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It was a hot Tuesday in January. Rose, on summer holidays from the lab, was walking home from the florists with a bunch of flowers for Harold's mother.

She was taking the longer way back in order to compose for her own mother a convincing reply to the question of whom these fine flowers were for? A problem she deferred by picturing the meeting with Harold's parents as something she could later portray to her mother as a kind of exemplary tableau vivant. An oblique retort – *You see, you see …How they welcomed me* ... Such victories flourished in the hothouse of the imagination. She knew that. And yet … and yet.

She could always say the flowers were for Sally, a sick colleague. Still, it was a lie. And no matter how easily it rolled off the tongue, she couldn't persuade herself it was anything other than that. Which was quibbling, of course. She was perpetrating a far greater deception on her mother. But what choice did she have? Harold Carlyle was a Gentile. Her parents would never accept him.

Rose didn't blame them. As orthodox Jews, they couldn't be otherwise. Still, she chafed at being bound by conventions to which she no longer subscribed. And though she'd succeeded in feigning the dutiful daughter, the constant dishonesty was an iron band round her heart, squeezing harder with each devious act.

Yet for now, the concocted story about Sally would have to stand. She had other things on her mind. Well, just one thing really. This visit. Harold insisted his parents

were looking forward to meeting her. As well they might after all this time. But were they really? People didn't always say what they thought. As she very well knew.

She shook herself then. This was an afternoon tea to which she was invited. A trip from Carlton to St. Kilda, two tram rides across town. She'd endured more crucial expeditions.

Ten short years ago, she and her family left their home in Poland. They sailed from Marseilles aboard *Le Comissaire Ramel,* fortified by six feather beds, one crystal chandelier, and not one word of English between them. It was the January of 1929, a month before her thirteenth birthday.

The four weeks crossing allowed ample opportunity for stewing on their prospects. Still, they reassured each other constantly, quoting letters from friends who'd left before. And for more objective information, there was always her sister Sonya's French Dictionary – a useful distraction against the ever-encroaching images of home – the yellow wildflowers round the railway line, the cobblestoned courtyard of their Warsaw apartment, the blackberries in the woods in summer – the entire old world that the sea was leaving in its wake.

The entry on Australia was as clear in her mind as if the pages were open before her. She could see it now: *L'Australie. Le plus petit des continents et la plus grande des îles*. She'd sat beside Sonya in their cramped cabin, and traced the map's pink nibbled coastline with her finger, wondering at the small triangle of land that had fallen away. *La Tasmanie*, Sonya explained, an island, also part of Australia, but cut off from the mainland by water.

Rosė read the names of the surrounding oceans and seas - '*L'océan Indien, L'océan Austral, l'océan Pacifique, Mer D' Arafoura, Mer de Timor,*' reciting the

names over and over till she knew them by heart. Moving overland, her finger hovered over *Terre d'Arnhem*, Borraloola, Hermannsburg, Oodnadatta, and Noman's Land. Although she stumbled over these names, she was aware of the differences in their sound. Hermannsburg might just as well have been located over Poland's western border; its name was as familiar as Oodnadatta and Borraloola were exotic and strange. The implications of Noman's land chilled her, though the history of this new land was so benign as to be almost unbelievable: settled by convicts (*déportés, forçats*) - a history seemingly unbloodied like a child's bedtime tale.

Yet, her own vision of Australia was just as fanciful: a paradise of white sands glinting like mounds of sugar, where smiling brown-skinned natives, (*les indigènes, Canaques,* the dictionary called them), waited to welcome them with platters of tropical fruits. So real was this picture that the actual salutation she received on disembarkation on the Melbourne wharf - a skinny boy her age aimed his finger at her and blew away the smoke - appeared dreamlike, like a still from the moving pictures, a half-grown Lone Ranger perhaps, amusing more than discouraging.

She was walking faster now. Ahead of her, the asphalt footpath shimmered and rippled like a wavy grey sea. When she rounded the corner into Pigdon Street, she almost collided with a man fixing the footpath. He halted the up and down stutter of his pneumatic drill to look at her, and then spoke, rolling all his words together into one smile-shaped greeting.

'Hotenoughforyaluv?'

She was taken aback, but grateful. Pleased with herself too - a few years ago, she might have crossed the street to avoid such a man. She smiled a broad lip-stretching smile. 'Yes, very hot,' she said, 'too hot.'

Which was all the reply she could think of, though some abject part of her wanted to express her gratitude for his greeting her as if she was just like anyone else. Anyone else, born here, that is, who'd never wonder whether or not they belonged.

She was angry with herself then. Certainly, she belonged. In this country, you could participate in easy conversations with strangers without preamble or introduction. Living here was like being a member of a club whose conditions for membership were utterly flexible. Social equality, Harold called it, but in a teasing voice. Still, she wanted to believe it was true. Her parents did. They called Australia Paradise despite not having sufficient English, or sufficient confidence, to speak to any of Paradise's natives.

Before she could block it, that photograph of Sonya with her friends at Warsaw University slid into her mind. There they were, assembled on the left side of the lecture hall, the assigned spot for the Jewish students - the club of the unwanted. Which, was the way things were there. They all accepted that. But perhaps, after a while, they didn't. Was this why the family left Poland? It was never mentioned in her hearing. And at her age then, she never thought to ask.

This image of Sonya's exclusion darkened her mood. Why didn't Sonya ever say she was humiliated? But Rose knew why.

Humiliation was a solid choking lump in your throat, which even if swallowed down, comes right back up again. Humiliation was herself at thirteen at Brunswick Street State School. Marooned with not enough English words to save her. The little girl sitting beside her explained this to the teacher, 'Miss, she don't understand.' While a boy sitting across from her made circles around his ear with his finger.

Her meagre English could not shield her from the mouth-drying, face-reddening shame of it. And though she could simply hate the boy, her gratitude to her

kind desk-mate wavered - she couldn't help noticing the tinge of scorn in her pity. Even now, she swung between gratitude and resentment at the memory, as if she were forever fastening then removing an ugly brooch gifted by an ambivalent friend.

These days, she was no longer afflicted by wordlessness. She'd worked hard not to be. But now, in the presence of this friendly man, she couldn't think of anything else to say. Nor could she walk on, in case he saw it as an ill-mannered, premature ending of a conversation. She found herself holding her breath as if awaiting some calamity.

But then a reprieve - above both their heads the telephone wires with their pale ceramic bells resonated in their muted bell voices. Which brought her back to that same classroom on a day when the teacher struck the desk with a magical metal fork causing a perfect note to quiver in the air. If the sound had physical form it would be a silver bead of mercury rolling whole and intact along a glass slide – an image of light and motion - which enabled her to step forward with a smile and a wave to the man, who stood there gravely at attention beside his silent drill.

When she arrived home, her mother wasn't there. Another reprieve. She studied the bouquet in her hand – roses and November lilies. The roses were the precise pink of a baby's heel.

Two hours later, she was standing beside Harold outside a semi-detached weatherboard. The doormat spelt out 'Welcome' in black bristles. She could feel their spikiness beneath the thin soles of her sandals. Harold twisted the doorbell. Its strident trill made her jump.

Both parents came to the door. Harold's hand was at Rose's back pushing her forward, a reluctant child at the school-gate. He made the introductions, and straightaway his mother kissed her. His father shook her hand for a long time. Both

parents were smiling as if meeting her was the best thing that had happened to them for a long time.

Mrs Carlyle shepherded Rose and Harold down the narrow hall and into a small sitting room. 'You just sit yourselves down, while I get a vase for these beauties.' She left the room with the flowers resting like some precious infant across both outstretched arms. Harold's father smiled a diffident smile, and set himself to wait as if no word could be uttered in the absence of his wife. Harold, to Rose's bewilderment, was also quiet, lounging back against his chair patting both knees rhythmically with his palms.

Rose sat upright on the sofa. The silence weighted her shoulders like stone. She recalled that cheerful drilling man with a kind of desperation, holding his image to her as a talisman of ease and acceptance. She stared down at her feet. Both little toes curled behind the neighbouring toe like some shell-less mollusc - hardly an observation around which she could initiate a conversation. Why didn't someone speak? Why didn't Harold?

When she first met him, he hardly stopped talking to draw breath. It was at a party in aid of Spanish Relief. He asked her to dance but he wasn't a good dancer, spinning her round so fast she almost lost her footing. At one point, she almost tumbled but with a sort of control that allowed him to scoop her up at the last moment (which felt at the time as if he'd excavated her heart) and propel her still faster round the floor while the walls sped past her in the other direction.

At suppertime, champagne was served for a toast. What were they drinking to? The International Brigade? The defeat of Franco? She raised her glass as the others did, though she was too nervous for genuine fervour. She'd never drunk champagne

before, and it was a disappointment. She'd expected something magical and sophisticated, but the sour bubbles in her glass reminded her of some acidic solution foaming and hissing in a beaker.

Without realizing it, she relaxed into the silence. Beyond the white-netted windows, a bird settled on the windowsill. Its tail feather rose and fell at regular intervals like boom gates at a railway crossing. She was jolted into attentiveness when Mrs Carlyle returned with a vase containing the flowers. She placed the vase on the mantelpiece beside a trio of speckled cowrie shells. Rose looked away. The shells made her think of small freckled heads.

Mrs Carlyle turned to Harold. 'You remember, our neighbour Mr Doyle, Harold?' she said. 'He died. In the hospital. So awful for the family - ' She stopped, flustered, as if it had just occurred to her that this was an unsuitable subject for a first meeting with Rose.

Rose wanted to say that they could talk about anything in her presence even though she was a stranger. Yet as a stranger, she could hardly state this so bluntly. Still, she had to speak.

'This neighbour was treated well in the hospital?

Mrs Carlyle nodded, relieved. 'Yes, very well. But he - '

'Jack the dancer of the duck and fowl,' Mr Carlyle clarified.

Rose nodded. No doubt, they assumed she understood. And she wasn't about to declare ignorance. Besides, she understood many such odd sayings now - idioms, Harold called them. This dancer, duck, and fowl combination was a mystery, though others were obvious, even for the non–native speaker. Pulling the wool over

someone's eyes came immediately to mind. She saw the wool as pink, in prickly thick strands, pulled over a duped victim's eyes to block vision and deceive.

'Of course, you know about illness, working in a hospital, 'Mrs Carlyle's words brought her back. 'A biochemist, Harold tells me.'

'Yes. I work in the haematology department. In the laboratory.'

'That would be very interesting. You must like your job?'

'Yes, I like it very much.'

Rose wanted to tell them about her work but not in that mechanical back and forth way. She'd mentally rehearsed a similar conversation when Harold suggested this day. She'd had plenty to say then, if only to herself. Taking blood samples from newborn babies, and then examining the samples under the microscope for the presence of genetic disorders *was* interesting work – and not difficult to explain.

She was about to say this, but then an image of the rumpled faces and perplexed expressions of those babies flew into her mind. Steeling herself to their startled response when she slid the needle into their heels was still impossible for her. Their cries sounded reproachful - as if they had just learned something they had specifically asked not to be told about. And when the results were bad, someone had to break the news to the parents. Not her, thank God. And none of this - the sick babies, the awful knowledge of their prognosis – would allow itself to be ordered into composed truthful sentences.

Mrs Carlyle seemed to understand Rose's reluctance. She stood up.

'But, we must have some tea. I'm sure you're all thirsty. I'll put the kettle on. And Rose, while it's boiling, come into the back garden. I want to show you something.'

Rose stood up, and followed Mrs Carlyle down the hall, and into the kitchen. She waited while Mrs Carlyle filled a kettle, put in on the hob to boil, and then opened a

screen door leading into the garden. A pungent whiff of fertilizer drifted from a vegetable patch. Mrs Carlyle led her along the side fence to a large cage containing a dozen or so small green and yellow birds.

Mrs Carlyle stepped back and extended her arm towards the cage. 'It was given to us.' She spoke as if replying to a question. 'I mean the aviary came with the house. Pretty little birds, aren't they? The previous owners were moving to a smaller place with no garden, so we agreed to keep the aviary.'

Rose stepped closer to the cage. The birds were beautiful. So beautiful it almost hurt her to look at them. They made her think of small people with their black and white speckled necks like scarves. As if in response to her gaze, they put on a performance, swerving from side to side, and then darting to the top of their cage.

'What sort are they?' Rose asked. She didn't care about their breed. That wasn't what she wanted to ask.

'They're budgerigars, a type of parrot.'

'Do they like being in a cage?' The words were out before she could amend them. She felt herself blushing.

'They're protected in here.' Mrs Carlyle said, surprised. 'They've got everything they need. Not like those ones that have to fly from one side of the world to the other. If we let them out, they probably wouldn't survive. The cage is all they know. The cage is their home.'

A blue budgerigar flew to the front of the cage. It put its head on one side and closed its curved beak around the wire, getting so close its head appeared to be crushed. It seemed to be reaching out to the sounds and scents and colour of the garden outside. Then it edged sideways, crablike. Its claws were pink and blue, and its tongue was the colour of stone.

Rose stepped back. 'Are they the ones that talk?'

Mrs Carlyle laughed. 'Well these ones don't. Apparently they can if you take the trouble to teach them. Unnatural, really. Perhaps, you were thinking of cockatoos? You know, the big white ones with yellow crests. They repeat what the people around them say, or what they're trained to say. And what's the point of that?'

Rose nodded. There was no point. Only people had the power of speech. Which was something to take pride in, not expend, through cowardice, in lies.

A stray phrase pressed in on her. *Free as a bird.* Another obvious idiom. Not the case for these birds, except when they broke out of their shells. But the words were true for her. She felt their weight in her mouth, the true words that her mother must hear. The budgerigar gave one final chirrup, a high note that pinged and reverberated. She looked at the latch on their cage and marvelled at its slightness.

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