

SPRING 1946. TO ENGLAND.

The boy was everything to her. Small and unruly, he had a nervy way about him like a wild creature caught in the open. All the dark hearts of the lost, the found, and the never forgotten lived in his child's body, in his quick eyes. She loved him with the same unforgiving force that pushes forests from the deep ground, but still she feared it was not enough to keep him. So she was taking him to England, determined that Janusz would love him and keep him safe.

On the ship's sailing list she was named as Silvana Nowak. Twenty-seven years old. Married. Mother of a son, Aurek Josef, aged seven years.

"What is your profession?" the British soldier asked her, checking the identity papers she put before him.

She looked at the documents on his desk and saw pages of women's names. All were listed as housewives or housekeepers.

Behind her, hundreds more women, dressed as she was in donated clothes, stood silently with their children. Above the soldier's head, a sign in several languages including Polish, detailed the ship's rules. *All blankets and sheets remain the property of the ship. All stolen items will be confiscated.*

Silvana tightened her grasp on her son. The soldier glanced at her quickly and then looked back to his papers. She knew why. It embarrassed him to see a woman so unkempt and a child with such restless ways. She touched her headscarf, checking it was in place, and pressed her other hand into Aurek's back, trying to make him stand up straight.

“Profession?”

“Survivor,” she whispered, the first word that came to her.

The soldier didn’t look up. He lifted his pen. “Housekeeper or housewife?”

“I don’t know,” she said, and then, aware of the queue shifting impatiently behind her, “Housewife.”

So that was it. She was recorded, written neatly into a book in indelible black ink. She was given a transport number, a label pinned on her lapel that corresponded with the details on the ship’s passenger list. Proof that she and the boy were mother and son. That was a good start. Nobody, after all, could disagree with or dispute an official document. Only the title *housewife* looked questionable. Together or separate, Silvana was sure nobody would believe the words *house* or *wife* had anything to do with her.

All night, while the sea carried the ship and its passengers toward another land, Silvana worked at remembering. She found herself a space in one of the crowded corridors belowdecks and sat, arms crossed, legs tucked under her. Curled into herself in this way, with Aurek hidden under her coat, she breathed through the odor of sweat and diesel, the throb of the engines marking time, while she tried to recall her life with Janusz. Always, though, the same memories came to her. The ones she didn’t want to own. A road she didn’t want to travel. A filthy sky full of rain and planes coming out of the clouds. She shook her head, tried to think of other things, to cut off the image that would surely come. And then there it was. The wet mud shining underfoot. Trees twisting in the wind and the child swaddled in a jumble of blankets, lying in a wooden handcart.

Silvana pulled Aurek tighter to her, rocking him back and forth, the memories departing. He snaked a bony hand out from under her coat and she felt his small fingers searching her face. And how was it that love and loss were so close together? Because no matter how she loved the boy—and she did, furiously, as if her own life depended on him—loss was always there, following at her heels.

By the time the dawn sky leaked light into the darkness, Silvana was too tired to think anymore and finally closed her eyes, letting the heartbeat drone of the engines settle her to a thankfully dreamless slumber.

Morning brought with it a pale sun and salt-laden winds. Silvana pushed her way through the crowds to the upper decks, Aurek hanging on her coattail. Gripping the handrail, she let him settle in a crouch between her feet, the weight of him against her legs. Green waves lay far below and she stared down at them, trying to imagine what England would be like, a place she knew nothing of except that this was where her husband, Janusz, now lived.

She had been lost and he had found her. He must have thought he was reaching back into the past; that she would be as she was when he left her, his young wife, red hair pinned up in curls, a smile on her face, and their darling son in her arms. He couldn't know that the past was dead and she was the ghost of the wife he once had.

The heaving of the ship made her dizzy and she leaned against the handrail. She had left her country far behind and now there was no shoreline, no land to mourn, only water as far as the horizon, and shards of dazzling light splintering the waves. She hadn't seen Janusz since the day he left Warsaw six long years ago. Would she even recognize him now? She could recall the day they met, the date they married, his shoe size; that he was right-handed. But where did this awkward grabbing of dates and facts get her?

She squinted at the sea, the waves churning, over and over. She had loved him once. That much she was sure of. But so much lost time stretched between them. Six years might as well be a hundred. Could she really lay claim to a man simply because she remembered his collar size?

Aurek pulled at her hand and Silvana dropped to her knees, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve, trying to smile. The boy was the reason she was making this journey. A boy must have a father. Soon the past would be behind them and England would become their

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present. There she was sure they would be able to live each day with no yesterdays and no memories to threaten or histories to follow them. She ran her fingers through Aurek's cropped hair, and he wrapped his arms around her neck. She was on her way to a new life, and her one piece of Poland was still with her.

22 BRITANNIA ROAD, IPSWICH

Janusz thinks the house looks lucky. He steps back to get a better look at Number 22 Britannia Road, and admires the narrow redbrick property with its three windows and blue door. The door has a pane of colored glass set in it: a yellow sunrise sitting in a green border with a bluebird in its center. It's so typically English it makes him smile. It's just what he has been searching for.

It is the last house in a terrace, and although it stands next to a bomb site, somehow it has escaped any real damage itself. The only sign is a crack in the colored glass pane, a line running through the bluebird that makes it look as if it might have problems if it tried to fly. Apart from that, it is possible to believe the war has never touched this building. It's a fanciful idea, he knows, but one he likes. Maybe the house will share some of its luck with him and his wife and son.

"Don't you worry about that eyesore," says the estate agent beside him, waving his hand at the wasteland where dirty-faced children are playing. "That'll be cleared in no time. We'll have this town back on her feet quick enough." He straightens the cuffs of his tweed jacket and hands Janusz a bunch of keys. "There you are. All yours. I hope you like living here. Can I ask you where you're from?"

Janusz has been waiting for this question. The first thing people want to know is where you come from.

"Poland," he says. "I'm Polish."

The estate agent pulls out a cigarette case from the inside pocket of his jacket. "You speak damned good English. In the army, were you?"

And that is the second thing they ask: *What are you doing here?* But

Janusz is at ease in this country. He knows the manners and ways of things. Keep everything simple and to the point. Let them know you are on their side, and they're happy.

The first time someone had asked him where he came from, back when he had been anxious about his foreignness, seeing it like a birthmark, a facial port-wine stain visible to all, he had mistakenly tried to answer them. He'd not been in England very long—a year, if that—and the loud, bloody enthusiasm for war he found among his new comrades had lit a kind of fire in his heart. A rich blazing ran through his veins and flared in him an outgoing recklessness he'd never experienced before. He was in a smoky hall with a noisy crowd of RAF men, drinking beer the color of engine oil, and launched into his own story, the whole journey from Poland at the very start of the war, to France, and then England.

Too late, he realized he'd made it too complicated and in any case nobody was listening. Nobody wanted to know about the women he'd left behind. He carried on, stumbling over vocabulary, finishing up lost in his own regrets, mumbling into his beer in Polish, talking of painful things like love and honor. When he left the hall and stood in the sobering night air, looking up at a sky littered with stars, he regretted every foolish word he had uttered.

He squares his shoulders and closes his mind to those memories. "I served with the Royal Air Force," he says, his voice clear and steady. "The Polish Corps. I came over in 1940. I've been here ever since."

"Ah. Right you are." The man smiles and offers him a cigarette. "I was in the army, myself. I met quite a few of your lads. Great drinkers, the Poles."

He lights his cigarette, flicks the match onto the ground, and hands the box to Janusz.

"Stationed around here, were you?"

"No," says Janusz, taking the matchbox, giving a brief nod of thanks. "We moved about a lot. I was demobbed in Devon and offered work here or up in the North."

“Well, you’ll find this is a decent enough area. Ipswich is a nice little market town. And you got this house just in time. I’ve a list as long as my arm of people wanting this property. If you hadn’t been there, banging on my door before I’d even opened up, it would’ve been some other fellow who’d have got it. It’s a nice family house. Have you, er . . . any . . .?”

“Family? I have a wife and a son. They are coming to Britain next month.”

“Reunited, heh? That’s good to hear.”

Janusz takes a drag on his cigarette, blows a smoke ring and watches it drift out of shape.

“I hope so. It’s been six years since I last saw them.”

The estate agent cocks his head on one side, a concerned look on his face.

“That’s tough. Mind you, look at it this way, you’ve got this house, a job, and your family’s coming over here. Add it up and you’ve got yourself a happy ending.”

Janusz laughs. That’s exactly what he is hoping for.

“That’s right,” he says. “A happy ending.”

When the Red Cross officer told him Silvana and Aurek had been found in a British refugee camp, he had not been able to smile. “They are in a bad state,” the officer said. The man’s voice had dropped almost to a whisper. “They’d been living in a forest. I gather they’d been there for a long time. Good luck. I hope it works out for you all.”

Janusz jangles his new house keys on his finger, watching the tweed-jacketed back of the estate agent as he walks briskly down the hill. So this is it. Peacetime. And he’s got a house. A home for Silvana and Aurek when they arrive. His father would have been proud of him, bringing his family back together. Doing the right thing. Looking to the future. He can’t return to Poland. Not now that his country has communist rule imposed upon it. He must face facts. Dreams of a free and independent Poland are just that—dreams. His home is here. Churchill himself said Polish troops should have the citizenship and freedom of the British Empire, and that’s what he’s accepted. Britain is his home now.

If he ever speaks to his parents or his sisters again, if one day they answer his letters and find him here, he hopes they will understand that this is where he has chosen to be.

He pockets his keys and wonders what life here will bring him. When he was offered two jobs, one in a factory making bicycles in Nottingham and one in an engineering works in a town in East Anglia, he sat in a library with a map of Britain and put his thumb on Ipswich. It was a small town with a harbor squatting on a straggling line of blue estuary leading to the sea. With his little finger he could reach across the blue and touch France. That's what decided it for him. He would live in Ipswich because he could be nearer to H el ene. It was a stupid reason, especially when he was trying so hard to forget, but it eased the pain a little.

He yawns and sighs deeply. It feels good here. The air is clean enough and it's a quiet place. Terraced brick houses stretch away down the hill. In the distance, a church spire reaches for the sky, the top of it boxed in by scaffolding. Whether the scaffolding is there to carry out long-awaited repair work or due to recent war damage, he doesn't know. And he doesn't care. He has stopped believing in God. Now he hopes for specific things. A job to go to. A family to care for and perhaps, one day, a small degree of happiness.

Beyond the church, rows of housing are hemmed by the river and the tall chimneys of the factories. Beyond them are fields and woodland. Above him, the sky is chewing gum gray but some blue is breaking through. H el ene would have said there was just enough blue to make a pair of trousers for a gendarme.

He lights another cigarette and allows himself to think of France. It's a weakness that he savors briefly, sweet and good as an extra spoon of sugar in bitter barracks tea. He thinks of the farmhouse with its red-tiled roof and blue wooden shutters. H el ene standing at the kitchen door. Her tanned skin and her warm southern accent, the life in her beautiful eyes.

He finishes his cigarette and wanders through the house again,

planning, making a list of things that need mending or replacing. Flinging open the back door, he strides out into the garden. It is a long, rectangular piece of land. The grass hasn't seen a mower in years and there are nettles and brambles everywhere. At the end of the garden is an old oak tree. It looks just right for a tree house for his son. And when the lawn is cut and the weeds are dug up, he'll have flower beds and a vegetable plot, too. A real English garden for his family.

With his list of things to do in his hand, Janusz stands at the front door and watches the children playing on the wasteland beside the house. Hard to imagine his son Aurek will be one of them soon. Janusz is going to be a good father to the boy. He's determined to get things right. In the grainy sunlight, the children laugh and leap, shrieking through the afternoon, their shouts mingling with the sharp-edged call of gulls from the quay. When Janusz hears the cries of women calling them home for tea, he locks up and walks back to spend his last night in lodgings.

At the town hall, he fills in forms and waits in queues for government vouchers for furniture and paint. The furniture comes from a warehouse near the bus station and is all the same: solid, square shapes in thin, dark-stained wood. He buys wallpaper from Woolworths: "Summer Days"—cream colored with sprays of tiny red roses in diagonal lines. He gets enough for the front parlor and the main bedroom. He buys wallpaper for Aurek's room, too, asking the advice of a shop assistant, who says she has a son the same age.

He papers the hall and the kitchen in a pale beige, patterned with curling bamboo leaves and twiggy canes in soft green. Upstairs, rose-pink paint for the bathroom and landing. Aurek's room has gray formations of airplanes flying across its walls. It's a good-sized room. He'll be able to share it with a brother one day if everything works out the way he wants it to.

Every evening Janusz comes back from work and starts on the house, finishing only when he is too exhausted to carry on. When he

lies down to sleep he has the impression his arms are outstretched in front of him, still painting and wallpapering.

Alone on his bed at night, he dreams. He enters his parents' home, running up the porch steps. The heavy front door swings open and he calls for his mother but he knows he has arrived too late and everybody has gone. In one of the empty, high-ceilinged rooms is a dark-haired woman in a yellow dress. She stands up, takes off her dress and beckons to him, then maddeningly, quick as a fish in midstream, the dream changes direction and she is gone. He wakes with a start, eyes open, heart thumping. He moves his hand toward the ache in his groin and twists his face into the pillow. This loneliness will kill him, he's sure of it.

Victoria station is huge, and even at seven in the morning the place is noisy and full of lost people who grab Janusz by the elbow and ask him questions he can't answer. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and checks his watch. He has been practicing what to say to her when he sees her. "It's been a long time" is what he thinks he will say. It sounds casual and yet full of meaning.

He finds himself searching his mind for Polish phrases, but he's been immersed in the English language for so long now, he has lost the habit. It's like trying to recall the names of half-forgotten school friends, requiring too much effort and an unwilling excavation of the past. Truth is, there's too much nostalgia in his mother tongue. If Silvana can speak English it will be easier. They will be making a new life here and she will have to learn the language. "Welcome to Britain" is another phrase he thinks he might use.

The platforms overflow with crowds. Suitcases are piled high on trolleys, and rag-and-bone bales of clothes and belongings are everywhere. People blur past in grays and browns and dark blues. He scans the crowd, trying not to think of H el ene, how he had once imagined it would be her he would meet like this after the war. Then he sees a woman looking his way. He stares at her and feels a jolt of recognition. Everything comes back to him. It is Silvana. His wife. His hand goes up

to take off his hat, an awful, narrow-brimmed trilby. It came with his demob suit and he swears it's made of cardboard. He smoothes his hair, spreads finger and thumb across his mustache, coughs, clasps the hat in his hands, and walks toward her. She is wearing a red headscarf and now he has seen her, she stands out in the colorless crowds like a single poppy in a swaying cornfield.

Janusz focuses on the headscarf until he is near enough to see the embroidered birds with flowing wings sweeping over her forehead and tucking themselves under her chin. She looks thinner, older, her cheekbones more prominent than he remembers. As she recognizes him she gives a small cry.

A skinny, dark-haired child leaps into her arms. Is that Aurek? Is that him? The last time he saw him he was just a baby, a plump toddler with baby curls. Not even old enough for his first haircut. He tries to see the boy's face, to find some familiarity in his features, but the child clambers up Silvana like a monkey, pulling her headscarf off, his arms locking around her neck, burying his head in her chest.

Janusz stops still in front of them and for a moment his courage fails him. What if he has made a foolish mistake and these two are somebody else's family? If all he has really recognized is the forlorn look the woman carries in her eyes and his own lonely desires?

"Silvana?"

She is fighting the child, trying to pull her headscarf back on. "Janusz? I saw you in the crowd. I saw you looking for us . . ."

"Your hair?" he says, all thought of rehearsed lines gone from his mind.

Silvana touches her head and the scarf falls around her shoulders. She looks away from him.

"I'm sorry." He doesn't know whether it is the sight of her that fills him with apologies or the idea that he has already made her uncomfortable in his presence. "Really. I didn't mean . . . How are you?"

Silvana pulls her scarf back onto her head and knots it under her chin. "The soldiers cut it."

It's hard to hear her clearly with the racket and grind of trains arriving and departing and guards calling across the platforms. He takes a tentative step closer.

"We were living in the woods," she says. "Did they tell you? The soldiers found us and told us the war was over. They cut our hair off when they found us. They do it to stop the lice. It's growing back slowly."

"Oh. It doesn't matter. I . . . I understand," says Janusz, although he doesn't. The child clutches something wooden in his hand. It looks vaguely familiar. Janusz frowns.

"Is that the rattle your father made?"

Silvana opens her mouth to speak and then closes it again. He notices her cheeks color slightly in a blush that disappears as quickly as it comes. But of course it is the rattle. She doesn't need to say a word. The dark wood, the handmade look to it: it has to be. He smiles with relief, suddenly reassured. Of course this is his family.

"You kept it all this time? Can I see it?"

He reaches out, but the boy pulls it to his chest and makes a grumbling sound.

"He's tired," says Silvana. "The journey has tired him."

It's a shock to see a child so thin. His son's face has a transparency to it, and the way his skin is tight, revealing the cradling structure of bones beneath—it makes Janusz's heart ache like a soft bruise.

"Aurek? Small, isn't he? Hello, little fellow. Don't be frightened. I am your . . . I am your father."

"Your mustache," says Silvana, pulling the boy onto her other hip. "It's different. It makes you look different."

"My mustache? I've had it for years. I'd forgotten."

"Six years," she says.

He nods his head. "And my family? Do you have news of them? Eve? Do you know where she is?"

Silvana's eyes darken. Her pupils widen and shine, and he's sure she

is going to tell him Eve is dead. That they have all died. He holds his breath.

“I don’t know,” she says. “I’m sorry. I don’t know where any of them are.”

“You don’t know?”

“I never saw them again after you left us.”

He’s been waiting for news of his family for years. He’d thought Silvana might arrive with letters from them, stories about them. Some information on their whereabouts. They stand in silence until Janusz speaks again.

“Well, you’re here now.”

Silvana answers in a whisper and he has to lean in toward her to hear what she is saying.

“I can hardly believe it. I can hardly believe we’re here.”

Janusz laughs to stop himself from crying. He presses her hand into his, curling his fingers over hers. He feels tired suddenly. It is as much as he can do to look her in the eye.

“I expect we’ve both changed . . . but it doesn’t matter,” he says, trying to sound relaxed. “We’re still the same people inside. Time doesn’t change that.”

Even as he says it, he knows he is lying. She does, too. He can see it in her eyes. The war has changed all of them. And Silvana’s hair is not just short. It has turned gray.