face with the oil of her thumb. “He got real nervous and did horrible. I felt real bad after. I think it really damaged his confidence.” She paid the cashier 20 crowns, the equivalence of a dollar, and we walked out into the wet fog. “Still, he’s the smartest man I know.”

“My dad’s the stupidest man I know,” Zoe said, adjusting the long, bohemian earrings she had just bought.

“Is he Gypsy too?” I responded. Hannah laughed, but Zoe just stared at me long enough to make me fake a cough.

“I bet Hollywood’s daddy’s probably smoking a cigar somewhere in a Tommy Bahamas shirt right now,” Hannah said.

I laughed and said “Fuck you,” wondering if it was that obvious.

“Don’t worry, Hollywood.” Hannah cooed, nudging my elbow. “If we actually thought you were a prissy bitch we wouldn’t have kidnapped you to be our friend.”

I turned my face to hide my strange satisfaction. I thought about the night ahead, how one or both of them would stray into the dark like the dazzling cheap dates they so hungrily set out to be.

I’d like to say that I played the innocent bystander, more loftily amused by their lifestyle than swayed by it. But they were convincing in their scandal – convincing that there was no scandal.

I had woken up one morning to Zoe knocking on my apartment door at 10 am. Her hair was wet and her clothes, the night before’s. She crawled into my twin bed that smelt of sex.

Three hours before a 30-year-old Belgian man had been lying there. Olympic rings tattooed on his chest as evidence of his bronze medal for field hockey, although my drunken selective hearing had me convinced it was just hockey. He had told me I was the first girl he ever felt so immediately connected to, that he had only done this with two other girls in the Olympic village. I had asked if he meant sex but he said, “No, one-night stands.” I wondered what the point of it all was, why we needed to dress up some lie. Everything casual had faltered in his lie – it was an acknowledgement of guilt, a thirst for justification. I remember hardly listening as I traced his tattoo with my finger, trying to focus on the story it gave me instead of his pointy nose and crooked chin. I thought about that night with Johnny, how the story had circulated among my friends, dragged along my dignity. In Prague, in front of Hannah and Zoe, I was taught to brag over such things. I wondered how they could do this every night, whether they believed what they preached.

“An Italian man is in my bed,” Zoe said. “Fucking Hannah brought him home and he’s sleeping in my fucking bed.” She had been gone hooking up with two firefighters that night.

“At the same time?” I asked. She nodded and I laughed and she laughed too. It was sort of fucked up the way her presence that morning comforted me. I thought, no matter what I did, I could be worse. When we stopped laughing, she stared up at the ceiling in silence. Black makeup dribbled down her eye crease onto my pillow.

“I’m so tired,” she said. “Fucking Hannah I just want my bed.”

Hannah didn’t enter my room until 2 pm. Walking in with her typical pride and a slight hint of guilt, she looked at Zoe with clenched teeth and red cheeks. Zoe stared back with her signature death glare.

“I woke up and saw him in there and was like ‘Oh, fuck. Zoe’s gonna kill me.’” That was Hannah’s idea of an apology.

“I made out with him before you took him home,” was Zoe’s response. The comment took the form of amusement but lingered in the air with an indignant aftertaste.

Hannah shrugged. “Hollywood,” she said to me, “looks like you got laid last night.” I remembered in a blurred haze standing at the bar with the Belgian, watching Hannah and Zoe both leave separately without looking back at me, without wondering where I was going or how I was getting there. Perhaps, if they had stayed I would never have taken him home – wouldn’t have craved the company.

“Yeah,” I said, “an Olympian.” I blew on my fingernails and performed a hair flip. Hannah high-fived me. Zoe smirked and stared out the window.

The three of us sat in the dimmed room for the majority of the day, smoking weed and laughing about our wild night until the smoke felt claustrophobic and the humor in it all staled.

When I suggested we go to Náměstí Republiky because it had the only Lékárna open on a Sunday and because I needed Plan B, everyone complied. It was freezing walking through the city. The eerie fog had settled over the castle like a haunted Disneyland, like a beautiful joke. I remember feeling the gothic buildings’ stare, taunting me through the cyclic twist and turns of the cobblestone streets.

“Wait – I just realized we just walked through hell for you,” Hannah said. We were huddled up outside of a Costa Coffee so I could swallow a little pill. “What you did last night is not Zoe or my problem.”

I didn’t say anything, wondering if she was right.

Later I would find out on Facebook that the Belgian had a wife and two kids waiting for him at home. Hannah applauded me for it. Zoe laughed. I laughed until I numbed.

In the midst of it all, Hannah found a boy – not a love (she was not one of those) – just a boy. He meant more to her than the 50-year-old cocaine dealer or greasy Portuguese though, and that was enough to surprise me, the fact that she would let someone mean something to her at all. His name was Lukas and they met as organically as the American- Czech divide permits: at a bar in Narodni Trida, after matching up on Tinder. Lukas had whitish-blond hair, a square face, and a Czech belly. But most importantly, he had the one way to Hannah's heart: money.

At first Lukas was just a fuck. That is, until he drove her back to Zizkov the next morning in a Maserati convertible. Rolling up to our apartment building, Hannah relished in the image of it all, proudly exiting her carriage in true Cinderella fashion: tattered dress and missing high heel.

A week later, Zoe met a boy and a girl. Well, the girl came first. We went to a show at Club Roxy one night. Hannah brought Lukas, who Zoe, bitter over her lost wing, openly shunned. I hardly noticed her disappear into the crowd since I was dancing so hard my eyes were closed. As typical as it was for Zoe to have already found a man, we were quite intrigued to find her holding hands with pink pigtails at the end of the night. The girl's name was Petra. Zoe didn't introduce us.

They went on a second date though. Petra invited Zoe for drinks at Nebe, this time bringing along her ex-boyfriend, Simon. It must have gone well since all three of them slept in Zoe's twin bed that night, and for many more nights after that.

"They told me they've never met an American as intriguing as me," she'd say beaming beneath her smoky eyes and sumptuous eyelashes.

Something about it was endearing.

Beyond the girl working graveyard shifts at the potraviny down our block, Lukas, Petra, and Simon were the only Czech friends "I" made. Once the early a.m.'s of a Saturday found all 6 of us around the same kitchen table: a result of coincidence, post-club sex, and boredom. It was an odd group. Lukas in his Lacoste button up with his hair combed to the side sat stiffly next to Hannah, hardly saying a word when he usually said too many. Simon and Petra, in contrast, were dressed in all black, Petra in overalls and Simon in some sort of profane t-shirt. While all three of them actively joined in Cards Against Humanity, matching cards like

*What are my parents hiding from me?* with *all-you-can-eat shrimp* or *Dick Cheney*, Lukas hardly acknowledged Simon and Petra beyond low glances. They hardly seemed to care. And it was when Simon and Petra were discussing plans of Gypsy genocide with us that Lukas left the table impulsively, thumping down the stairs for Hannah to follow. I strained to catch the conversation floating up through the floorboards.

“What’s wrong with you?” Hannah asked.

“Why are they here? They are no good people!”

“What?”

“They are different from me. Why must we hang out with them?” He asked in a fit of frustration. “I do not spend time with people like them. They are trash.” He yelled with the strain in the back of his throat that signaled a verge of crying. “I want to go.”

“Okay then leave.” Hannah said.

The door slammed and Hannah walked back upstairs, slightly pinker than usual, but collected and emotionless nonetheless. She sat back down at the table and picked up her cards.

“Lukas doesn’t feel good,” she said.

That night had sat with Hannah though, enough for her to bring it up a week later. I followed her and Zoe through the underground tunnels of U-Sudu to the last room where Jan bartended, mounting the corner stool, wordless, like they did. Within a half hour tequila was being poured down our throats and joints wedged between our lips. This would never happen without Hannah and Zoe. I admired the way they could regally sit up on that bar stool and command the entire room with only their fingers and their eyes.

We had been sipping mojitos at 3 am when Zoe excused herself to the bathroom.

“I don’t know what was up with Lukas that night,” Hannah said with nonchalant dryness. Her boobs were practically protruding out of her tight red dress. “He called and apologized.”

“Just don’t tell Zoe you heard him say those things about Simon and Petra – I already know she doesn’t like him... And she’s like obsessed with Simon and Petra,” she said with an eye roll.

“Sounds like you’re starting to give a fuck about who you fuck,” I said, wondering if my two friends were more capable of monogamy than I gave them credit for. Polyamory in Zoe’s case.

I nodded and smiled at the girl bartending. She was as beautiful as she was grungy with dark silky hair, in slight need of washing, and maroon stained lips. Once she had worn a West Coast crop top with a palm tree on it and I made the mistake of telling her I was from California. Actually that wasn't the mistake – the mistake was saying she could come stay at my house there. She handed Hannah and I each a shot that I knew would put me over the edge. “Shit,” I said, smiling through my teeth.

“Well here it goes,” Hannah said. We clinked glasses and right as I swallowed it down, Hannah discreetly threw it over her shoulder – never one for formalities.

“What the fuck.”

She shrugged.

I told her I was going to vomit when it hit me.

“Don't let it hit you then,” she said, pointing two fingers into her mouth.

Following her sage advice, I headed through the narrow brick hallways and clouds of tobacco smoke to the wooden door with the skirt painted on it. It was perfect timing. Before I had a chance to grab the handle, it swung open to Zoe walking out. I smiled at her but she had just stared at me coolly, jaw held high, and walked past me. My confusion subsided when our usual bartender Jan exited shortly behind her.

It might have been worth mentioning that Zoe had a thing with Jan, and not worth mentioning that Jan had a girlfriend. So much for slowing down. The next morning we would laugh about their bathroom sexcapade, not daring to cast it as anything but funny.

Hannah and Zoe both had skeletons that I couldn't help but learn about no matter how well they masked themselves. It was the reason there was a them and me. One night when Jan was bartending again, Hannah and I stumbled into the bathroom at U-Sudu. I remember being bothered by a girl that left the stall without washing her hands. She didn't care who saw – just walked out without even looking at the sink.

“Zoe's been so weird for the last week,” Hannah said. “Like not talking to me at all, until finally she apologizes to me today, saying her brother gotta go back to rehab or some shit.”

“I'm like, ‘Ok, so you got family shit,’” Hannah said over the sound of her pee stream. “Well guess what, my mom just got diagnosed with breast cancer and my parents just found out they might lose their fucking house. Doesn't mean I'm gonna be a bitch.”

The way she looked and said it was so matter-of-fact, as if she was complaining about uncomfortable heels. I didn't know what to say other than sorry. She looked in the mirror and scooped her boobs up in that same red dress. "How'd you do on Bernie's test?"

The next thing I remember is dancing on the stage at Retro an hour later, holding hands with a young woman in a wedding dress, screaming Madonna. Hannah went home with the coke dealer that night – the same 50-year-old Slovakian that didn't speak English. Somehow they had ended up at the shopping mall at 8am. She said she had wanted new shoes, then complained about being too tired to make him buy her things. I searched her swollen face for emotion that wasn't there.

It was easier to see it in Zoe. Some days she would spend all morning lying in bed, staring at the ceiling and complaining about period cramps. She would never confess to regret – that would mean defeat.

Once the three of us were eating lunch at Café Louvre, neither Hannah nor Zoe had slept. Hannah had ended the night with Lukas, and Zoe with some blonde Swiss. Zoe had spent the meal prodding her dumplings like a science experiment. She "needed" to be at dinner with Simon and Petra in an hour, which meant another night with no sleep. When she excused herself to the bathroom, Hannah rolled her eyes.

"I feel bad," I told Hannah.

"Why? For her getting too much dick?"

When Zoe returned to the table, her eyes were puffy from crying.

I had gotten so tired by the end of it, tired for us, tired for them. It all had lost its luster, but it didn't stop them from going for more. Always pursuing those drunken nights and shallow mornings, while I tagged along, having alienated myself from the friends that slept before sunrise. That feeling of freedom dissipated with a routine I no longer wanted but couldn't give up.

A week before returning home, I sat on the apartment balcony smoking a cigarette. I had been thinking about home, wanting to return to normalcy while fearing it in the same way I feared returning my mom's phone calls. Hannah walked out drinking red wine in a white robe and sat next to me. We could see all of Prague from the balcony. It was one of the stillest spots I had ever known, juxtaposed between the surreal and real.

“I can’t believe I have to go back to working,” Hannah said. Her entire schooling, including abroad, had been paid off waitressing double shifts. “Maybe I’ll just marry Dennis. I don’t like him. But he’s older and I’ll probably just marry him.”

“Really?” I said.

“I’m graduating and I don’t own shit. At least he treats me well. Buys me things.”

I told her she wasn’t going to marry him.

“Maybe not.” She took a sip of her wine glass. “Shit - haven’t gotten my period for two weeks,” she said with a laugh.

I looked out over the balcony, the splattering of red and yellow roofs outstretching like a fairytale. It was amazing how such a place could be so whimsical and haunting at the same time. I thought about the night on Harley’s bar, when Hannah and Zoe first reeled me out of the sea of everyone else. That night I had been saved from drowning only to board a sinking ship.

I turned back to Hannah, but she just stared ahead. There had always only been enough room for the two of them. We all had known I was just a temporary boarder, about to return to the same harbor I had come while they sailed on. It was necessary. I was the extra body whose weight the ship couldn’t hold. I looked away again, toward a sunset that was sickeningly beautiful, that dared something extraordinary, different, to happen.

“Well,” Hannah said, chugging her wine and standing up, “you got 30 minutes to get your face ready, Hollywood.”