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Remembering Judith

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Published by Accent Press

Extract

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Ah think then, sweet people, when you look on us, clad in our motley and tinsel, ours are human hearts, beating with passion, we are but men like you. For gladness or sorrow, 'tis the same broad Heaven above us, the same wide lonely world before us! Will ye hear, then, the story? How it unfolds...

From the Prologue of Pagliacci

Foreword

Your bloody memory taps you on the shoulder when your back is turned. Smell that perfume. Remember when your mother used to wear it?

I am small. About four years old. A scene many of you who were children in the 50's will remember. She's off to a party. She's promised she'll show me her dress. I lie in my bed waiting, it seems, for hours. Then she pushes open my door and wakes up the dark with a rustle of taffeta, a swish of silk and a mist of perfume.

'Let's see, Mummy – let's see! Please, put the light on.'

She laughs a tinkling sound, not her usual laugh, but in her special other-people voice. She moves to the switch and, suddenly, the room is neon-bright. I blink, rub my eyes, unaccustomed to its dazzle, and she is standing there like a film star, blond hair set in rigid Marcel waves curling into her slim face, her narrow pale shoulders exposed above folds of shot fabric. Her skirt is decorated with appliqué leaves and flowers, and she twirls on six-inch crocodile platform shoes. She is beautiful. But the vision lasts only seconds. The warmth, the laughter, is gone with a 'Sweetheart, you must go to sleep now'. She leans over the bed planting a dark-red kiss and laughs when it marks my cheek, rubbing the smear with a red-nailed finger. Then she is gone and I am back in the black, and the dressing gown returns to the face of a witch, the man in the moon laughs through the curtained window, and the monsters under the bed sharpen their claws to catch me if I dare dangle a foot.

But later, much later, I hear shouts from their bedroom. They are arguing and I can hear her sobbing – it begins as muffled whimpers and intermittent cries like the yelping of a lost puppy. But she often cried – that's what girls do, isn't it? The sound becomes louder, and now he is screaming indistinguishable words at her. I call and call. Nobody comes. The monsters are flexing their talons and won't let me get out of bed. So I sing to try to drown their scratching and the bad from that room, with a high-pitched lisping of a repertoire repeated from *Music While You Work*. Then I'm Wilfred Pickles, muttering in a broad north-country accent to 'Give 'em the money Mabel'. Eventually, I fall asleep.

In the morning, I sit with our mother's help in the breakfast room. She's made me some porridge. I never like it when she makes it. It is decorated with black bitter flecks. It lies crouching in a blue and white striped dish like a grey solid mound surrounded by a moat of luke-warm milk and topped with a scab of brown sugar crust. I'm excavating broken lumps swimming round the bowl, trying to force the stuff down, concentrating on *Housewives Choice*, which is playing 'Spanish Eyes' and selections from the 'Desert Song' to busy ladies at home in Sidcup and Chichester. My mother walks into the room. She is cross because our help has dressed me in my second best Shabbat outfit – a navy knitted skirt and jumper decorated with bunches of red knitted cherries and bleach-white socks. I know she'll make me change into last year's clothes, now designated as playing clothes. So we make our way back up the stairs, me begging to leave off the liberty bodice. But I'm aware that it's hopeless and first the liberty bodice and then the old tight clothes are forced over unwilling limbs. We come downstairs and I'm duly inspected.

'That's better,' she says. 'Good enough for playing in.'

I looked at her bright smiling face, eyes swollen from hours of crying – the colour masked with Pancake. I want to ask about the crying and the shouting, but somehow, even at

four, I know not to. The rules are set. Tidy. Neat like my mother – the lady with standards. That's the way it was. She was a wife of the fifties and she never told. She lived in happy, happy land with her husband and her daughter and dedicated her life to perfecting their existence. That was what society demanded, and she would always obey. She was used to self-sacrifice.

But this story is not only about my mother. It could be your mother if she lived in the fifties, except she may not have had my mother's precarious start. No one who hasn't experienced life with an anorexic mother could imagine such a life. People might say that living with an alcoholic is similar and, yes, the relentless agony must be comparable. My family's tale is a chronicle of contrasts located in a convoluted world – of feasting and fasting. Slivers of joy slipped between chasms of sadness.

My parents' circumstances were not unique. There were many like my mother and my father: people who escaped from German oppression. My mother, Judith, came from Hamburg – the daughter of a religious and highly respected family – and in 1938 journeyed from there to the Hook of Holland and then to Harwich and finally to London. My father, Geoffrey, came from a small farming village outside Breslau. I do not know when or where he arrived. This story's beginning symbolises that time of separation, when young children were torn away from loving families, friends, a fluent language and secure lives, to cross a dangerous bridge to a hostile country, because of the onset of war. They were evacuated to families who took children into their homes, sometimes with altruistic motives, but often as a source of cheap labour. Moreover, these children were thrown into a society very different from their own, within a land of strangers. And this story does not stop with the survivors – the ones who 'made it', who adopted a new

country as theirs, absorbed their standards, became 'assimilated'. There is a second generation who are also suffering. In a way, this story is not about my parents but about me. There is so little told about the second generation. Sometime we mask our histories, afraid to tell. Some people, the extrovert personalities, are able to shout and sometimes bully their way through adversity under a defiant banner of pride – Yes We Are. So What! Maybe they are the survivors. But there are many more, such as myself, with more cloistered emotions, who still hurt and want to know why. There's a part of us that has never been allowed to leave the *shtetl* – that small Jewish village in Eastern Europe – and the ghetto. We witnessed and still live our parents' and relatives' pain in its many obscene forms, yet are expected to be tough: to cope. We stand in the wings as they perform their agonies on centre stage, watch, encourage, be comforter, sometimes nurse and even mother. We are the children of those who learnt that duty above all things is paramount. We learned German or Polish or Czechoslovakian, subliminally, through our skins as we took breath. The language of fear seeped into our blood, staining our understanding, our motivation, our confidence. But that language is part of the secret, not to be used, not to be spoken. It is packed away, locked in suitcases that wait on top of wardrobes to join the flight. The words of different lives. Not for others to hear. They must never know. They might suspect we are dissimilar. They might hate us for that.

This is the story of the second generation, but it starts, like all truths, at the beginning. So, 'Are you sitting comfortably? Then I'll begin.'

Chapter One

Are You Sitting Comfortably?

Before it all started. 1950, and I was four. I squatted on a leather pouffe – tan, imprinted with a star – hugging plump knees and, from the radio resting on the bookshelf, came a BBC lady's voice. 'Are you sitting comfortably?' she asked me, and as a dutiful child I replied, 'Yes.' Then, magically, without seeing me through the small mahogany frame and fine basket weave, but obviously hearing me, she said, 'Then I'll begin.'

So began my special time – those few minutes when the world circulated around me. A nursery rhyme, followed by a traditional story with a strong moral ending, usually about the exploits of princes, adventurous rabbits or children whose lives were very different from my own. Then another nursery rhyme, finishing with soft piano music. But for those brief minutes I floated from the morning room to enchanted palaces, to gardens that housed princesses, and swans that could speak, support four or five small children on their backs and, strong-winged, carry them to lands where people always smiled and shouting never happened. Then, when it was over, I was back in the morning room. Why the 'morning' room? It was decorated in beige embossed wallpaper with a border of orange and pinkish fruit and autumn-tone leaves. The paper was already on the walls when my parents moved into this Cardiff house, and they never changed it. On the far wall was a beige tiled fireplace that I knew my mother hated. She tried to bring out the pinkish colour by accenting it with a staggered row of pink

Ruth's fourth birthday

Sylvac rabbits. I was never allowed to play with them, even touch them, and I never disobeyed. The fireplace held a real fire that told stories in the flames and housed a secret city of goblins and elves – the fire fairies, immune to the burning temperatures – who watched us as we battled through our lives. Across the room from the fire was a small oak table, I suspect a junk-shop find, covered with a fresh seersucker cloth – the hand-embroidered cloths were saved for visitors – and four matching oak chairs with barley twist legs. I sat there with the mother's help, some terrifying female introduced into the house, supposedly to watch me and care for me.

I remember Betti – the first help of many to live across the landing next to my room. She was an elderly Welsh spinster with grey-wired hair and a single eye. She must have answered my mother's advertisement in the hope that she would idle away her final years with a family who wanted little besides some babysitting and ironing, and been more than satisfied with me, the perfect compliant only child. One night she stole food from the larder, a bread pudding and a bowl of custard cooling for a trifle, and blamed me for its disappearance. I tried to protest, but she stared at me with her single eye and terrified me. Another time she switched on the wireless and forgot to switch it off and my father heard the whispering sounds and furiously switched off the button, shouting about wasted electricity and was he Bloody Rockefeller? She said I was the culprit. As a result, she invoked an unknown devil within me, a side to my character that I had not known before. A sense of justice invaded my small body. I hated her. She was fair game. I hid her hair brushes, and loosened the top of her talcum powder, shaking a smoking cloud of Parma Violets into her underwear drawer.

The next Monday, I returned from the dentist with my mother, and Betti was gone. There was a note on the sideboard written in copperplate on scented violet paper saying how she'd never met such a despicable child and that she'd decided not to give her notice, but just to go. I felt my face redden with the injustice of it, and my tears flowed as I was accused of being the cause of her disappearance. And of shaming the family. I was to go to my bedroom and wait for my father to deal with me. I was terrified. My father was a large man – almost six feet – with an angry temperament and matching voice that would never listen to reason. It was impossible to placate his fury once he was roused. (To the outside world he presented a different picture. Strangers would see a smiling man, even-featured, who carried himself well and always looked good in clothes, with broad

shoulders tapering to wide wrists. He had thick wavy hair which fell softly over one eye if left in its natural state, but more often was slicked back into a smooth cap with an over-application of Brylcreem. His hands in some incongruous way seemed too small for his large build. They were small hands with manicured nails – a perfect white half-moon on each. He would spend every Sunday evening treating his nails. He used to mutter about people who had filth under their nails and how disgusting they were and he had special bowls for water and pots of cream. Only once my mother teased him about his nail attention, longing to escape the house and go out with him for a couple of hours. There were raised voices in their bedroom later.)

As I moved to my bedroom, my feet shuffled with fear over the polished brown lino. I seemed to sit on my bed for hours, swinging my legs, trying to think of songs that would divert my mind from my fate. But Mario Lanza was of little use. The slam of the door downstairs announced my father's return, and was followed by the muted sounds of my mother telling her story. My father shouted. I heard heavy footsteps and shook as his pounding feet ran up the thin-carpeted wooden stairs and drew closer with a sharp rat-tat of the lino outside my room. The heavy door swung open. He was white with anger. Words, angry consonants and vowels, formed with a bitter mouth, hurt more than the pain of the slap.

A few days later, my mother noticed that two of her favourite silver picture frames and a coffee pot had also disappeared.

Then, for a few weeks, it was bliss. My mother took sole charge of me. We did wonderful things together. Made pastry. My effort was rolled and re-rolled until it was grey and cut into shapes which stuck in the cutter but eventually made biscuits for my father to eat. I never saw him eat one. If he was home, which was rare, he'd wrinkle his nose and mutter, 'later'. Better were the stories we invented together,

cutting pictures out of magazines to illustrate them. We had picnics in the park, and once we caught the train to 'Ponty'. It was the first time I'd seen bolts of cloth stacked, roll upon roll, a kaleidoscope of colour, and ducklings in cardboard boxes: peeping, tiny, fluffy creatures, ready to love. But it could not last. I knew that. Another gruesome woman would be employed to watch me. My mother returned to her small fashion concern, and I to the business of surviving the next harridan. But why so elderly? Why so sexless? Why so unpleasant? After all, my parents had to share a house with these females. It seemed to me, through my childish eyes, that these females were chosen specially by my mother for their ugliness, unsavoury armpits and hairiness.

The rules of the house insisted that, after breakfast, I was dispatched to the garden, unless it was raining heavily.

'Don't take your dolls out. You'll dirty them in the mud, and no...not your books...they'll spoil...You may have a ball... But don't throw it against the wall. Don't bang it!'

A ball for an only child when she wasn't allowed walls?

'And don't go out in the front. There are bad men lurking...they might steal you...they have...'

My imagination filled in the gaps. Giants with green teeth, putrid breath and glutinous fingers the colour and texture of slugs.

So I invented people in my green prison. I'd sit on the stone step leading from the kitchen door, hugging my knees and pulling my knitted skirt over the chubby bend of flesh to see how far the knit would stretch, conversing with my characters. Sometimes they were individuals remembered from radio stories, but chiefly they were half-people, nebulous morphs with the ability to change on demand, and with the predominant characteristics of my mother's friends. I would take the part of my mother. There would be invitations to send either by letter – smooth variegated ivy leaves were good for that – or phone, and then I would have to prepare the food for cocktails and intimate dinners.

'Victor, would you like to try these?' In my mind I'd made the tiny cream cheese boats I'd seen my mother prepare when she returned home from work. I'd watch her as she rubbed her back with the strain of it all. Nibbling all evening on a green pepper cut into slivers and three water-biscuits carefully laid out, as she prepared her elaborate banquets. In front of her would be trays of tiny tomatoes stuffed with tinned salmon mayonnaise, bite-sized vol-au-vents filled with mushrooms in wine sauce and bouchées – tiny mouth-sized morsels of choux-pastry filled with chopped anchovies and egg. Then she'd start on the frying – slivers of sole fried crisp, walnut-sized salmon rissoles to fit on the end of a cocktail stick, and lastly, slices of bread rolled flat smeared with butter and layered with cream cheese and chopped asparagus. They'd be cut into pin-wheels, kept fresh with a layer of damp tea cloths and arranged with all the other savouries. I would copy all these. The honeysuckle that hugged the stone wall between us and our neighbours was densely covered with glorious sticky red berries, lupines devoid of their hairy summer skins made wonderful substitute peas, and the discarded rhubarb fronds on the compost heap made plates.

Victor would always accept anything I cooked. 'You know how much I love your food,' he'd say, and then I'd turn to Lionel and say, 'Yes, darling, you are so sweet,' and I'd try the tinkling laugh.

If it rained, my life was easier because there was more to do indoors, except I was in the way of the Hoover, or the steaming-hot boiler bubbling on the kitchen stove, or the wooden muscles of a tyrant mangle that squashed my father's shirts to submission on clothes day and had been known to chomp a portion of finger. Usually, I was banned from the hysteria of the kitchen and settled alone in the morning room where I was allowed books and colouring and sometimes Plasticine. Though, whenever I used the last, there was always a row. No matter how careful I tried to be,

a few miniscule blobs would find their way to the threadbare carpet to be squashed in by my Startrite soles. Sometimes the play with the Plasticine was worth the conflict, because time passed so quickly. The food for my people could be made to look realistic, and I could talk to my yellow and purple little bodies right up till lunch-time. And in the beginning, my mother came home from her fashion business to give me lunch. Perhaps only a small piece of 'yellow' haddock set next to smooth half globes of mashed potatoes, or two boiled eggs and a piece of bread, with the outline of a house complete with windows and a door, scraped out of a smear of butter. If I was ill she'd steam a small fillet of plaice in milk dotted with a little butter and there'd be pink semolina to follow – semolina cooked with a little milk, sugar and grated lemon rind and then coloured with a little pink colouring. But the type of food never mattered. It was that feeling of her, by my side: enveloping layers of softness and warmth. Tight cuddles with a slim body wrapped in an elegant suit, covered by a voluminous pinafore. A closeness and safety and a special time together.

But those days became less frequent as her business became more demanding. Mostly, on weekdays, I was left something on a covered plate for someone else to heat up and my mother really only existed as the highlight of my weekend. My father's presence too seemed to ebb, returning only in a violent wave of weekend presence.

But the drama of the Sabbath preparations began on the Thursday evening and sometimes I was allowed to stay up and watch, as my mother thought it was important for me to know how to kosher meat and to understand the Jewish laws and their logic. She'd return from work exhausted. Change into old clothes. Drink black coffees. Then take two white pills, smile brightly, rub some kind of cream over her aching shoulders, very occasionally smoke one Craven A, and begin the marathon. The meat that had arrived in brown paper parcels tied with string and smeared with blood had to be

koshered. The parcels were unwrapped and grumbles and sighs followed.

'This roast he's sent – seems a bit small to me...! And the brisket's very fatty...I hope it's not going to be stringy ...Thought I might get liver this week...oh well.'

It was laid out on a wooden board with slats so that when it was liberally doused with salt the excess blood would drain away. Then the meat was rinsed. An old boiling chicken would then be scalded and scraped. It was quite a dangerous process as this large bird would be immersed whole in boiling water, and my mother was a tiny woman. It took all her strength to remove the hot beast from the scalding liquid. While it was still hot, she would burn off (lovely smell) the remaining dark spines. The neck skin was saved to stuff with sausage meat, stitched with black cotton, and roasted for another meal. And the small chicken liver was burnt over the open flame of the gas so that it lost all its blood. It was then converted with the help of some fried onions, grated hard-boiled eggs, and a little of the rendered fat from the chicken, into chopped liver for the traditional starter and stored till the following evening. At that point I would be hastily dispatched to bed.

The Sabbath labours continued on Friday afternoon. She would rush in, tap-tapping her perfumed high-heeled dash I so adored. The table had to be laid with a snowy-white damask cloth, the best plates, the best glasses. My mother said that the Sabbath was a queen and we had to treat her as such. She would always manage to find two or three flowers from the garden, even in the midst of winter, to arrange in a small crystal vase to decorate the table. All the silver was polished. Not that my parents had much, but the few remnants of my mother's previous life, before her hasty exit from Germany – the candle-sticks of very thin silver plate, and a *becher* (a small silver beaker) – were given very loving treatment. Those were her precious pieces of another world: a world that would always make her cry. At that age I

didn't understand why, as she sat rubbing, re-polishing and re-polishing, the tears would flow. We had someone in the house to help, but they were not allowed to touch these items. I assumed that silver religious articles were imbued with some magical but terrifying quality.

Once the table was laid my mother would start preparing the meal. There were only three of us (the help usually had the weekend off) and it was a marathon job, as food was prepared for the whole of the Sabbath and had to last until three stars could be seen in the sky on the Saturday night. But making vast amounts of food seemed to give her satisfaction. At that moment she was a creator. Her level of contentment was in proportion to her effort. However it was constantly assessed by some inner measure, the beating of an inner clock that surveyed her standards of perfection and constantly berated her endeavours. She could never make a half-hearted attempt. Everything had to be as perfect as she could manage. And in her eyes, it was never good enough.

She placed the chicken in a vast cooking pot with carrots, onions left whole, sticks of celery, and a good sprig of bay leaves, topped with water. It was simmered gently with the giblets until the flesh was almost slipping off the bones and the vegetables were meltingly soft. The cooked pieces were laid in a casserole with cooked rice and usually a rich mushroom and red wine sauce – she'd steal a little wine from Sabbath wine. We never drank any alcohol. (Not that there was any religious restriction on our alcohol intake.) This casserole would sit overnight in a very low oven to be served as our after-synagogue Sabbath feast. The liquor would be brought to the boil to remove excess fat which was lifted from the bubbling corner of the soup with a ladle.

'I wish I could do more on Thursday,' she'd sigh, readjusting her cotton peasant scarf tied over her head to protect the set waves.

'If only I had the time to do the chicken then, I could leave the soup overnight in the larder and just scrape the soft fat off the top.'

In the summer she would prepare mounds of potato salad to mix with chopped pickled cucumbers, and in the winter she'd make potato dumplings to a traditional German recipe. Half-cooked potatoes were grated and mixed with flour and dropped in boiling water to eat with the chicken. She always made gravy, thickly enriched with mushrooms, and cakes in case visitors arrived on the Sabbath. My father and I would eat our way through a vast chocolate-iced chocolate and vanilla marble cake which was cooked in the tin that was part of her past. That *gugelhupf* tin had been part of her small amount of luggage, brought as a memento of her home when she ran away from Germany – a little girl of twelve years old.

And still there was a *lockshen* pudding – the traditional Jewish dessert, noodles enriched with margarine, eggs and sugar, redolent with vanilla, lemon rind and juice and heavily solid with dried fruit. Sometimes there was an apple pie with apples out of the garden and a sugary crust and the juice running mixed with spices and sultanas. Yes, my mother could cook. She, I considered, was my Sabbath Queen.

We would wait for the sunset to pour gold over the apple trees at the bottom of the garden. I would have bathed and changed into my Sabbath best, and my mother would unfurl the voluminous apron, if she hadn't changed completely, and we would stand, calling my father many times until he appeared. He would have been resting. Earlier she had put out his slippers in welcome in the lounge, and had taken in a tray laid with a cloth she had embroidered herself, set with dishes of fresh home-made biscuits and his cup brimming with coffee. Then she would change out of her house-shoes and, slipping on the stilettos that she had discarded under the sideboard, resume her elegant stance.