



Wings under the old stone bridge

by Leona Francombe

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Grandfather never spoke about what happened on the old stone bridge. He told the story about skiing across the Austrian border one frigid night in 1949 on boards ripped from an old barn; he spun tales of the long, lonely flight to Belgium, and lampooned the singular fate of a Czech exiled in Flanders. But he never mentioned the bridge. It was as if the battered biscuit tin of photos and keepsakes he kept under his bed had a false bottom, and underneath it lay the real, unutterable truth about why he fled Prague.

Everyone assumed Lutgard knew. She had always been Grandfather's favourite, after all. Lutgard Procházka. What a name! Rather like heaping *waterzooi* and plum dumplings on the same plate. It had taken Franta Procházka several heated sessions to convince his daughter-in-law.

"St Lutgard is the most prized sculpture on Charles Bridge, you know. Even if she was a Catholic." This last remark weakened his case somewhat, but in the end he won, though the fact that the saint came from Tongeren proved the definitive argument.

Face to face with her namesake

Lutgard was 15 when he led her on a pilgrimage across the bridge. They walked in silence down the alley of chiselled, miming saints to the statue of her namesake. It was a cold November twilight. Swans preened on the Vltava below. They spread their great white wings and Lutgard could feel a shiver of energy. She looked at Grandfather and he seemed changed, as though his roguish self had melted away into the heavy aura of river vapours and saints.

He glanced uneasily up and down the bridge. Then, without a word, he left her alone and headed for the stone stairs down to Kampa Island. Lutgard stood rooted before the statue, gazing up through the gathering mist. The saint pulsed through her stone robes; her lips trembled with rapture at the Christ falling into her embrace. A strange warmth brushed Lutgard's cheek.

"Come, *pujdeme*," said Grandfather brusquely, reappearing suddenly out of the thick air. He looked tall and remote. The lamps on the bridge were coming on, and droplets of ice lit his beard like sequins on snow. "We're too late." He strode ahead, back toward Old Town. Lutgard kept looking over her shoulder at the saint, at the ardour seared into that sublime, breathless face. Only years later did she realise that it was not faith that had warmed the air on that bridge – at least not for her – but the flush of possibility.

The cryptic note

Franta died at 98 as he had lived, with a gleam in his eye, to a waltz, after a few faltering pirouettes across the floor. He took with him the secret of the bridge. But to Lutgard he bequeathed something odd: the battered biscuit tin, sealed with duct tape, and a cryptic note. Her trip with him to Prague 25 years ago had left only an echo, a haunting radiance. Until now... until she could no longer ignore the memory. *Take the box to the statue. November 21. At twilight.*

Dusk was already wrapping its shadows around the Powder Tower. The huge, squat bulk gazed inscrutably over the crooked streets like a knave with a pack of cards. Lutgard strode past and shivered, the biscuit tin bumping against her leg in its plastic bag. The years had left Prague a hopeless labyrinth in her mind. She remembered the Old Town Square, of course, and the statue of the martyr Jan Hus, where Grandfather, fiercely Protestant, had tarried too long. But down which narrow byways he had led her had evaporated into time.

She struck randomly down a side street. Her heart quickened at the thought of what awaited her; of what might happen if she failed to appear. 'We're too late', Grandfather had said then. But for what? For whom? She only knew that she could not be late now. Not this time. Not for him.

It began to snow. The walls of Karlova Street leaned inward and caught the drifting flakes in their niches. Lutgard hurried under an ancient arcade, the air fetid with ammonia and boiled cabbage, her footsteps scattering like dice. She could smell the Vltava now, surging, pungent. Though the snow had stopped, a spectral mist hovered in its place, inert and airless. It was that poised, uncertain moment of a Prague evening, when houses settle on their stones and alchemists shut their doors, and unseen things of air and magic go about their business.

The Old Town Bridge Tower seeped grotesquely through the twilight. Another knave, his face shuttered. She could see the bridge now with its aisle of saints, their arms snow-draped and beckoning.

The meeting on the bridge

The saint continued her splendid adoration, as if in all that time not a single, indifferent moment had intervened. Lutgard stared up at her. At once she felt the same flush – insistent, warm, tempting. The lure of the possible. Was it a memory, or a reminder? She leaned over the parapet, as if searching for clues. A trio of swans floated through blackness, three bleached dreams on liquid sleep.

"I've been expecting you."

Lutgard spun around. For a moment it was as if one of

the statues had spoken, as the words had no direction, no substance.

A tiny woman stood before her. She wore a shapeless wool coat, the size of a child's, and a jaunty, misshapen hat from which strands of pure white hair escaped and blended with the snow. Her face was unlined, her eyes as dark as the Vltava.

"Franta was sure you would come." She extended a miniature hand. "I am Milena. Did he never tell you about me?"

Lutgard shook her head mutely. Her Czech had vanished. She handed the woman the biscuit tin.

"I...I suppose Grandfather meant for you to have this. Old photos, souvenirs...."

The old woman's face splintered into a smile.

"Franta didn't tell you anything before he died! *Blbec*." The affectionate word for 'idiot' snapped in the mist.

"Had you arranged to meet him here, twenty-five years ago?" asked Lutgard.

Milena's eyes widened with a curious sadness.

Discovering the truth

"I promised to keep watch for him every November twenty-first, the day we met by chance near Saint Lutgard, in 1948. I knew he couldn't come, of course. But I always kept the date. When you were fifteen, it looked as if he would actually make it." She looked absently over the parapet at the dreaming swans.

Lutgard hesitated. "But he did come... we did. We were just too late."

Suddenly the old woman turned and walked away, the tin banging against her stubby legs. She moved with surprising speed. "Biscuits! That Franta..." She chuckled under her breath and disappeared down the stone stairs to Kampa Island.

Lutgard hurried after her. The maze of ancient houses near the bridge seemed to crowd in. The steps were icy and treacherous, but the old woman had already reached the bottom, moving toward the river with jerky, gnome-like movements. She led Lutgard under one of the vast arches of the bridge.

"We spent three months together, Franta and I. Enchanted, stolen months, here on Kampa Island." Milena took the tin out of the plastic bag and began peeling off the duct tape. "But the Communists were after him then. He was an anarchist at heart, as you know, full of mischief."

"But that's not really why he left, is it?" said Lutgard.

Milena turned to her slowly. "You're right," she said, prying the lid off the tin. "I was only 19. My parents forbade me to see him. He was a Protestant, you see, and we were Catholic. It was simply unthinkable. He couldn't bear to stay after that. He lived for possibility, and here, back then, there was none." She stepped toward the dark, restless river and opened the box.

"Now he has found it."

"Wait!" Lutgard leapt to her side. "The photos...."

Milena swung the tin out over the water and released a grey puff of ash. The swans churned and hissed in alarm, and in a single movement all three lifted from the water. Their great wings flashed white and then faded into the mist, but Lutgard could see the grey cloud still clinging to them, drifting away over the river.