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Somewhere Behind the Morning

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Extract

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SPRING AND SUMMER 1914

One

On Pollard Street, our little look-out gave the warning whistle that usually meant 'Coppers chasing Sunday street-traders! Scarper!'

Today it meant something else, but I didn't know that.

Fast as I could, I gathered the pies into the centre of the beef sheeting, knotted the corners and rushed the lot to Mrs O'Malley. She took the bundle from me and shut the door, as Dad tipped the handcart to run it into the alley out of sight.

'Get the Yid!' came the yell.

They came out of nowhere, three lads, the skinniest waving a cricket bat. Two of them would have blown away in a strong wind but together they caught Dad off-guard as he came out of the alley. Later, he said they'd tripped him, but all I saw was Dad fall and boots flying at his ribs, belly and head.

I tugged at a collar and a lump of shirt, pulling at the biggest bruiser, a ginger-haired lad covered in freckles. I couldn't drag him off. The white-haired one, rat-eyed, caught my wrist and shoulder with a kind of sneering grunt, and flung me against the wall, but not before I yanked at his hair fit to split his scalp. He would have throttled me but let go when the scabby boy with the cricket bat yelled, 'Don't heed her, get the Yid's money.'

The ginger bruiser stopped kicking and bent down over Dad to rifle his pockets. I thought they'd killed him. The

scabby lad thought that, too. I could tell by his scared look. His nose started to bleed then, and he rubbed the back of his hand against it. Blood poured through his fingers. While he looked at it, sort of surprised, he relaxed his hold on the cricket bat. I grabbed the bat from him and swung it at his knees. His legs buckled and he gasped in pain.

I swung out again and bashed the bruiser on the head and shoulders while he was still trying to rifle Dad's pockets (having no luck, as I'm the one who keeps the cash). I belted out with the bat, walloping White Rat and Ginger Bruiser, then dancing out of the way as I've seen Frank do in the boxing ring.

I don't know how Dad managed to get up. He tried to land a punch but fell against White Rat and sent him sprawling.

Mrs O'Malley opened the door, shouting to her husband to come, and charged out, waving her rolling pin.

The three ran. At the end of the street, White Rat turned and yelled, 'We'll get you for this, Yid. You too, Yiddess.'

I have the same jet-black hair Dad once had; his now has streaks of white. He has a weather-beaten face and hazel eyes. My skin is fair and my eyes true blue, though I felt them blazing with hurt and anger. Dad took my hand between his finger and thumb, asking was I hurt. I told him I thought we'd hurt them more. But I don't believe that because there is more than one kind of hurt. Calling names doesn't hurt, people say. That's not true.

I'm not a Yiddess. I'm not even Jewish. My mother was Margaret Lynch and that's about as Jewish as soda bread. But I wished at that moment I was Jewish *and* German, then I would be like my father.

Dad took a few breaths, shallow and noisy, as if the air hurt him. He squeezed my hand. 'Is all right, Julia. We see them off.'

He gave a gasp as if something jabbed his chest, then reached out to the O'Malleys' window sill to steady himself. Mrs O'Malley took one arm and I took the other to lead him inside.

Little Mr O'Malley, blinking sleep out of his eyes, pulling his braces onto his shoulders, flung the door wide open and tried to look gigantic. The smell of cabbage and sweaty feet hit me full on. By this time all the little O'Malleys appeared from indoors and out, and the eldest boy, Steven, picked up the abandoned cricket bat.

When Mr O'Malley realized what had happened, he wanted to go rushing up Pollard Street, looking for our attackers. I told him they could be the other side of Leeds by now. Mrs O'Malley seemed grateful for that and patted my arm.

Dad sat on the one O'Malley chair, clutching a cracked mug of tea. I crouched near the door, drinking sweet tea from a jam jar. Mr O'Malley leaned against the mantelpiece, snapping his braces and saying he would go after the blethering attackers and I must give him a categorical description.

Dad held his hand up and shook his head. 'They know no better. Pity their ignorance.'

Mrs O'Malley started to say something about Dad being a finer Christian than most, even though he's a Jew.

When Mr O'Malley moves, I imagine that's how a pixie dances. His blue eyes shone with excitement when I said that a little help would be worth a lot of sympathy, and if he would finish our pie round for us and bring the cart

back to Bread Street afterwards, we'd pay him for his trouble.

He rolled up his striped shirt-sleeves, bobbed down and thrust an arm under my nose. 'See that biceps, young lady? Charge your man wi' pushing two carts twice round Leeds and I'll do it and fend off an army.'

It hurt Dad to speak, so I made Mr O'Malley say back to me which streets he would cover and in what order. After Balaclava and Alma Street he should cut across Beckett Street to the Workhouse Infirmary where the overseer, Mr Shepherd, buys from us.

It turned into an outing and six little O'Malleys went along with their daddy, to keep a look-out for police who like to pounce on Sunday street-traders. I went with them as far as Beckett Street, while Dad rested in Mr O'Malley's chair.

It felt strange watching the O'Malley clan head up Granville Place with our handcart, Mr O'Malley singing out, 'Come and buy yer meat-an-tater pies.' I wondered how many pies would be left to sell by the time the clan rounded the corner.

I stood on Beckett Street with my back to the recreation ground. An April shower started and I turned my face to the rain. It felt cool and calming. Only then did I realize that, from my toes to my head, I felt turned to lead inside, heavy and tense, but exhilarated because we'd seen off our attackers and they hadn't got a penny.

Behind me on the recreation ground, children played and called out to each other, but their voices seemed far away, unreal. The exhilaration turned to anger. I wanted to yell and scream at someone. Maybe that was why the first horse and cart didn't stop. Then a brown mare trotted

into view, a small cart behind. I waved at the driver. He had a lined and lived-in round face and wore a brown suit, shiny with age. He told me that the last time anyone waved at him that alarmingly it was to alert him that a cart wheel threatened to spin loose. He agreed to pick up Dad and take us back to Bread Street, refusing to take payment for his trouble.

Now Dad has a lump on his head the size of a crab apple. Aunty Amy (our next-door neighbour, no relation) heard the horse and cart, and looked through the window of her corner-house-shop. But I caught her eye and she nodded. Dad hates a fuss and it would mortify him to be helped indoors by his daughter and an old woman. She's a herbalist – though some children who don't know any better call her a witch.

Five minutes later she tapped on our door and came in with witch hazel, and beef sheeting cut into bandage strips for Dad's ribs and head, and my arm. She says she's sure he has at least one broken rib and must rest. Dad pretended his grimace of pain was a smile and said she was making a fuss. He would lie still and be 'reet as rain' tomorrow. He likes to say little phrases in a Leeds accent as though he is an Englishman. But he never really pulls it off.

I unfolded Dad's bedchair, but he wouldn't lie down. We sat side by side while Aunty Amy made a pot of tea. While it was mashing, she nodded for me to go to the bottom of the stairs. Then she marched me upstairs, saying that she'd bring my tea up and I'd be doing the right thing by resting for an hour because then Dad could get some shut-eye on his bedchair.

So I lay on my bed, shut my eyes tightly and conjured up those three evil faces.

Ginger Bruiser with wide cheekbones and eyebrows that met; White Rat who'd blow away in a strong wind; Scabby Lad with the cricket bat and the nervous nosebleed. I'd lost my shawl from my shoulders in the scuffle, and the blood from his nose had stained my blouse.

Dad can say 'Pity their ignorance' all he likes. I say different. I don't believe in turning the other cheek.

It annoys me that these events have turned out to be my first entry in this journal, which is really an old accounts book Dad had when he kept his own butcher's shop. I rescued it from the bureau. He said I could tear out the accounts and use the book. I cut the used pages out carefully, so as not to loosen the corresponding pages at the back of the book. (It is a great pity Dad had to give up the shop. Business was not bad.) For my birthday Dad bought me a pen, inkpot, pencil and a ruler. With the ruler I will underline important entries.

I decided to keep this journal because I was fifteen on 15 April and this year of 1914 will be the only time my birth date and my age coincide. I am doing tiny writing or I shall soon use up the pages. I have discovered that if I miss out vowels I can still read back what I have written as well as get it down faster.

I had meant to write my opinions about something important. Perhaps Tom Maguire's poetry. I am infuriated to end up writing about the blooming pie round and the three great stoits who think they can just come and beat you up for your hard-earned cash.