ESSAY

Freedom

by Anika Pavel



"up in the air" by Margaret Wiss

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My attic room was not quite Jane Eyre, but to me, it was special. The window was small, and too high for me to be able to see out of, but, on a sunny day, the little square filled the room with bright light.

I looked at my watch. It was 9:00 a.m. My stomach reminded me that it had not received any food since my lunch at the Prague airport some twenty hours earlier.

My father, who was a tailor, made me new trousers and a flannel shirt before I left home. It was the middle of November, so I put on the sweater my mother knitted for me.

I straightened the bed and reorganized the closet, but making my hands busy did neither silence my stomach, nor change the reality that sooner or later I had to face people in the house. I practiced the words aloud one more time: “Good morning. My name is Jarmila. I am the new au pair.“ I was sure I would find some dishes in the kitchen, wash them, and earn the food I was hoping for.

Slowly I descended the two flights of stairs, holding my breath and hoping none of the stairs would creak. I was not ready to hold an unscripted conversation. I made it to the kitchen without any incident.

“Good morning. I’m Scott. You must be the new au pair.” To my delight, I understood the tall young man who was in the kitchen. I nodded. He smiled. I smiled back. But my relief did not last long. When he spoke again, the rapid fire of his words far exceeded my grasp of the English language.

Scott noticed my panic-stricken face. He walked over to the refrigerator, took out an egg and showed it to me.

“An egg,” he said. I smiled nervously while he fired a few more questions at me. Soon he came to the conclusion that it was wise to leave the culinary decision of my egg to him. As of that morning, I would recognize the words egg, toast, butter, and tea in any conversation.

Mrs. Landis, the woman I was going to work for, came in as I was finishing my tea.

With the help of a dictionary and a lot of show and point, she explained what she expected of me. She had four lodgers for whom I was to cook dinners. Everybody, including Mrs. Landis, was responsible to keep their bedroom clean. My job was to keep the kitchen, dining room, sitting room, and bathroom clean.

Mrs. Landis was licensed to practice natural medicine. Later, she told me how she became interested in alternative medicine. Her husband worked in a rural hospital in Rhodesia (Zimbabwe) and she was his nurse. There were times he was away helping in some village, and he was gone for days, even weeks.

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“I was left to fend for myself, and for people who needed help.” She spoke about the hardship of the local population, but specifically the women. “I could never forget the suffering of those women... and girls... I did what I could, but it was mostly only temporary.”

Her face reflected painful memories that would not fade.

“But the women showed me how, using the local herbs, they eased their own pain and the pain of their children.” I had the impression that part of her was still in Africa.

“So, now I hope to help women here,” she said more cheerfully.

In time, I settled into a pattern of cleaning, cooking, and listening to Radio Caroline. The outlandish DJs kept me happy, playing the latest pop music.

Mrs. Landis was busy with her patients. Within a few months I could read books and converse on many topics. We often talked while we had lunch, and she asked me about my life back home. I told her that we had food, thanks to my mother’s ability to stretch a meager piece of meat to several meals. My father’s genius in cutting garments from the cloth in the way that would guarantee leftover material for his children was a skill that kept us all reasonably well-dressed.

Widespread shortages were the result of central planning as much as party cronyism, resulting in the incompetent people who were running the country. Sometimes it would be butter, other times toilet paper that was hard to get. My mother would go shopping with a bottle of Slivovic or a piece of material my father managed to save if she did not want to come home empty-handed. You bought whatever was available and then decided what you could make out of it. Going to the doctor without a suitable “baksis” was unthinkable.

My mother was born into abject poverty, but she did not get attracted to the communist ideals. Instead, she focused on getting an education. Travel, she often told me, was The University Of Life. She wanted me to learn about the life she could only dream about.

So, at the first opportunity available to me, I told Mrs. Landis how more than anything else in the world, I wanted to make my mother’s dream to travel a reality. Without hesitation, she invited both my parents to come and stay with her in Ipswich.

After I left home, the situation there had changed dramatically. In January 1968, Alexander Dubcek was elected the First Secretary and instantly established a free press and the freedom to travel. My parents and I were beneficiaries of the new reforms when they were granted a visa, despite the fact that I was already abroad.

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I wanted to earn Mrs. Landis's generosity, so I offered to help with her patients. She explained that sometimes she performed small surgeries and some patients liked to stay overnight.

Her patients were mostly women, and although, they came in all different ages, those who stayed overnight were all young girls. Not a suspicious person by nature, I did not dwell on this anomaly. When I would find a girl crying, huddled in a blanket on the sofa in the living room, my primary concern was to make her comfortable. I would try to distract them with funny stories from my childhood. My favorite story to tell was about my brother, who was a huge J.F. Cooper fan and knew *The Last of the Mohicans* by heart. One day, when he was about eleven years old, and I was nine, he told me he would demonstrate to me the art of scalping. Horrified, I started to scream. However, when my mother inspected my brother's pockets, the most sinister item she found was a black pencil.

Mrs. Landis said I would make a good nurse, and I liked the idea, but after she included the task of emptying the bedpan, I changed my mind. I did not like the sight of blood and I flushed it down the toilet fast.

At last, the day I imagined so many times had arrived. True to our Slovak emotions, we hung on to each other and cried happy tears. And then, my mother opened her suitcase. It was, as I knew it would be, full of my favorite cookies, lovingly baked by her. The sweet aroma of the *kolach* hit my nose, and in a box wrapped with particular care was my favorite, the *strudel*.

It was late when I showed my parents how to sleep in a bed without a duvet. I closed the door and smiled at the thought of putting my parents to bed.

Refreshed after a good night's sleep, we were ready to embark on some serious sightseeing. I took my parents to the nearby seaside town of Felixstowe. Like all people from landlocked countries, the first thing my parents wanted to do was to taste the water in the ocean. Was it really salty? Next I introduced them to fish and chips. My father joked that he had never had anything so good that came out of a newspaper, referencing newspapers like *Pravda* (which ironically means "truth").

For my mother, the visit to Cambridge was akin to a devout catholic going to the Vatican. Because she had only a scant education and was essentially self-taught, the walk through the buildings that housed the highest institutions of education was immensely important to her.

The freedom to travel was intoxicating. We went back to Felixstowe to enjoy the ocean and have fish and chips. Walking on the beach, I watched my parents breathe in the salty air as if they were storing it for years to come.

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After a pleasant day, we sat in the kitchen when Mrs. Landis came in and asked me to follow her to the living room. She stopped in front of the closed living room. I could hear the TV. She was searching for words, but finally just opened the door.

“I am so very sorry,” she said.

My eyes fell on the TV screen. Tanks filled Wenceslas Square. They were pointing at the city and people were lying in front of them. Bloodied young people screamed, “Go home,” in Czech. Many had climbed the statue of St. Wenceslas, waving a torn and blooded Czechoslovak Flag. I could hear the words “The end to Prague Spring” coming from the TV, but for a moment I could not process them. I stood shocked, suspended between disbelief and reality.

The door opened and my parents stood in the doorway looking at the TV screen. My head moved from the TV to my parents in an involuntary motion. The wrinkles on my father’s kind face deepened in sorrow. He sat on a chair and put his hands on his knees in surrender. He’d allowed himself to believe in the possibility of freedom, and once again he had to watch that hope trampled under the might of tanks, and the power behind them.

My mother clasped her hands together, but she could not stop them from trembling. “What are we going to do?” she asked.

The week following the invasion, Europe was filled with anger and chaos. My brother Palo, the only member of our family who was still in Czechoslovakia, called us on the telephone.

“I can get to Vienna, and from there to England,” Palo said. “Austria is letting people in and the Slovak guards are letting people through. Should I leave?”

I looked at my father. After a long pause, he said, “Tell him to stay.” His voice was heavy, as if delivering the verdict of a life sentence without parole.

We sat in deafening silence; each deep in our own contemplation. I could not get my brother Palo out of my mind. After my mother went to bed I asked my father, “Why did you tell him to stay?”

“Your mother is battling cancer,” he said. “I am eighteen years older than she is. Did you think I would put an albatross like that on your neck?”

I knew there was no point in arguing. We said good night, both hiding our tears.

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After my parents returned home, Mrs. Landis told me that if I wanted, I could stay and work for her. After the Russian Invasion, Britain gave all Czechoslovak citizens living in England a work permit and the permission to stay indefinitely. My mother's health was holding out, giving me the time to weigh my options.

Absorbed by my own challenges, I paid little attention to Mrs. Landis and her activities. Any questions about the girls who stayed in the house went beyond my usual lack of suspicion.

Finally, I came to my decision. I would take Mrs. Landis's offer to stay and work for her during the day, and take evening classes to study English and history so that I could learn what kind of lie I'd been fed by the communist schooling.

Some time had passed and one evening I asked Mrs. Landis if I could talk to her. "I have to talk to you too," she said before I could utter a word, gesturing for me to sit. "Things have changed in the past few weeks and I may have to sell the house." She paused. "That is not all."

Being preoccupied herself, she was unaware that I had spent the previous few weeks in my own shattered universe, picking up the pieces and putting them together like a jigsaw puzzle.

"There is a good chance that I will go to prison." I was sure I misunderstood. In my mind I searched for a word that would sound like prison.

"Did you hear me, dear?" asked Mrs. Landis.

"Did you say prison?" I asked.

"Yes. Prison," she reiterated, looking at me.

"Why?" I asked.

"You don't know?" She paused, scrutinizing my face. "You really don't know, do you?" She sounded half amused.

"Did I do something wrong?" I asked.

"No. Nothing you did," she said. She explained that some of the small surgeries had in fact been terminated pregnancies. Although abortion in England was made legal the year before, it was frowned upon by doctors and nurses and was generally hard to obtain.

"In Rhodesia I terminated early pregnancy for women who had already too many children who were hungry," she said.

After she got her license to practice alternative medicine, Mrs. Landis had built up a small clientele.

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“A patient I had treated for eczema earlier came back begging for help. She was pregnant. She was only seventeen, confused and desperate. The hospital would inform her parents, so she could not go there. I spoke to her about responsibility and told her if she got into trouble again I would tell her parents myself. But, in the end I terminated her pregnancy.” She put her head in her hands and breathed heavily.

“After that, girls were making appointments for a dermatology consultation, but what they wanted was an abortion.”

I was stunned. Suddenly, the girl’s cries, the pain, it was all making sense. How could I have been so stupid?

“One of the girls was too far along, and I refused to terminate her pregnancy. She was angry and reported me.”

“Did I… I… did… the pan… I didn’t… did I…” I could not verbalize the horror of what I felt, what I feared, what I knew was going to be the answer.

“They were all very, very early,” she said. “You must not blame yourself.”

“I don’t,” I said angrily and left the room.

I threw myself on the bed. The jigsaw puzzle that I had constructed so carefully had exploded, and some pieces I would never recapture.

The memory of the young girls would not leave me. Their faces reflected happy relief as they gave me the small tokens of thanks. I threw them all into the garbage, but it did nothing to help straighten the havoc in my head and my heart.

Was it because I felt duped into doing something I did not know that I was doing? But if I were told, and asked to help, would I have refused?

Mrs. Landis explained that her solicitor wanted to talk to me and to sign some papers. She said she would pay for my train ticket.

“Where is his office?” I asked.

“London.”

I decided I would go to London, but I would not come back to Ipswich. I had a few pounds saved, and I would find a job.

“I asked Mr. Frost to secure a room for you at the YWCA for the first few nights.” Mrs. Landis tried to sound matter of fact. “You know you can come back, tonight, or any time.” She was fighting tears. I felt I was betraying her. I knew she was a good woman.

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When the train pulled out of the station, I waved to the lone figure on the platform, and then she was gone.

I remembered how to navigate London from the happier times when I visited with my parents. By the time I reached Great Marlborough Street, I felt empowered by the city. I walked into the office of Claude Hornby and Frost with confidence, which promptly disappeared when I was told that Mr. Frost was delayed in court, and would I please come back tomorrow at 10:00 a.m.? And no, there wasn't any message for me.

I tried to find my lost courage walking down Carnaby Street. The music coming from the hip shops brought me back to the secure days of Radio Caroline and kept me walking until I found myself heading toward Victoria station. It held the memory of my parents. I found the bench where the three of us sat, talked, cried, and finally said goodbye.

I walked over to a telephone booth that had a promising number of directories. I started to look for the YWCA hostels and their addresses and telephone numbers. I made several calls to the nearby hostels that I hoped I could afford, but they were all full for the night.

I realized it was getting late. I noticed a policeman telling a couple of people who were sleeping on the benches to move along. I watched an old man who carried his entire belongings with him lift himself up with difficulty from a hard bench and slowly move across the station and out into the dark city. I pretended to talk to the receiver. I did not want to be told to leave. For a second I wondered if I had missed the last train to Ipswich.

I looked around and found the least conspicuous booth. I had an apple and a piece of cheese in my handbag. I cleaned the apple on my shirt and slowly ate it and the cheese. Then I created a kind of chair out of my suitcase, my canvas bag, and my handbag. My mother's sweater served as a pillow.

I slept in snatches. Finally, it was light again and the station hummed with its early morning ritual. Strangely, I did not feel tired. I was invigorated by the prospect of the new day and the new beginning. I untangled my leg from the corner of the booth.

The bathrooms were open, and I did the best I could with my limited resources. I sat on my parents' bench until it was time to start my own walk toward the offices of Claude Hornby and Frost.

I sat in a brown leather chair facing an enormous desk. Mr. Frost stood behind the desk and looked at me with kind eyes. He asked me where I was staying, but then he interrupted before I had a chance to speak.

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“Heavens, I forgot about you yesterday. I was held up in court. I trust you managed.” His question made my night in the telephone booth real and I struggled not to cry.

After I answered all the legal questions, Mr. Frost offered me a job as a help in his office. I would be paid ten pounds a week, which made me feel very rich. I was getting three pounds up to then.

I stepped out of the office, and I was practically on Carnaby Street. Since I did not have to look for a job anymore, I allowed myself an hour to savor the atmosphere of pop culture and let my dreams run free. To the tunes of Cliff Richard, I would spend my entire week’s salary at least three times over in a boutique called Mary Jane.

In the last shop on my tour of mental indulgence, I noticed a black and white poster of Alexander Dubcek. His face filled the poster. Below his face in large red letters was one word. FREEDOM. In his expression was the pain of the nation. I stood transfixed, unable to move.

Finally, a Robin Gibb lookalike came over and asked me if I wanted to buy the poster. I explained why I would like to buy it, and why I could not spare the money. To my surprise, he wrapped the poster and gave it to me. I was touched by his kindness, but the fact that he knew who Dubcek was, was even more important to me. I paid him back from my first paycheck.

By seven that evening, I was having dinner at a YWCA that I found in the yellow pages. I would share a bedroom with two other girls and I would get breakfast and dinner Monday to Friday. On weekends, I would get lunch. This would cost me three pounds, seventeen shillings and sixpence. By the time I would pay for the underground and my lunch, there was not much left.

I fell in love with London. From my perch in the office of Claude Hornbey and Frost, I watched Paul McCartney go into Great Marlborough Court to marry Linda Eastman. Joe Cocker revolutionized the Beatles' song “With a little help from my friends,” and people in the office adored me.

One day Mr. Frost called me to his office.

“I had a letter from Mrs. Landis,” he said. “She asked if you would come and visit her.” He gave me the address, date and the time when I could go and visit. I calculated that the trip would wipe out almost all my savings, but I knew I would go.

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It was a gloomy winter Sunday and I wondered what the prison would be like. I pictured every prison I had ever seen in movies. To my surprise, the prison was a converted old English manor house. The gentry who owned the house owed back taxes and the solicitors worked out a deal in which the government got lumbered with the drafty house. Not inclined to spend money on the old place, the government had made it into a prison for women.

Mrs. Landis was serving an eighteen-month sentence for performing abortions. We sat in a large vestibule that had clearly witnessed grandeur in its past. Everyone talked in hushed tones, as if it were some posh hotel lobby that had fallen on hard times, but the clientele had retained its dignity by solemn behavior.

Mrs. Landis encouraged me to stay in England.

“It will get worse,” she said, “and you can help your family more from here than if you go back and subject yourself to who knows what trumped-up charges.” She grilled me about my work, and if I had a boyfriend.

“I decided not to sell the house,” she announced abruptly. “Feel free to visit there any time you want, I’ve decided to go to Israel for a year or two after I come out.”

She kept changing subjects abruptly. We talked about everything except the elephant in the room. I promised to come again.

It was dark by the time I boarded the train for the long journey back. I pondered over the notion whether to go home or stay. Could I live without the freedom I had grown accustomed to? Could I really be in danger if I returned? But ultimately, there was only one question that mattered. Was I prepared to become an immigrant?

I closed my eyes and thought about the non-conversation that took place between Mrs. Landis and me. I searched my mind and my soul as to what, if anything, I would do differently if I knew that the girls staying with Mrs. Landis were there to have abortions. I tried to picture myself in the shoes of those girls. What would I do? Right now, for example, I could barely take care of myself. I had nobody to lean on, and I knew that at any moment my family might need to lean on me.

For a while my mind played Ping-Pong between two daunting conundrums. Eventually, I was rescued by fatigue and the monotonous sound of the train. I fell into drowsy semi-consciousness. Out of the fog cleared the figure of Mrs. Landis, the unlikely women’s libber, who had no desire to burn her bra, but who would help women at the risk of going to prison. Who was I to judge?

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