# The Apologizer

### By Milan Kundera

## Alain meditates on the navel

It was the month of June, the morning sun was emerging from the clouds, and Alain was walking slowly down a Paris street. He observed the young girls: every one of them showed her naked navel between trousers belted very low and a T-shirt cut very short. He was captivated, captivated and even disturbed: it was as if their seductive power resided no longer in their thighs, their buttocks, or their breasts but in that small round hole at the center of the body.

This provoked him to reflect: if a man (or an era) sees the thighs as the center of female seductive power, how does one describe and define the particularity of that erotic orientation? He improvised an answer: the length of the thighs is the metaphoric image of the long, fascinating road (which is why the thighs must be long) that leads to erotic achievement. Indeed, Alain said to himself, even in mid-coitus the length of the thighs endows woman with the romantic magic of the inaccessible.

If a man (or an era) sees the buttocks as the center of female seductive power, how does one describe and define the particularity of that erotic orientation? He improvised an answer: brutality, high spirits, the shortest road to the goal, a goal that is all the more exciting for being double.

If a man (or an era) sees the breasts as the center of female seductive power, how does one describe and define the particularity of that erotic orientation? He improvised an answer: sanctification of woman, the Virgin Mary suckling Jesus, the male sex on its knees before the noble mission of the female sex.

But how does one define the eroticism of a man (or an era) that sees female seductive power as centered in the middle of the body, in the navel?

So: ambling along the streets, he would often think about the navel, untroubled at repeating himself, and even strangely obstinate about doing so, for the navel woke in him a distant memory: the memory of his last encounter with his mother.

He was ten at the time. He and his father were alone on vacation, in a rented villa with a garden and a swimming pool. It was the first time that she had come to see them after an absence of several years. They closed themselves into the villa, she and her former husband. For miles around, the atmosphere was stifling from it. How long did she stay? Probably not more than an hour or two, during which time Alain tried to entertain himself in the pool. He had just climbed out when she paused there to say her goodbyes. She was alone. What did they say to each other? He doesn’t know. He remembers only that she was sitting on a garden chair and that he, in his still-wet bathing trunks, stood facing her. What they said is forgotten, but one moment is fixed in his memory, a concrete moment, sharply etched: from her chair, she gazed intently at her son’s navel. He still feels that gaze on his belly. A gaze that was difficult to understand: it seemed to him to express an inexplicable mix of compassion and contempt; the mother’s lips had taken the shape of a smile (a smile of compassion and contempt together); then, without rising from the chair, she leaned toward him and, with her index finger, touched his navel. Immediately afterward, she stood up, kissed him (did she really kiss him? probably, but he is not sure), and was gone. He never saw her again.

## A woman steps out of her car

A small car moves along the road beside a river. The chilly morning air makes even more forlorn the charmless terrain, somewhere between the end of a suburb and open country, where houses grow scarce and no pedestrians are to be seen. The car stops at the side of the road; a woman gets out—young, quite beautiful. A strange thing: she pushes the door shut so negligently that the car must not be locked. What is the meaning of that negligence, so improbable these days with thieves about? Is the woman so distracted?

No, she doesn’t seem distracted; on the contrary, determination is visible on her face. This woman knows what she wants. This woman is pure will. She walks some hundred yards along the road, toward a bridge over the river, a rather high, narrow bridge, forbidden to vehicles. She steps onto it and heads toward the far bank. Several times she looks around, not like a woman expected by someone but to be sure that there is no one expecting her. Midway across the bridge, she stops. At first glance she appears to be hesitating, but, no, it’s not hesitation or a sudden flagging of determination; on the contrary, it’s a pause to sharpen her concentration, to make her will steelier yet. Her will? To be more precise: her hatred. Yes, the pause that looked like hesitation is actually an appeal to her hatred to stand by her, to support her, not to desert her for an instant.

She lifts a leg over the railing and flings herself into the void. At the end of her fall, she slams brutally against the hardness of the water’s surface and is paralyzed by the cold, but after a few long seconds she lifts her face, and since she is a good swimmer all her automatic responses surge forward against her will to die. She plunges her head under again, forces herself to inhale water, to block her breathing. Suddenly, she hears a shout. A shout from the far bank. Someone has seen her. She understands that dying will not be easy, and that her greatest enemy will be not her good swimmer’s irrepressible reflex but a person she had not figured on. She will have to fight. Fight to rescue her death.

## She kills

She looks over toward the shout. Someone has leaped into the river. She considers: who will be quicker, she, in her resolve to stay underwater, to take in water, to drown herself, or he, the oncoming figure? When she is half-drowned, with water in her lungs and thus weakened, won’t she be all the easier prey for her savior? He will pull her toward the bank, lay her out on the ground, force the water out of her lungs, apply mouth-to-mouth, call the rescue squad, the police, and she will be saved and ridiculed forevermore.

“Stop! Stop!” the man shouts.

Everything has changed. Instead of diving down beneath the water, she raises her head and breathes deeply to collect her strength. He is already in front of her. It’s a young fellow, a teenager, who hopes to be famous, to have his picture in the papers. He just keeps repeating, “Stop! Stop!” He’s already reaching a hand toward her, and she, rather than evading it, grasps it, grips it tight, and pulls it (and him) down toward the depths of the river. Again he cries, “Stop!” as if it were the only word he can speak. But he will not speak it again. She holds on to his arm, draws him toward the bottom, then stretches the whole length of her body along the boy’s back to keep his head underwater. He fights back, he thrashes, he has already inhaled water, he tries to strike the woman, but she stays lying firmly on top of him; he cannot lift his head to get air, and after several long, very long, seconds he ceases to move. She holds him like that for a while; it is as if, exhausted and trembling, she were resting, laid out along him. Then, convinced that the man beneath her will not stir again, she lets go of him and turns away, toward the riverbank she came from, so as not to preserve within her even the shadow of what has just occurred.

But what’s going on? Has she forgotten her resolve? Why does she not drown herself, since the person who tried to rob her of her death is no longer alive? Why, now that she is free, does she no longer seek to die?

Life unexpectedly recovered has been a kind of shock that broke her determination; she has lost the strength to concentrate her energy on dying. She is shaking, suddenly stripped of any will, any vigor; mechanically, she swims toward the place where she abandoned the car.

## She returns to the house

Little by little, she feels the water grow less deep, she touches her feet to the riverbed, she stands; she loses her shoes in the mud and hasn’t the strength to search for them; she leaves the water barefoot and climbs the bank to the road.

The rediscovered world has an inhospitable appearance, and suddenly anxiety seizes her: she hasn’t got the car key! Where is it? Her skirt has no pockets.

Heading for your death, you don’t worry about what you’ve dropped along the way. When she left the car, the future did not exist. She had nothing to hide. Whereas now, suddenly, she has to hide everything. Leave no trace. Her anxiety grows stronger and stronger: Where is the key? How to get home?

She reaches the car, she pulls at the door, and, to her astonishment, it opens. The key awaits her, abandoned on the dashboard. She sits at the wheel and sets her naked feet on the pedals. She is still shaking. Now she is shaking with cold as well. Her shirt, her skirt, are drenched, with dirty river water running everywhere. She turns the key and drives off.

The person who tried to impose life on her has died from drowning, and the person she was trying to kill in her belly is still alive. The idea of suicide is ruled out forever. No repeats. The young man is dead, the fetus is alive, and she will do all she can to keep anyone from discovering what has happened. She is shaking, and her will revives; she thinks of nothing but her immediate future: How to get out of the car without being seen? How to slip, unnoticed, in her dripping clothes, past the concierge’s window?

Alain felt a violent blow on his shoulder. “Watch out, you idiot!”

He turned and saw a girl passing him on the sidewalk with a rapid, energetic stride.

“Sorry!” he cried after her (in his frail voice).

“Asshole!” she answered (in her strong voice) without turning around.

## The apologizers

Alone in his studio apartment two days later, Alain noticed that he was still feeling pain in his shoulder, and he decided that the young woman who had jostled him in the street so effectively must have done it on purpose. He could not forget her strident voice calling him “idiot,” and he heard again his own supplicating “Sorry,” followed by the answering “Asshole!” Once again, he had apologized over nothing! Why always this stupid reflex of begging pardon? The memory would not leave him, and he felt he had to talk to someone. He called his girlfriend, Madeleine. She wasn’t in Paris, and her cell phone was off. So he punched in Charles’s number, and no sooner did he hear his friend’s voice than he apologized. “Don’t be angry. I’m in a very bad mood. I need to talk.”

“It’s a good moment. I’m in a foul mood, too. But why are you?”

“Because I’m angry with myself. Why is it that I find every opportunity to feel guilty?”

“That’s not so awful.”

“Feeling guilty or not feeling guilty—I think that’s the whole issue. Life is a struggle of all against all. It’s a known fact. But how does that struggle work in a society that’s more or less civilized? People can’t just attack each other on sight. So instead they try to cast the shame of culpability on each other. The person who manages to make the other one guilty will win. The one who confesses his crime will lose. You’re walking along the street, lost in thought. Along comes a girl, walking straight ahead, as if she were the only person in the world, looking neither left nor right. You jostle each other. And there it is, the moment of truth: Who’s going to bawl out the other person, and who’s going to apologize? It’s a classic situation: actually, each of them is both the jostled and the jostler. And yet some people always—immediately, spontaneously—consider themselves the jostlers, and thus in the wrong. And others always—immediately, spontaneously—consider themselves the jostled, and therefore in the right, quick to accuse the other and get him punished. What about you—in that situation, would you apologize or accuse?”

“Me, I’d certainly apologize.”

“Ah, my poor friend, so you, too, belong to the army of apologizers. You expect to mollify the other person with your apologies.”

“Absolutely.”

“And you’re wrong. The person who apologizes is declaring himself guilty. And if you declare yourself guilty you encourage the other to go on insulting you, blaming you, publicly, unto death. Such are the inevitable consequences of the first apology.”

“That’s true. One should not apologize. And yet I prefer a world where everyone would apologize, with no exception, pointlessly, excessively, for nothing at all, where they’d load themselves down with apologies.”

Alain picked up his cell phone to call Madeleine again. But hers rang and rang in vain. As he often did at similar moments, he turned his attention to a photograph hanging on his wall. There was no photograph in his studio but that one: the face of a young woman—his mother.

A few months after Alain’s birth, she had left her husband, who, given his discreet ways, had never spoken ill of her. He was a subtle, gentle man. The child did not understand how a woman could have abandoned a man so subtle and gentle, and understood even less how she could have abandoned her son, who was also (as he was aware) since childhood (if not since his conception) a subtle, gentle person.

“Where does she live?” he had asked his father.

“Probably in America.”

“What do you mean, ‘probably’?”

“I don’t know her address.”

“But it’s her duty to give it to you.”

“She has no duty to me.”

“But to me? She doesn’t want to hear news of me? She doesn’t want to know what I’m doing? She doesn’t want to know that I think about her?”

One day, the father lost control.

“Since you insist, I’ll tell you: your mother never wanted you to be born. She never wanted you to be around here, to be burying yourself in that easy chair where you’re so comfortable. She wanted nothing to do with you. So now do you understand?”

The father was not an aggressive man. But, despite his great reserve, he had not managed to hide his profound disagreement with a woman who had tried to keep a human being from coming into the world.

I have already described Alain’s last encounter with his mother, beside the swimming pool of a rented vacation house. He was ten at the time. He was sixteen when his father died. A few days after the funeral, he tore a photograph of his mother out of a family album, had it framed, and hung it on his wall. Why was there no picture of his father in his apartment? I don’t know. Is that illogical? Certainly. Unfair? Without a doubt. But that’s how it is. On the walls of his studio, there hung only a single photograph: the one of his mother. With which, from time to time, he would talk.

## How to give birth to an apologizer

“Why didn’t you have an abortion? Did he stop you?”

A voice came to him from the photograph: “You’ll never know that. Everything you imagine about me is just fairy tales. But I love your fairy tales. Even when you made me out to be a murderer who drowned a young man in the river. I liked it all. Keep it up, Alain. Tell me a story! Go on, imagine! I’m listening.”

And Alain imagined. He imagined the father on his mother’s body. Before their coitus, she’d warned him: “I didn’t take the pill, be careful!” He reassured her. So she makes love without mistrust, then, when she sees the signs of climax appear on the man’s face and grow, she cries, “Watch out!” then “No! No! I don’t want to! I don’t want to!” But the man’s face is redder and redder, red and repugnant; she pushes at the heavier weight of this body clamping her against it, she fights, but he wraps her still tighter, and she suddenly understands that for him this is not the blindness of passion but will—cold, premeditated will—while for her it is more than will, it is hatred, a hatred all the more ferocious because the battle is lost.

This was not the first time Alain had imagined their coitus; this coitus hypnotized him and caused him to suppose that every human being was the exact replica of the instant of its conception. He stood at his mirror and examined his face for traces of the double, simultaneous hatreds that had led to his birth: the man’s hatred and the woman’s hatred at the moment of the man’s orgasm, the hatred of the gentle and physically strong coupled with the hatred of the courageous and physically weak.

And he reflects that the fruit of that double hatred could only be an apologizer. He was gentle and intelligent like his father; and he would always be an intruder, as his mother had viewed him. A person who is both an intruder and gentle is condemned, by an implacable logic, to apologize throughout his whole life. He looked at the face hanging on the wall and once again he saw the woman who, defeated, in her dripping dress, gets into the car, slips unnoticed past the concierge’s window, climbs the staircase, and, barefoot, returns to the apartment where she will stay until the intruder leaves her body. And where, a few months later, she will abandon the two of them.

## Eve’s tree

Alain was sitting on the floor of his studio, leaning against the wall, his head bent low: Perhaps he had dozed off? A female voice woke him.

“I like everything you’ve said to me so far, I like everything you’re inventing, and I have nothing to add. Except, maybe, about the navel. To your mind, the model of a navel-less woman is an angel. For me, it’s Eve, the first woman. She was born not out of a belly but out of a whim, the Creator’s whim. It was from her vulva, the vulva of a navel-less woman, that the first umbilical cord emerged. If I’m to believe the Bible, other cords, too: with a little man or a little woman attached to each of them. Men’s bodies were left with no continuation, completely useless, whereas from out of the sexual organ of every woman there came another cord, with another woman or man at the end of each one, and all of that, millions and millions of times over, turned into an enormous tree, a tree formed from the infinity of bodies, a tree whose branches reached to the sky. Imagine! That gigantic tree is rooted in the vulva of one little woman, the first woman, poor navel-less Eve.

“When I got pregnant, I saw myself as a part of that tree, dangling from one of its cords, and you, not yet born—I imagined you floating in the void, hooked to the cord coming out of my body, and from then on I dreamed of an assassin way down below, slashing the throat of the navel-less woman. I imagined her body in death throes, decomposing, until that whole enormous tree that grew out of her—now suddenly without roots, without a base—started to fall. I saw the infinite spread of its branches come down like a gigantic cloudburst, and—understand me—what I was dreaming of wasn’t the end of human history, the abolition of any future; no, no, what I wanted was the total disappearance of mankind, together with its future and its past, with its beginning and its end, along with the whole span of its existence, with all its memory, with Nero and Napoleon, with Buddha and Jesus. I wanted the total annihilation of the tree that was rooted in the little navel-less belly of some stupid first woman who didn’t know what she was doing or what horrors we’d pay for her miserable coitus, which had certainly not given her the slightest pleasure.”

The mother’s voice went silent, and Alain, leaning against the wall, dozed off again.

## Dialogue on the motorbike

The next morning, at about eleven, Alain was to meet with his friends Ramon and Caliban in front of the museum near the Luxembourg Gardens. Before he left his studio, he turned back to say goodbye to his mother in the photograph. Then he went down to the street and walked toward his motorbike, which was parked not far from his apartment.

As he straddled the bike, he had the vague sensation of a body leaning against his back. As if Madeleine were with him and touching him lightly. The illusion moved him; it seemed to express the love he felt for his girl. He started the engine.

Then he heard a voice behind him: “I wanted to talk some more.”

No, it wasn’t Madeleine; he recognized his mother’s voice.

Traffic was slow, and he heard: “I want to be sure that there’s no confusion between you and me, that we understand each other completely—”

He had to brake. A pedestrian had slipped between cars to cross the street and turned toward Alain with a threatening gesture.

“I’ll be frank. I’ve always felt that it’s horrible to send a person into the world who didn’t ask to be there.”

“I know,” Alain said.

“Look around you. Of all the people you see, no one is here by his own wish. Of course, what I just said is the most banal truth there is. So banal, and so basic, that we’ve stopped seeing it and hearing it.”

For several minutes he kept to a lane between a truck and a car that were pressing him from either side.

“Everyone jabbers about human rights. What a joke! Your existence isn’t founded on any right. They don’t even allow you to end your life by your own choice, these defenders of human rights.”

The light at the intersection went red. He stopped. Pedestrians from both sides of the street set out toward the opposite sidewalk.

And the mother went on: “Look at them all! Look! At least half the people you’re seeing are ugly. Being ugly—is that one of the human rights, too? And do you know what it is to carry your ugliness with you through your whole life? With not a moment of relief? Or your sex? You never chose that. Or the color of your eyes? Or your era on earth? Or your country? Or your mother? None of the things that matter. The rights a person can have involve only pointless things, for which there is no reason to fight or to write great declarations!”

He was driving again now, and his mother’s voice grew gentler. “You’re here as you are because I was weak. That was my fault. Forgive me.”

Alain was silent; then he said, in a quiet voice: “What is it that you feel guilty for? For not having had the strength to prevent my birth? Or for not reconciling yourself to my life, which, as it happens, is actually not so bad?”

After a silence, she answered, “Maybe you’re right. Then I’m doubly guilty.”

“I’m the one who should apologize,” Alain said. “I dropped into your life like a cow turd. I chased you away to America.”

“Quit your apologies! What do you know about my life, my little idiot! Can I call you idiot? Yes, don’t be angry; in my own opinion, you are an idiot! And you know where your idiocy comes from? From your goodness! Your ridiculous goodness!”

He reached the Luxembourg Gardens. He parked the bike.

“Don’t protest, and let me apologize,” he said. “I’m an apologizer. That’s the way you made me, you and he. And, as such, as an apologizer, I’m happy. I feel good when we apologize to each other, you and I. Isn’t it lovely, apologizing to each other?”

Then they walked toward the museum. ♦

(Translated, from the French, by Linda Asher.)