

Cheque Republic

by Nora Nadjarian

The Czech girl talks non-stop, in Czech. I have no idea what she's saying but I'm nodding my head from time to time, just so she doesn't think I'm a fake. On the train, we're crossing borders. Austria, Czech Republic. On the way to Břeclav. She's saying she's a single mother of twins. Or that her boyfriend is sixteen years older than she is. And that she sells hand-made jewellery by day and sings by night. Or that she hates what she sees in the mirror every morning. And that she spends what she earns on make-up and clothes and hides a tiny diary in the pocket of her leather jacket. And, Or. Neither, Nor.

Czech is one hell of a language. If only I knew what she were talking about. Maybe giving directions to Babylon. Straight ahead, turn right, then left, then join the dots around the park opposite the castle... You'll see it. You can't miss it. Maybe she thinks in Czech, dreams in German, pretends in English. Babylon is a beautiful place after all. Like that hall where a Danish poet and his American translator decided to read the poem and the translation at the same time. Simultaneous translation and original on top of each other, layers and layers of. It was lovely, I finally understood everything about language. I loved that poem.

We get off in Břeclav and the girl asks me if I need a taxi to Valtice. I nod and then shake my head as if to say: we can share, but I only have euros, no crowns. It's almost like admitting I'm a fraud, not a single crown on me, not even on my head. We drink some young wine in a musty cellar in Valtice and I decide to tell her everything about me. Except that she isn't here.

And if Someone asked me to spell the word Czech right now, I'd probably hesitate and think of my cheque book. And if I were American, it might be Check. Homophones should be spelt the same way, I'd say, to avoid confusing innocents. And Someone would verify that I'm a complete and utter phony. And then I would ask that Someone to tell me the truth, as he or she knows it, even if it were

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in Czech.

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