After reading Mary McCarthy's *Ideas and the Novel*, it was interesting that the next novel I read was all about an idea, the idea of "ignorance." There is one form of ignorance that everyone is subject to — it falls under the heading of Frost's "the path not taken." What would have happened to us if we had arrived at a major decision point in our lives and had taken the path we didn't take? This is a question that is particularly poignant to emigrants who left a Communist country twenty years earlier and now are faced with returning to their country to face those family members and friends who remained behind while they fled. They will each confront in their own way, the myth of the "Great Return" as Kundera calls it. This is the story of some of those emigrants. Will they remain in their adopted country or return to their homeland?

This novel seems to be the fourth movement in a symphony of ideas coming as it does on the heels of Kundera's three previous books, "Immortality", "Slowness", and "Identity". How does one write a novel about an idea? Kundera gives us an excellent case study in his latest one.

He likens the Great Return of the Czechs post-1989 to that of Odysseus whose sojourn away from Ithaca lasted twenty years, the same amount of time the Czechs spent under the Soviet domination after their 1969 self-emancipation. Kundera makes a point about the significance of twenty years in the span of a lifetime and about the "Tell us!" paradox that a Great Returner, like Odysseus, finds himself in.

[page 34, 35] After leaving Calypso, during his return journey, he was shipwrecked in Phaeacia, whose king welcomed him to his court. There he was a foreigner, a mysterious stranger. A stranger gets asked "Who are you? Where do you come from? Tell us!" and he told. For four long books of the *Odyssey* he had retraced in detail his adventures before the dazzled Phaeacians. But in Ithaca he was not a stranger, he was one of their own, so it never occurred to anyone to say, "Tell us!"

When the heroine of *Ignorance* returns for a visit to her Bohemia that she left over twenty years earlier, she brought along a case of vintage Bordeaux as a special treat for her old friends she invited to dinner at a restaurant. She was appalled to find them snub her wine for their beer and lift their mugs to toast, "Health to Irena! Health to the daughter who's returned." They only wanted to see and acknowledge the Irena they knew twenty years ago, not to encounter the Irena who has matured and returned to them as an adult, full of stories to tell. But no one asked her to tell her stories; they were too busy telling all the things that happened in Bohemia to them while she was gone. In the middle of all the "Remember when's," Irena felt amputated.

[page 43] Earlier, by their total uninterest in her experience abroad, they amputated
Irena got the impression that if she went back to live with these people she would have to lay her whole life in Paris "solemnly on the altar of the homeland and set fire to it."

Twenty years of my life spent abroad would go up in smoke, in a sacrificial ceremony. And the women would sing and dance with me around the fire, with beer mugs raised high in their hands. That's the price I'd have to pay to be pardoned. To be accepted. To become one of them again.

Kundera gives us the two roots of the words nostalgia as coming from returning (nostos) and pain (algos) — to have nostalgia, one must have both a desire to return and a feeling of pain about the return being unreachable. In this passage he talks about a young girl who discovers nostalgia for the first time after a boy broke up with her. She began to see out of the rear window of life for the first time.

Until then her view of time was the present moving forward and devouring the future; she either feared its swiftness (when she was awaiting something difficult) or rebelled at its slowness (when she was awaiting something fine). Now time has a very different look; it is no longer the conquering present capturing the future; it is the present conquered and captured and carried off by the past. She sees a young man disconnecting himself from her life and going away, forevermore out of her reach. Mesmerized, all she can do is watch this piece of her life move off; all she can do is watch it and suffer. She is experiencing a brand-new feeling called nostalgia.

Thomas Wolfe said that we cannot go home again. It was his way of saying we cannot step in the same river twice (Heraclitus) — if we go home again, we find that home has changed, and perhaps the very things we went home again for have disappeared. Things change. It always happens before we know it because knowing can only come after the change has occurred. Apart from Star Trek Voyager's holodeck, the quaint small town of Fair Haven you remember from your childhood in Ireland cannot be reconstructed.

We don't understand a thing about human life if we persist in avoiding the most obvious fact: that a reality no longer is what it was when it was; it cannot be reconstructed.

This is true whether it was twenty years ago or twenty milliseconds ago that it happened. Life is one unique wave crashing on the shore after another.

Several years ago I met a man I knew back when I was in the seventh or eighth grade. I hadn't seen him for over forty years. I remember distinctly and fondly long summer days of picking Japanese plums along the Westwego Canal with him, building balsa models of Spitfire airplanes, feeding his guinea pigs, and so forth. He remembered none of those things. He didn't even remember me. This discrepancy between my memory and his took me aback for some time. How could that happen? Kundera explains the phenomenon this way.

I imagine the feelings of two people meeting again after many years. In the past they spent some time together, and therefore they think they are linked by the same experience, the same recollections. The same recollections? That's where the misunderstanding starts: they don't have the same recollections; each of them retains two or three small scenes from the past, but each has his own; their recollections are not similar; they don't intersect; and even in terms of quantity they are not comparable: one person remembers the other more than he is remembered; first because memory
capacity varies among individuals, but also because they don't hold the same importance for each other.

Irena explains to Milada — the only woman who drank her Bordeaux wine in Bohemia that first day, and the only one who said "Tell me!" — what holds her to Paris. As she talks about how she came to Paris as an emigrant, a child in her arms, one in her belly, and a husband who died shortly after they arrived, she says, "You won't believe this, but nowadays when I look back, those were my happiest years."

[page 162] She is shocked, herself, at having called "happiest" the years after her husband's death, and she corrects herself, "What I mean is, that was the one time I was master of my own life."

The presence of the word "I" twice in that last sentence is a key to understanding what she meant. One feels happiest when one's "I" is active and working in one's life. And the book's theme of ignorance creeps into the conversation when she says that she married at age twenty. Since I got married, had my first child, and chose my profession at the age of twenty, I read with interest the following passage. Although I never considered any of those decisions of mine as “an irreparable mistake,” I will admit they were made at “an age of ignorance.”

[page 163]"An irreparable mistake committed at the age of ignorance."
"Yes."
"That's the age people marry, have their first child, choose a profession."

This next passage caught my attention because it shows an insight into the French people, the French way of thinking, the French way of being. The British Constitution was designed from the experiences in common law — from the bottom up; the French Constitution was designed from the top down — this is the law and you will shape your experiences accordingly.

[page 168] "Oh, the French, you know — they have no need for experience. With them, judgments precede experience."

By the end of the novel, Irena has met a man, a fellow emigrant who ended up in Denmark, whom she remembered from Bohemia, but who did not remember her. The theme of ignorance weaves in and out of the pages of this novel like the cord that binds the book's signatures together. Open the book widely at any page and you will catch a glimpse of it. And by the end of the book you will be a bit less ignorant of the tie that binds us to our humanity.