

An Extract from *Ignorance* by Milan Kundera.

Irena is a Czech woman who came to France after the Russians put down with military force the liberal government in 1968. Now that the 'Iron curtain' has been drawn aside, Irena's friend Sylvie - w Frenchwoman - thinks that Irena should return to her homeland.

What are you still doing here? Her tone wasn't harsh, but it wasn't kindly, either; Sylvie was indignant. Where should I be? Irena asked. Home! You mean this isn't my home anymore? Of course she wasn't trying to drive Irena out of France or implying that she was an undesirable alien: You know what I mean! Yes, I do know, but aren't you forgetting that I've got my work here? My apartment? My children? Look, I know Gustaf. He'll do anything to help you get back to your own country. And your daughters, let's not kid ourselves! They've already got their own lives. Good Lord, Irena, it's so fascinating, what's going on in your country! In a situation like that, things always work out. But Sylvie! It's not just a matter of practical things, the job, the apartment. I've been living here for twenty years now. My life is here! Your people have a revolution going on! Sylvie spoke in a tone that brooked no objection. Then she said no more. By her silence she meant to tell Irena that you don't desert when great events are happening. But if I go back to my country, we won't see each other anymore, said Irena, to put her friend in an uncomfortable position. They were seated across from each other, over two empty coffee cups. Irena saw tears of emotion in Sylvie's eyes as her friend bent toward her and gripped her hand: It will be your great return. And again: Your great return.

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“But Sylvie! It's not just a matter of practical things, the job, the apartment. I've been living here for twenty years now. My life is here!”

“Your people have a revolution going on!”

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They were seated across from each other, over two empty coffee cups. Irena saw tears of emotion in Sylvie's eyes as her friend bent toward her and gripped her hand: “It will be your great return.” And again: “Your great return.”