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THE MUSEUM OF BROKEN PROMISES

Written by **Elizabeth Buchan**
Published By **Corvus**, an imprint
of **Atlantic Books**

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THE MUSEUM OF BROKEN PROMISES

ENTER ITS DOORS, AND THE PAST WILL FIND YOU

ELIZABETH
BUCHAN



‘I gradually came to realize that
there were two kinds of freedom,
internal and external’

Ivan Klíma, *My Crazy Century*

Austria, 1986

A TWENTY-YEAR-OLD GIRL WITH A BANDAGED HAND waits on an Austrian station platform with a suitcase at her feet inside which is stuffed a rucksack but nothing else because it is only there for pretence.

The platform is grey and so badly maintained that plants scramble through the cracked asphalt. It is the same story on the track where the weeds sprout lustily between the sleepers.

Her eyes slot right and left, searching for a watcher. One of the grubby but sometimes desperate people who keep afloat by reporting on others. She is becoming an expert on those.

She strains to see into the distance. Small and isolated, the station is surrounded by woods. Ash and pine, and beautiful silver birches. Through a break in the trees, she sees a cluster of red roofs from the centre of which rises an onion-domed baroque church. So typical of Middle Europe, she thinks, the breath catching in her chest. Of free Europe.

A couple walks onto the platform. The woman is carrying an overnight bag and he a larger suitcase which he sets down. The woman is thin and dressed in a camel-coloured coat. He is stockier

and wears an Alpine hat with a feather in the hatband. They are prosperous and smug, and she hates them on sight. *They* can park their bottoms on the train seats and sit in perfect tranquillity all the way to Vienna.

The girl swings around in the direction from where the train will arrive. To the north and east is the border between Communist Czechoslovakia and the Austria where she now waits. Even though the rail route was established in the Hapsburgs' heyday and is well mapped, it is not going to be, and never would have been, a simple journey.

If the schedules run true to form (not something on which one counts in Czechoslovakia) the tank-like, grimy Soviet Bloc engine with its red star on the smokebox should be pulling into Gmünd, which is the exchange station for the engines and on the border between Czechoslovakia and Austria. Having made the same journey from Prague to Vienna a week earlier, she knows there is a special platform fenced off by a wall and barbed wire where the passport and custom control officials wait.

She is not Czech. Her ability to travel was not in question. Yet, on that train journey she realized she had been infected by the pathogen of repression. Sweaty palms. A constant urge to urinate. Checking, checking on her fellow passengers. Paranoia is promiscuous. It doesn't mind which philosophy it feeds on.

At Gmünd, the Czechoslovakian frontier bullies worked their way through the carriages as they will be doing at this moment. She and the other passengers sat in dead silence. On the platform, dogs and police checked the length of the train's chassis for 'deadheads' clinging to the underside.

When the all-clear signal sounded, the Czech engine decoupled. There was a bump as a shiny western one replaced it.

She remembers clutching her UK passport in her injured hand and trying not to think of the ‘deadheads’. Instead she made herself concentrate on him – of when they first met and how it became what it is.

Then, as she is doing now, she thinks about love and what an extraordinary, incendiary thing it is and of how it consumes her. Of how her life has been transformed.

If she closes her eyes, she can summon him. His touch, his smell, his body.

The single bench on the platform by the waiting room is free and she sits down. Its wood is gnarled and splintering and guaranteed to ladder tights.

She lights up a cigarette.

Milos will have gone over and over the plan with Tomas. *It's the details that count.* She remembers Milos telling her about the escape plans. *Learn them.* The right seat, the right station, the right clothes... *You have to convince them that your journey is normal and you have been given permission to make it.*

A crate of champagne will have been sent to the watchtower.

It seldom fails, said Milos. Get them drunk.

Step by step. The architecture of an escape is painfully hazardous to construct because it involves trust.

Her heart beats faster. Don't think about failure.

It's madness to try and do a runner from the cross-over point at Gmünd. Suicidal. Everyone knows that. That's why this unremarkable station on the other side of the border is the one to go for and why she is here.

On arrive, he promised in his execrable French. ‘I will.’

The autumn wind whips the tops of the trees. Her cigarette flares up and then dies. She grinds the butt with her boot and shivers.

The watchers. Who are they? Answer: everyone, including your grandmother. Once it is understood that an elderly woman with a string bag bulging with vegetables is as dangerous as the bully boy in the leather jacket, it becomes obvious that anyone can manipulate anyone. She also knows that, in more cases than she supposed, the watchers are as frightened as the subjects on whom they spy.

Waiting.

Waiting is an art form. Those who live in eastern Europe know its intimacies. The dry lips. The rapid heartbeat.

She shoves her cold hands into her pockets. In the left one she clutches the railway ticket she used to make her own getaway. *Prague, Brno, Gmünd...* She refuses to throw it away.

The elderly Volkswagen she has bought from a garage is parked up outside the station. God knows what condition the car is in but if it gets them to England it doesn't matter a toss. On the back seat is a loaf of bread, sausages, apples and beer.

'You'll have to marry me if you want to stay in England.'

'Do I now?'

Her stomach clenches with pain and she begins to shake.

She knows what she has done.

She knows.

She checks her watch. In the world she has just fled, there are many jokes about timetables being made of jelly. She's not laughing now.

Again, she checks her watch.

If all is well, the newly attached engine is easing its way to the border where the frontier police are poised to open the concrete barriers, leaving it free to gather speed towards Vienna.

If all is well.

She knew that the instructions would be precise. He must chop his hair short and wear a business suit – not his style at all. He must always keep his forged passport to hand.

‘I hope your name won’t be Wilhem,’ she told him as they said goodbye. ‘I refuse to love a Wilhelm. It should be Viktor for Victory.’

On the station bench, she prays that he is occupying the aisle seat – aisle seats are better positioned to make a break for it. In his briefcase should be a made-up schedule of business commitments for his four-day visit to Vienna and a forged docket for the hotel.

She squints into the distance. Smoke is billowing over the trees and, in the far distance, a train moves against a green backdrop. Gradually, it enlarges and bears down towards the station, wheels screeching on the rails as it reins in its momentum. A stink of anthracite and low-grade coal floats over the platforms.

What is love? What is her love? Profound, infinite, burning, tender... all those words.

Guilty?

Her hands clench.

The train has precipitous steps up to the carriages and the passengers are descending. A toddler is coaxed down. An elderly man clings to the rail and summons his courage.

The smug, prosperous couple further along the platform wait to board.

The wind shifts and the engine’s steam throws a dense, white veil over the scene. A man in a pinstriped suit and black brogues steps down from the third carriage. His hat obscures his face but he has short hair and a red handkerchief tucked into his lapel pocket.

Gritty smoke blows into her eyes which are watering copiously. Her heart beats a tattoo of relief.

Then...

The figure halts in front of her. 'Laure.'

The smoke clears. *Oh my God.*

Her insides are dissolving, her knees weakening. In a second or two, she is going to collapse onto the grey platform.

Petr holds out his hand.

Hers remain at her side. 'Where is Tomas? Tell me where he is.'

'I can't tell you that.'

'Is he alive?'

'I can't tell you that.'

He looks at her with a mix of pity and contempt. In a moment of clarity, she understands that Petr's feelings for her do not extend to ensuring her happiness. He has his life. He has his family. He has his politics.

She steps back, one foot feeling unsteadily behind the other. 'My God ... you've betrayed him.'

He grabs her by her injured arm and she bites back a scream. 'I betrayed him?' he says.