The Unbearable Lightness of Being

The following is a passage from Milan Kundera’s The Unbearable Lightness of Being. It starts on page 146 and goes to page 149 and is in part four of the novel Soul and Body. The two main characters are Tereza and Tomas. The story is set in Prague, Czechoslovakia, in 1968, in the wake of the invasion by the USSR. Tereza is in love with Tomas, she lives with him, they are happy, yet he cannot quit his womanizing ways. She takes this as a sign that she is not good enough. At this point in the story, Tereza is having a slight meltdown about Tomas’s habits, and he seems to be trying to comfort her and give her a solution.

“I can’t take it anymore, Tomas. I know I shouldn’t complain. Ever since you came back to Prague for me, I’ve forbidden myself to be jealous. I suppose I’m just not strong enough to stand up to it. Help me, please!”

He put his arm in hers and took her to the park where years before they had gone on frequent walks. The park had red, blue and yellow benches. They sat down.

“I understand you. I know what you want,” said Tomas. “I’ve taken care of everything. All you have to do is climb Petrin Hill.”

“Petrin Hill?” She felt a surge of anxiety. “Why Petrin Hill?”

“You’ll see when you get up there.”

She was terribly upset about the idea of going. Her body was so weak that she could scarcely lift it off the bench. But she was constitutionally unable to disobey Tomas. She forced herself to stand.

She looked back. He was still sitting on the bench, smiling at her almost cheerfully. With a wave of the hand he signaled her to move on.

Coming out at the foot of Petrin Hill, that green mound rising up in the middle of Prague, she was surprised to find it devoid of people. This was strange, because at other times half of Prague seemed to be milling about. It made her anxious. But the hill was so quiet and the quiet so comforting that she yielded fully to its embrace. On her way up, she paused several times to look back: below her she saw the towers and bridges; the saints were shaking their fists and lifting their stone eyes to the clouds. It was the most beautiful city in the world.
At last she reached the top. Beyond the ice-cream and souvenir stands (none of which happened to be open) stretched a broad lawn spotted here and there with trees. She noticed several men on the lawn. The closer she came to them, the slower she walked. There were six men in all. They were standing or strolling along at a leisurely pace like golfers looking over the course and weighing various clubs in their hands, trying to get into the proper state of mind for a match.

She finally came near them. Of the six men, three were there to play the same role as she: they were unsettled; they seemed eager to answer all sorts of questions, but feared making nuisances of themselves and so held their tongues and merely looked about inquisitively.

The other three radiated condescending benevolence. One of them had a rifle in their hand. Spotting Tereza, he waved at her and said with a smile, “Yes, this is the place.”

She gave a nod in reply, but still felt extremely anxious.

The man added, “To avoid an error, this was your choice, wasn’t it?”

It would have been easy to say, “No, no! It wasn’t my choice at all!” but she could not imagine disappointing Tomas. What excuse, what apology could she find for going back home? And so she said, “Yes, of course. It was my choice.”

The man with the rifle continued: “Let me explain why I wish to know. The only time we do this is when we are certain that the people who come to us have chosen to die of their own accord. We consider it a service.”

He gave her so quizzical a glance that she had to assure him once more: “No, no, don’t worry. It was my choice.”

“Would you like to go first?” he asked.

Because she wanted to put off the execution as long as she could, she said, “No, please, no. If it’s at all possible, I’d like to be last.”

“As you please,” he said, and went off to the others. Neither of his assistants was armed; their sole function was to attend to the people who were to die. They took them by the arms and walked them across the lawn. The grassy surface proved quite an expanse; it ran as far as the eye could see. The people who were to be executed were allowed to choose their own trees. They paused at each one and looked it over carefully, unable to make up their minds. Two of them eventually chose plane trees, but the third wandered on and on, no tree apparently striking him as worthy of his death. The
assistant who held him by the arm guided him along gently and patiently until at last the man lost the courage to go on and stopped at a luxuriant maple.

Then the assistants blindfolded all three men.

And so three men, their eyes blindfolded, their eyes turned up to the sky, stood with their backs against three trees on the endless lawn.

The man with the rifle took aim and fired. There was nothing to be heard but the singing of birds: the rifle was equipped with a silencing device. There was nothing to be seen but the collapse of the man who had been leaning against the maple.

Without taking a step, the man with the rifle turned in a different direction, and one of the other men silently crumpled. And seconds later (again the man with the rifle merely turned in place), the third man sank to the lawn.

**Juxtaposition** – there is contrast here between losing the will to go on and stopping to face one’s death and the setting where this happens – the luxuriant, thriving maple.

The ease with which the (compassionate) executioner carries out his task is particularly disconcerting. He seems robotic. He just aims, shoots, turns towards the next target, and repeats the action. There is still the singing of birds in the background, adding to the surrealism. At the end, the reader is not sure whether or not this is a dream. Where did reality end? Or is this a metaphor? If so, where did the metaphor start? I believe that Kundera seeks to lead the reader to question reality. What defines it? Where are its boundaries? Does it even matter anyway, as long as the lesson is learned? I believe that this could possibly be a metaphor for Tereza’s subconscious desire to either have Tomas all to herself or to have nothing at all.