

The Exiles Return: A Novel

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WITH A FOREWORD BY EDMUND DE WAAL, AUTHOR OF THE HARE WITH AMBER EYES

SET IN THE ASHES OF POST-SECOND WORLD WAR VIENNA, A POWERFUL, SUBTLE NOVEL OF EXILES RETURNING HOME FIFTEEN YEARS AFTER FLEEING HITLER'S DEADLY REIGN

Vienna is demolished by war, the city an alien landscape of ruined castles, a fractured ruling class, and people picking up the pieces. Elisabeth de Waal's mesmerizing *The Exiles Return* is a stunningly vivid postwar story of Austria's fallen aristocrats, unrepentant Nazis, and a culture degraded by violence.

The novel follows a number of exiles, each returning under very different circumstances, who must come to terms with a city in painful recovery. There is Kuno Adler, a Jewish research scientist, who is tired of his unfulfilling existence in America; Theophil Kanakis, a wealthy Greek businessman, seeking to plunder some of the spoils of war; Marie-Theres, a brooding teenager, sent by her parents in hopes that the change of scene will shake her out of her funk; and Prince "Bimbo" Grein, a handsome young man with a title divested of all its social currency.

With immaculate precision and sensitivity, de Waal, an exile herself, captures a city rebuilding and relearning its identity, and the people who have to do the same. Mesmerizing and tragic, de Waal has written a masterpiece of European literature, an artifact revealing a moment in our history, clear as a snapshot, but timeless as well.

Elisabeth de Waal was born in Vienna in 1899. She studied philosophy, law, and economics at the University of Vienna, and completed her doctorate in 1923. She also wrote poems (often corresponding with Rilke), and was a Rockefeller Foundation fellow at Columbia. She wrote five unpublished novels, two in German and three in English, including *The Exiles Return* in the late 1950s. She died in 1991.

One

When the train pulled out of the great echoing hall of Zurich Central Station, gathering speed as it travelled eastwards along the shore of the lake, Professor Adler knew that he had passed the point of no return. He was committed, he was going back. As long as the train had been standing in Zurich he could, he told himself, have got out. There was the platform, just under the window of his sleeping compartment, there was even a porter, looking up expectantly at the two large suitcases and the coat and hat hanging on the brass hook opposite the long, narrow red plush seat. It would have needed only a tiny gesture, or just a smile, and the man would have been with him, hauling down his luggage, speaking to him in the guttural intonation and sing-song inflexion of Swiss-German, which he had not heard for so many years. Adler kept his eyes fixed on his suitcases, and the urge to stretch out his arm was very great. For a few concentrated seconds he was deeply conscious of his freedom of choice. Then, at the instant when the mounting tension

became almost unbearable, the train gave a jolt and began to move. He sat down again. He was alone in his compartment, a second-class one designed for two, but the train was not full, and he had had it to himself ever since he had boarded in Paris. It was only a short time ago that long-distance rail services into Central Europe had been re-established and not many people were travelling.

Adler sat by the window and looked out at the flat shore of the Zurichsee and then, as this receded, at the meadows dotted with apple trees and the neat farmhouses with gabled roofs, sliding past with increasing speed. The suitcases were still in the rack above his head. His sense of freedom to do as he wished, and the accompanying tightness in his chest, had left him. Instead he felt like an automaton, like a piece of machinery that, a long time ago, had been conditioned to behave in a definite way, to carry out certain instructions, and was now doing so, mechanically, according to plan. At the same time his mind was quite clear and able to reason about it, to maintain that he had all along been, and still was, a free agent.

He could, of course, have got out in Zurich. It would have been perfectly plausible for him to have undertaken the long journey from America in order to go there. He could have gone to call on an eminent colleague with whom he had corresponded about their different methods of studying the structure of certain molecules in a type of hormone cell. It would have been quite obvious to everyone concerned that he wished to have a live discussion with Professor Schmidt and to observe his laboratory work at first hand. If his wife happened to have told anyone that he was on his way back to Vienna, it would be clear that she had misunderstood his intentions, or wilfully distorted them. Their closest acquaintances knew that he and Melanie were barely on speaking terms and that she had been bitterly opposed to his going. So, if she had denounced him to her friends for having deserted her - crazy, irresponsible, sentimental she had called him - and for having set out to go back to that "little hole of a country that had turned them out", well, he could say that he had never meant to go there. He had come to Switzerland to see Professor Schmidt.

But now Zurich was left behind. He had not got out, so this explanation of his movements had become untenable. Or had it? The Arlberg Express in which he was sitting would not stop again until it reached Buchs, at the frontier. But Buchs was in Switzerland, on this side of the Rhine; here only a little river that formed the actual boundary between Switzerland and Austria. He could get out in Buchs if he wished and wait for the next train back to Zurich. No one would know. And even if they did - why would it matter? He had been deep in thought about the chemical structure of certain secretions and had not noticed when they got to Zurich, and all of a sudden he found himself in Buchs. That's what he would say. He was an absent-minded professor, the kind that hunted for his spectacles while they were still on his nose. Then he smiled at himself. He was really being ridiculous! Who was he arguing with, who was he trying to convince? He was not accountable for his actions to anyone, to anyone in the world. Not even to Melanie. Or least of all to Melanie. She had never understood him or made the slightest effort to do so. She had no insight into his feelings, and would not take any notice of them if she had.

Since they had been in America, Melanie had made a life of her own, setting herself up as a corseti^{er} and making a tremendous success of it. Suddenly the rather nondescript, meek-looking little woman who had been his wife had discovered in herself a stupendous ability for business. She had started making foundations to measure, to special order, and

women had flocked to her; first to the tiny living room of their little flat in a shabby Upper West Side street, now to her elegant salon in uptown Madison Avenue. He had been very grateful to her at first, she had made it possible for them to make a start in New York; for it had taken a long time before he was earning even a modest salary and had secured an appointment as assistant pathologist in a hospital sponsored by a Jewish foundation. That was a thing that had taken him completely by surprise - this virulent anti-Semitism rampant in so many walks of American life, even in academic, even in medical, circles. He had scarcely known it in Vienna. Of course, it had always been endemic there, but in such a mild form that one had almost been able to forget about it, until the threat of Hitler made it loom huge and terrifying. He had not been prepared for it in America, where, although there was no danger of physical extermination, there was an ever-present insidious consciousness of it, like a suppressed toothache which one could never quite forget. But it had no place in politics or in business, and Melanie flourished entirely uninhibited. Gradually she drew her clientele from the more fashionable and, in the end, from the most exclusive society, and treated women whose names were stars in the social register with blatant familiarity. They did not, of course, invite her to dinner, but she got her satisfaction out of them by unashamedly humiliating them in her salon, especially the not-so-young and the not-so-slim who were the majority of her customers.

"Take off all your clothes, please, Mrs Waterhouse. I can't make you a foundation unless I can see what I've got to build on. Yes, everything please, the slip and the bra - what a dreadful bra! No wonder you look as if you had a bolster on your chest. There! That's better. It's the body itself I have to study.' And the poor woman would stand up in her nakedness, shivering in spite of the temperature of the room, which was tropical even in winter, while Melanie walked round her appraisingly, making derogatory comments. "Not quite a Venus, are we, Mrs W? But there, we can't all be bathing beauties, not when we're getting on a bit. And we all do, it comes to all of us. Well, that's why you come to me, isn't it? You wouldn't need me if you were trim and slim. You're my bread-and-butter with all your little disfigurations, so it's not for me to find fault with them is it? It's my job to remedy them, that's what is expected of me. And Mr W isn't Adonis either, I don't suppose, so who is he to complain? The left hip is rather thicker than the right, isn't it? And the left breast. But we'll even that out, and smooth away the bulk just above the waist. Now, I'll take the measurements myself, here we are. We don't want any unnecessary prying eyes, do we? And I do all the fitting, my assistants only work on the garment itself. Very well. First fitting a week from today.' And then she would quote some astronomical price, and her client would remonstrate: "Really, Mrs Adler, I was told you were expensive, but I was given to understand -"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Waterhouse, but yours is a very difficult case. Of course, if you prefer to abandon the project - I never force myself on anyone, even if I have studied my subject.' Then, having submitted to the ordeal, the order is given, and three weeks later Mrs Waterhouse is beaming with delight. She feels so comfortable, her couturier congratulates her on her figure, her clothes simply glide onto her and she moves with undreamed-of ease. So the next half-dozen clients are advised to go and see "that awful woman' who makes such heavenly foundations that it's worth submitting to the worst indignities in order to possess one.

This was what Professor Adler was remembering - and not the structure of hormone cells - when the train began to slow down as it approached Buchs. One day, when she was in a

playful mood. Melanie herself had given him this description of a typical interview with one of her most stiff-necked clients. At the time she had told him about it, it had nauseated him: it was not, perhaps, the situation itself, which he might have found comical, but the relish he saw in his wife's face as she described it, which had sickened him. Melanie was making a lot of money and good luck to her - if she could command such high prices for the excellence of her products. But in her gloating over the humiliation of her customers she was humiliating him too. A nerve of moral fastidiousness in him revolted against this behaviour, against her very person. He had become aware that the increasing luxury of their surroundings, their furniture, their food, his wife's and his daughters' clothes, was being paid for with money thus come by. Certainly, his own contribution to their way of life must have become proportionately ever smaller.

For a long time he had hardly noticed anything, wrapped up as he was in his work, unchanging in his personal habits. It was when Melanie had suggested buying an apartment in one of the new luxurious blocks of flats under construction - when he, taken by surprise, had in all innocence protested that they surely couldn't afford it - that his eyes had been decisively, brutally, opened. His mind flinched from the scene. Melanie had rounded on him with real venom. Of course they could afford it, no thanks to him. She didn't believe he hadn't known how much she was earning. Did he think they had been living these last years on his derisory salary? Had he ever made the slightest effort to get it increased? Perhaps he had, and been ashamed to admit that he had been refused? She must assume that he wasn't worth more. In this country, she had said, a failure is a failure and a success is a success and there's a good reason for both. You've only yourself to thank or to blame. He could thank his lucky stars that he was her husband and the father of her daughters, or he might still be poring over his notebooks in that evil-smelling tenement where they had started off.

That was not true. When he had got his appointment at the hospital, they had moved into a perfectly respectable apartment, small but adequate. In an unfashionable district of course. He didn't care about that, and hadn't thought that she did. Then she had begun to expand her business and her contribution to their income had been very welcome, especially as it helped to educate the little girls. But now? The girls were grown up and sided entirely with their mother. They were smart, business-like, in love with money, and intent on having a good time. They had jobs, they had boyfriends. One worked in a department store, the other for a travel agent. They no longer spoke any German, although he was sure they understood it - they could not fail to do so, since he and Melanie still used it at home. He himself, he suspected, had never got rid of his Viennese accent when speaking English, but Melanie had deliberately cultivated an American voice and intonation. By sheer exaggeration she had succeeded in obliterating all vocal trace of her origin, except to the most discerning ear. To this day, he hardly recognised her speaking voice if he heard her on the telephone or in the next room.

And yet, when he had told her that he was going back to Austria, she had denounced him as if she were being threatened with the loss of her sole support and protection. There had been scene after scene. Why was he deserting her? Had she not been a good wife to him - faithful, loyal and hard-working? What did he reproach her with that he wanted to leave her, to break up their marriage after more than twenty years?

At first he had argued that he had no desire to desert her, all he wanted was to go home. Would she not come with him? Or promise to follow him as soon as he had reestablished

himself? This suggestion had infuriated her even more. That did not surprise him. Remembering it all as he sat looking out of the window at the meadows and the apple trees and the cows, the neat villages and scattered farmsteads, he admitted that the proposal had been disingenuous. She would never give up the life she had embraced with so much zest, her financial success and her independence. He had not really wanted her to come. She would be miserable if she had to live in Vienna again. He was not sure if he wasn't going to be miserable himself. He couldn't know what it was going to be like, how he was going to fit in. Melanie was sure that he was going to be totally disillusioned. Perhaps she was right. Yet the urge to go had been irresistible, and he had then suggested that she divorce him, and had made this proposal in good faith. But it had made her even more angry, if that were possible, than his offer to take her with him. She had a horror of divorce, the very idea incensed her. It appeared that under all the veneer of her emancipation, in spite of all the examples she saw around her, the old atavistic principles of her faith and tradition remained deeply ingrained. She was his wife. She was not going to be cast off - as she felt she would be - even if it was she herself who did the casting. And then she had indulged herself in ludicrous accusations. Go then, go if you must, she had shouted at him, and find yourself some silly smirking hussy, younger than I am, prettier than me, the woman who has slaved for years to keep the home together and to bring up your children - some soft, sensuous creature to rekindle your waning appetite - but I'll make sure you never marry her, not while I'm alive you won't, the slut!

Well, that was that. It had all been very undignified, sordid, and perfectly ridiculous. The thought of renewing his love life had never entered his mind.

The train was slowing down. Professor Adler shook himself out of his obsessive reminiscing and saw once more what was actually before his eyes. Buchs. He went into the corridor and pulled down the window to look out. In the old days the train used to stand here endlessly for customs formalities. He remembered a holiday he had spent with his parents in Lucerne as a small boy. What a long journey it had been, and how bored and impatient he had felt standing in this dull little station, with nothing to look at except the boxes of red geraniums in the stationmaster's windows. He leaned out and craned his neck to see whether there were any there now, but his carriage was standing rather far down the line and dusk was falling. He couldn't make out anything. It did not occur to him that only a short while ago he had been hesitating whether or not to leave the train here before it crossed the frontier. Then, suddenly, before he had had time to remember this, the train moved on. It had stopped for barely five minutes.

In a few moments they had crossed the little river and were approaching the mountains. And just as suddenly and unaccountably a wave of some ...

Other Books

More than a Massacre, More than a Massacre is a history of race, citizenship, statelessness, and genocide from the perspective of ethnic Haitians in Dominican border provinces.

Sabine F. Cadeau traces a successively worsening campaign of explicitly racialized anti-Haitian repression that began in 1919 under the American Occupiers, accelerated in 1930 with the rise of Trujillo, and culminated in 1937 with the slaughter of an estimated twenty thousand civilians. Relatively unknown by contrast with contemporary events in Europe, the Haitian-Dominican experience has yet to feature in the broader literature on genocide and statelessness in the twentieth century. Bringing to light the massacre from the perspective of the ethnic Haitian victims themselves, Cadeau combines official documents with oral

sources to demonstrate how ethnic Haitians interpreted their changing legal status at the border, as well as their interpretation of the massacre and its aftermath, including the ongoing killing and land conflict along the post-massacre border.

❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ ❓ . Fiction Alexis, Jacques S. *Compère général soleil*. Paris: Gallimard, 1982. Dalember, Louis-Philippe. *L'autre face de la mer: Roman*. Paris: Stock, 1998. Danticat, Edwidge. *The Farming of Bones: A Novel*. ... *The Exiles Return: A Novel* ."