

FÜR ELISE

BY

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Small bursts of laughter spilled from Elise's singing mouth while she held hands with the children dancing in a circle. At ages four, six, seven, and nine, their exuberance bubbled and spilled over as echoes in the stonewalled courtyard. They'd long ago forgotten they were born to mothers whose songs failed to lull their fitful sleep and quench their stifling fever. And when you die, forgiveness is automatic, and time has no meaning.

The sad truth remained like their echo in the courtyard, they had died too young, too miserable, and too hungry to fret over their newfound unearthly forms. Elise's own freshly cast spirit had found them wandering amidst the mist: *between the here and there*, and she took them under her tender wings—on earth, as it is in heaven.

*Ringel ringel reihen,
Wir sind der Kinder dreien,
sitzen unter'm Hollerbusch
Und machen alle husch husch husch!*

The children had chanted the well-loved rhyme raising their arms to an ageless rhythm and slipped contagious giggles in among the words and drowned in fits of volcanic laughter when they all *fell down*. It ended the harmonious babble, but their tickled cackling still reverberated off the stone wall.

Elise saw the stranger emerge from the shaded entry, just as the children had finished the *husch husch husch* and fell in giggling heaps. The man stood draped in the shadows that the midday sun threw randomly like a cumbersome cape. Hesitant to step into the light, his long fingers traced the stones in the rough-hewn wall, listening to the secrets its history whispered to those who were blessed with the gift of aural acuity. The slow gesture singled the man out from the others, those who, year after year, rushed beneath the arched entrance, oblivious to time's hold on history and snapped pictures to remember they were here.

"Shh! Here comes someone. This one, he can see us!" The children obeyed and scrambled to hide behind the fullness of her long skirt and apron, curious to see the man who broke uninvited into their game and ruined their afternoon. They peeked shyly around her dress, clutching at her sleeve. "Versteckt euch! Hide yourselves!" she silenced them out the side of her mouth. Her severe tone and brusque wave signaled the end for childish games.

Elise saw the man search out the deepening blue of her eyes. Oblivious to his uncanny gift, he saw her as she once was and assumed she belonged among the living and worked for the museum. *Elise thought that was a good omen* while beaming with her brightest light.

"Amerikaner, Ich bin sicher. American, I'm sure," she whispered to the children. Michl stood bravest next to her, possessed by the natural boldness of a nine-year-old. He mumbled into her elbow. "Stimmt! Ein Deutscher oder Österreicher kammat nie mit so einer kurzen Hosen daher. True! A German or Austrian would never wear short pants like that in a museum."

The man walked forward to meet them.

"Ja. So einer kummt und fragt fiers Klo. He'll ask for the toilet, wanna bet?" Michl hissed.

"Stop laughing," she reprimanded them and stopped herself from laughing too. With the protective instinct of a sister, she adored the urchins clinging to the pleats in her muslin skirt; she squared her shoulders.

"Fräulein, können Sie mir bitte helfen? Miss, can you please help me?" The man asked, then looked at the brochure in his hand when he was halfway toward them.

"Ja? Yes?" Elise replied. Her eyebrows lifted in wonder.

"*Ein Wunder. Er red echt Deutsch.* A miracle. He speaks real German," Michl jeered.

"I'm sorry, but my German is not so good. Ist dieses Haus das Pasqualatihaus? Is this the Pasqualatihaus?"

"Ja. Sie sind Willkommen. Yes. You are welcome here." Elise stepped ahead to meet him.

His gaze followed the lead of her slender hand and settled on the curved stairway visible beyond the open door. Instinctively he complied and strode across the cobbled yard. At the stairs, he puckered his lips and whistled the familiar tune he had picked up from the children, unaware they were merely blue-eyed Geister. The lyrics, *Ring around the Rosie*, flowed freely in his mind while he whistled the tune, and children's laughter still tugged on the melodious strings of his heart. Their childhood chant had charmed him, although he couldn't follow their strong descent into Mundart—dialect.

He looked at the glossy tourist brochure again. It hadn't misled him, and for the moment, he felt as if he had stepped inside the fragile glass bubble of an authentic experience. The young woman's cheeks had blushed into the shade of apple peel when he spoke to her. He doubted that she had an inkling how lovely she appeared and that the mussed braid that had come undone in the rush of the game stirred him with longing. If she were featured on a postcard, he'd buy it.

Since arriving in Vienna, his senses tingled with awareness. Following in the footsteps of a legend and pacing in the same rooms and opulent halls of his idol, *Herr Beethoven*, quelled any rational thoughts.

Elise lingered at the base of the winding staircase while he took the stairs with long compulsive strides. She understood his urgency; a similar thirst used to rush her too. But Elise didn't understand the reason binding her with trepidation. She had practiced for this moment for two centuries. Now that she had encountered the saving angel, she found words failed her, especially in anything other than her mother tongue. Desperate to harness the moment should it ever show its wizened face, she had rehearsed the favor she intended to ask in English. Now that the time had come, devastating lightheadedness struck her in anticipation. Her chest heaved as she inhaled deep out of habit, and then, she smoothed the folds of her full skirt as if they needed smoothing. She reminded herself to remain calm and not scare the stranger away as she'd done so many others.

"Is it on the fourth floor?" He stopped, catching his breath like butterflies on the landing.

"Yes. Herr Beethoven lived on the fourth floor on and off for eight years."

"Danke. Thank you. For showing me up." He leaned over the banister and smiled.

Oh, I better not lose sight of this one, Elise mumbled and followed silently to the museum door. Her dearest hopes rested with this man. She lingered in the corridor, combatting her worry. She glimpsed him as he paid for admission and then strolled toward the mahogany piano. She sensed he longed to finger the black and white keys, not knowing Ludi never thought much of the Streicher. He played his music too heavy-handed for the delicate hammers and strings, though Ludi's fingertips danced with such tenderness when he caressed her naked skin.

Often a fury over the prying eyes of tourists ransacked Elise. She even hated them for wishing that a piece of him, her Ludi, belonged to them too. They had no right to stake such claims, and she tired of sharing him in life and death with so many others.

The museum didn't advertise Beethoven's death mask. Although people found it morbid, it became a popular tourist attraction. But for Elise, it was more than that. Each night she floated beneath the layer of fragile glass. With her tender kisses, she caressed the swell of his upper lip and traced the shadows of his closed eyelids. "Soon, I promise you, my Schatzi, Sweetheart. Soon, I will be with you," she whispered, believing in her empty oath.

A dawning filled her even as she paced, waiting on the stranger. She sensed the hours spent within these rooms and corridors fading with a quickening drain.

"Fräulein, you didn't have to wait." The American startled her.

"I have something to show you. Will you come to the courtyard?"

"Sicher." He nodded his consent.

His assuredness encouraged Elise. He led the way; she followed, willing her nebulous form to hold its shape descending on the marble stairway.

While following the stranger, a recognition kindled the knowledge that two hundred years' worth of waiting was nearly at an end. A wave of soothing comfort overwhelmed her: *he wrote it for me*. Not for that damned Therese or the women who graced his life when it suited them. She had forgiven his many dalliances when the pleasure to nurse him, to settle his temper, and make him laugh became

hers alone. During those hours, she became the muse for the bagatelle that every prodigy yearned to master.

Since the birth of the famous bagatelle, she often longed for the virgin sound to fall on her senses again as it had that morning when the brilliant sun soured the milk forgotten on the table after their lovemaking. Even now, the effortless notes tingled her spine.

Obsessed with the tender fingering that cajoled the keys to birthing the beauty, he played the newly created piece solely for her. She yearned for God to grant Ludi's hearing to return for one more afternoon and allow him to be tantalized by the intoxicating beauty of his music too. Though she understood the notes echoed within the cavernous miracle that was his mind and soul, it wasn't enough. When he held her in his arms later that evening, he claimed the notes were for her; no other.

With such fond patience, he explained the poco moto's creation stemmed from her shuffling footfalls on the herringbone floor, and that her light footwork moved him to tears. He then copied her quickened steps on the marble stairs for the tempo. He hadn't forgotten to capture and include her laughter, which he always claimed as the spring of his happiness. Even if his hearing had waned, he said he sensed the tempo, the urgency in her footfalls to be near him.

That's all the music represented; music to capture the running, the laughter, and their love.

After Ludi's death, Herr Nohl became obsessed with finding the document. Of course, he heard Ludi play the piece, it was just too memorable, and he wanted to sell it. By then, Elise had removed the document. It said her name right on it. Not Therese, not Elisabeth.

She was given a week's wages and sent on her way without another thought. They bulldozed her from memory just as they had Ludi's final home in Schwarzspanierhaus until nothing, but the fringes of a name remained. Just like Für Elise.

"What's your name?" the American asked over his shoulder.

"Elise." She pronounced every letter, emphasizing the final *eh*.

She was impatient for him to open the cellar door since it had become impossible in her state. At this intersection of time and truth, the others fled; panic cast on their faces when they recognized what she was.

Familiar echoes warned her to be careful. *Don't float through the metal door.*

"Can you open it?" She pointed. "It's too heavy for me."

"Sure. Step back."

By the mercy of strength, he wrenched the door open; the hinges screeched on the rusted bolts.

"Take the flashlight off the ledge. The steps are slippery."

"Wait for me at the top. I will shine the way for you." He descended into the dark, a halo of light guiding him.

She'd seen cultures come and go—those who spat on the walls and pissed on the cobbles, those whose litter blew in the wind.

She liked his gallantry.

"Danke," she said for much more than words could ever convey.

At last, Elise thought, speculations would marry truth, and the wind would be free to huff away the white dust of her bones. Time would remember her. Never again would she argue the biased interpretation, the theories based on snobbery, the outright lies.

Was it so impossible that Herr Beethoven wrote it for her? —his faithful chambermaid who moved with him whenever circumstances forced him to change lodgings. Now, as time trickled like seeds of omnipotence filling the jar of truth, competing for Ludi's love rushed to an end. Love, which had always been hers alone.

Ludi had no choice but to keep their love affair a secret to protect her. He was a victim of class snobbery and couldn't bear the shame. Even at the height of his greatness, his humble roots clung like a stink and tortured him. But in his final

moments, it was her hand he held within his weakened one. With his fragile voice, he claimed he adored her, though no one in the room stood close enough to hear.

Her gentle fingers and tenderness soothed the fever on his brow. Nothing could ease his aches, and no one prayed for his soul to journey on its way home as his dearest Elise. The others in the room just wanted his life and suffering to be over.

The long days that stretched into the painful year of her life afterward prolonged her suffering and tore at her loneliness. None but the cloak of night overheard her rantings and was privy to hear her lament. On moonlit nights, into the pages of empty days, she whispered, and only velvet darkness listened.

He wrote it for me was the epitaph she dreamed of etching on her pauper's grave when the gift of consumption spared her the gut-wrenching lingering grief.

Even now, she was so eager for this moment which had arrived too despairing and late. This kind stranger would ease her into the next realm when she'd hand over the gift. For Elise, her final death meant an end to pestering tourists and their ignorant questions. To the stranger, it meant a shift into a world of fortune and the gift of knowing the truth.

But the importance of the moment lay in his naive trust. He had followed her without fear.

"You won't regret this," she hoped.

He ducked under the arched cellar ceiling, which like the God Atlas, held the bearing weight of her entire world on their shoulder. "What am I looking at?" His eyes searched, trying to gauge the darkness of the basement. The ceiling was too low, and Elise guessed his nostrils prickled against the sickening smell of mold, sour cider, and earth mingled into the vortex of time. But he was a victim to the intrigue that lurked beyond the dank. He wanted to know.

Many times, she had lost other volunteers at this very moment. Their senses had struggled against the unearthly shadows and the quivering manner of the girl in the costume. It wasn't something she could practice, and they always noticed and ran screaming from the cellar.

She beckoned him to the furthest corner and prayed to God, who whispered in her ear: *Come, my child. You are nearly there.*

"Da. There," she pointed.

The beam of light shone on the rough-hewn bricks and crumbled mortar. It was easy to see the bricks would wobble if fingers only reached out and touched them. Only Elise's weakness no longer made them wobble. It was the reason she needed him.

"Da. Ziehe, die Steine. There. Pull the bricks out." She pointed again.

"You want me to pull the bricks?" he asked.

Elise nodded, and she stifled the urge to yell. *Why don't you just tug them out? Dummkopf!* "Hurry, wiggle them harder. Don't worry if the walls fall down."

He shivered while he crouched as something cold brushed against his neck. But something in the wall caught his attention, and he reached. "Ah! Look, something's wedged in here." He wiggled it loose. "It's a book or something."

Her knees buckled. The American blew the dust off the worked leather journal and untied the frayed cord. He fumbled to manage the flashlight, and loose pages fluttered from the spine of the journal.

Time tricked Elise, and she slipped like a smooth cog on a wheel to catch the beginnings of the year 1827. Late snow had melted under the *Frühlingssonne*, spring sun, and in the small park, she had picked *Schneeglöckchen*, snowdrops, for Ludi. When he had inhaled their fragrant dew with the last of his beleaguered breath, he had pointed to the score of the beloved bagatelle nestled next to his other works.

"Für Dich. For you." His eyes had closed; his final breath swept out into the spring morning.

As if the pages heard her secret pleas, they fluttered from the bundle of notes in the American's palm on angelic wings.

"Are these yours?" the American asked.

She nodded, her speech lying lifeless next to the scribbled notes. Inside Elise, the aching of eternity welled. She brought her hand to her mouth to quell the hysterical sob. If it escaped from within her hollow, the man would bolt in terror.

"Let's look at this under daylight." He led the way up, engrossed in the documents.

Elise felt time spilling out; a pinprick-pulling in her legs weakened them. She watched while he studied the papers under the midday sun. The once dark ink had faded to a pale shade of teal but remained legible. After all those years—*Thanks be to God*. Elsie heaved; her eyelids fluttered to the light of the glorious Vienna sky.

"You have to go! Quick." she hurried him.

Enchanted by the fragile documents, he failed to notice little else. The dotted score and bundle of letters captivated his notice. Elise knew it was becoming evident that she was fading, and to shove him off would be futile.

"Wie heissen Sie? What's your name?"

"Fred."

She followed him as he rounded the corner, and he walked absentmindedly into the nearest coffee shop. He ordered a tall Americano and took a seat in the peel of sunshine.

"Stupid American," Michl said from behind her. He and the children had followed.

It was a pity. Of all the Kaffeehäuser lining the cobbled streets of Vienna, Fred had chosen a Starbucks. But Elise forgave his ignorance. The importance lay nestled within the journal captivating his attention.

"Maybe he won't taste the coffee," a child tugging on her ham sleeve said.

Elise looked about the street that had been her home for centuries, and at the ghostly children she'd leave behind. Michl, Heidi, Rosi, Walter, und Mitzi. Her tender fingers brushed over their faces, and she whispered, *Auf Wiedersehen*.

She burst into a million twinkling bits of summer dust and became part of the iconic cityscape and ambiance. She waved in the red and white flag that held her heart forever.

As she drifted in the magic of a twinkle, she saw Fred's brow lift from the pages splayed on the table and, with a nod, let her know he understood.

That *she was* Beethoven's mistress, she was and always had been: *Für Elise*.

Author Biography

Monika R. Martyn is retired, married, happy, and a minimalist. She enjoys traveling and creating stories layered beneath the lines. She has been published in numerous print and online magazines. Her novel, *The Lucky Man—An Act of Malice*, made its debut in the spring of 2021.