

HOKEY POKEY

Kate Mascarenhas



An Apollo Book

UNCORRECTED MANUSCRIPT

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HOKEY POKEY

To make a Hokey Pokey cocktail

2 measures of Pernod Fils absinthe

2 dashes of honey syrup

1 dash of Garnier crème de roses

1 dash of Marie Brizard and Roger anisette

The white of an egg

Shake and strain.

Part One

The Regent Hotel, Birmingham,
February 1929

1

Nora was not a liar, by nature. She was blessed with a prodigious skill for mimicry. If she chose, she could open her mouth and repeat every word she had ever heard, verbatim, in the style it was first spoken. Because of this ability she saw herself as truthful: she was a recorder of truth, as true as any phonograph.

At dusk, guarded against the cold by a fur coat and a mulberry red cloche, she arrived outside the Regent Hotel. The sky was opaque with the coming snowfall. The building was cream stone, half a dozen storeys high, and European in style: rectangular columns and iron balustrades abounded. Floral carvings and decorative heads, positioned in shrine-like niches, ornamented the spaces between the windows.

A red-jacketed porter carried her luggage up the central steps. He had met her at the railway station, which was a few minutes' walk away. She entered reception, blinking at the blaze of electric light. Her footfall softened on a Greek key carpet. Green marble clad the walls. She could hear the strings of salon music, coming from a distant room.

Psychoanalysts favoured luxurious accommodation, and Nora was no exception to that particular professional snobbery. But she hadn't chosen this hotel. Leo Cadieux – her fellow analyst; once her friend, and something more than a friend – had asked her to follow his wife here. He suspected promiscuity. Nora would watch, and send reports back to him in Zurich. The watching would come naturally. Despite never having met his wife, Nora was used to observing her from a distance; Berenice was a famed singer, of noted beauty, who Nora found compelling and hateful in equal measure. But the need for stealth made her feel furtive. She must appear entirely at ease, lest someone say: “Surely *you're* up to no good.”

Signs pointed the way to the Pinfold Dining Room, the Hagley Tea Rooms, the Reading Room, and the Narcissus Bar. To the left was a great staircase; to the right, a long mahogany desk. Behind the desk sat a neat-moustached man in a dark suit. Beside him stood a woman with an unmade-up face, a blonde shingle cut, and a sensible demeanour. He addressed her as *Harvey*. She was likely a housekeeper. In sizeable establishments you could count on one per floor. By the hotel's rules, a woman travelling alone must have an advance reservation, and a housekeeper must be there to receive her on arrival.

“Good evening.” Harvey consulted her list of that night's arrivals and departures. “Might I have your name?”

Nora was English. Despite spending her adulthood abroad she could still switch easily to the soft King's English of her mother, from her father's Czech, or her colleagues' Swiss German. With her pale blue eyes and pale brown hair she looked unremarkable in an English crowd. And the

reservation was in an English name: her mother's before marriage.

Nora Čapek said: "My name is Dr Dickinson."

To be English in England was to be less conspicuous. That was valuable when you were watching someone.

Once Harvey had left her to the privacy of her room, Nora sat upon the bed, her back straight, in the dying light. She removed her gloves finger by finger and considered the task ahead. Dinner would be served at six. Nora wasn't hungry, but she must attend, because she had to watch the woman she'd come for.

There was time to wash away the taint of travel. The bathroom was strictly in accordance with the hotel's standards: the mirror was highly polished, mounted on a wall of jadeite and black chevron tiles, and the bathtub recessed in the alcove was deep. The rail bore three perfectly aligned towels. A bar of lavender soap, in stiff paper, sat perpendicular to the sink tap. Nora tore the paper away and disrobed to wash. She always regretted turning the sharp edges of new soap soft.

Clean but shivering, she returned to the trunk in her room and knelt to open it. Uppermost was a yellow silk evening gown that was formal enough for the dining room. Fully unpacking could wait until after dinner. She donned her undergarments, and the dress, which felt slippery against her skin. The bell sleeves were long and elegant. She must attain the correct presentation, neither ostentatious nor dowdy. It was necessary to blend in while she gauged the best means of gathering information on Berenice.

By the time she had locked her room, and taken the stairs, and found the Pinfold Dining Room, she was breathless yet still, officially, on time. Some two hundred guests were awaiting sustenance. Nora hated to be in the midst of this many people. So many conversations to hear, to fill her head, and leave their mark.

A waitress, in an immaculate serving smock of dark blue, indicated Nora should follow. She was shorter than Nora, around five foot six, and Nora noticed with a glance at the other servers this was one of the higher class places that insisted waitresses all be of the same height. It lent the room an uncanny air, to be served by young women of identical physique in identical clothes, as if any one of them might be swapped for another and no one need notice or care. Nora wondered if each evening they lay down in identical boxes and the maître d'hôtel placed a lid on each one, to keep them spotless for the next day. It was a silly, macabre thought, and Nora dismissed it by reflecting that waitresses probably didn't live in. They would go back to their lodgings in one of the city streets, regaining their individuality with every step towards home.

Nora was shown to an unoccupied place at the end of a long table. To her immediate left was an elderly lady, in a long mourning dress, with a white bun spun over each ear. Opposite this Old Victorian was a slight man of Nora's approximate age – probably a stockbroker or commercial lawyer – with wry hazel eyes and black hair falling in waves from a side parting. He looked at her a beat too long, almost as if he were surprised to see her there. She hoped it wasn't a sign of flirtatious interest. Attention from another guest would make her task harder. But he gave a polite nod

of greeting, before returning to conversation with their neighbour, and Nora relaxed.

The place across from her was empty. She glanced about the room, reviewing the gathered hotel guests, looking for her quarry: Berenice Oxbow. Her name was anglicised too. Often Nora thought of Berenice as simply *the Icon*. For now the Icon was nowhere to be seen. Nora fidgeted with the hem of the linen tablecloth.

The room was high-ceilinged, thick with cherubs made from rose-hued plaster. Immense arched windows lined one wall. A series of blue glass lampshades swung from above: they were reminiscent of upturned goblets. The dark-haired man was talking of architecture to their elderly companion. Nora realised she had guessed wrongly; he wasn't a stockbroker after all. He was a public works architect. As the waitresses approached with plates of *pâté de foie gras*, the architect finished talking about the features of the Cathedral across the road. He moved on to the wonders of the hotel's water system – every guest now had access to hot and cold running water in their own suite – which, unusually, ran from the hotel's own private well.

"It's in the cellar," he explained, spearing his *pâté* with a small silver fork. "There's an old passage underground leading from the cathedral crypt. Before the hotel was built, locals had all sorts of ideas about the water source; they half considered it a shrine, I think. If you drank of it, you were supposed to be forgiven for your sins."

"*Really?*" the old woman replied appreciatively. "Can guests walk the passage?"

"No, there's a structural issue that's worsened with time; you could be halfway through and it would collapse

on you. Hotel management keeps the door locked. But it's safe to visit the well by the hotel back stairs. Not just safe, an attraction. Think of these guests," he said with a smile. "Each bringing a guilty secret. All going home – redeemed."

She chuckled.

"Come now," he teased her. "What have you been up to? You're here to be forgiven too, aren't you – feign to deny it."

"Me?" she said in mock disbelief. "What could I possibly have to be ashamed of?"

"Yes, you're the picture of innocence! Remember appearances can be deceptive. When I was young I knew a schoolgirl who confessed to murder. She was a mere slip of a thing."

Nora winced; she didn't like this topic. But the old woman gasped, enjoying herself immensely. "You must tell me more about that. Wherever I stay, I do so love to hear of the local murders!"

The architect had apparently noticed Nora's reaction.

"What about *your* secrets?" he asked. "Are you here to be forgiven?"

"No," Nora said gravely. Her tone invited no further conversation, and he looked at her a moment longer, his smile waning at the hard ground his banter fell upon. The uncomfortable gap in conversation lasted until the pâté was eaten, and the commis cleared the plates.

"Oh look!" the old woman said then, her voice hushed. "There is Berenice Oxbow!"

Nora looked sharply at the entrance to where a large-eyed young woman with a platinum crop was simpering apologetically at a waitress. Grey chiffon was wound around her shoulders. Yes, this was Berenice. The soprano,

lately of the Zurich Opera House and now on tour. She was late, always late. A few other guests turned to note her arrival, and watched as she was led down the room. Nora dropped her head, taking new interest in a fleshy smear of pâté left upon the table linen. Her heart quickened as she sensed the waitress pass by – she could smell Shalimar, Berenice’s fragrance, and for a moment she thought Berenice would take that last, empty seat at their table. But instead she sat at the table immediately behind. The two women must be three feet apart, back to back. Nora would be able to hear Berenice speak, though they were obscured from each other’s view.

And speak Berenice did. As everyone digested their first course Berenice regaled her unseen dinner companions, in those twittering, half American, half Russian tones, which was the type of foreign accent people might tolerate when they were starstruck. Her conversation flattered the other guests that they were equals, no doubt... Berenice remarked that she’d missed the pâté; dreadful of her. Wasn’t snow going to fall that night? The train had been comfortable but oh so unfriendly, with no one interested in conversation at all; she’d heard that the old horse and carriages had been much more congenial, in her grandmother’s day – at journey’s end you’d be lifelong friends with your fellow travellers.

Nora heard every banal word. The Old Victorian and the architect were listening too, with the studied expressions of people pretending not to eavesdrop. They probably thought Berenice was vivacious. Instead she was an imbecile, albeit one gifted in social niceties.

The waitresses returned bearing plates of pork, pale beneath a brittle shell of fat. Nora was starting to feel

queasy. It was the clamour of the hall – all this discourse, making marks on her brain like grooves in a recording cylinder. But Berenice chose that very point to fall silent. To sate her appetite, Nora assumed briefly, before she heard the scraping of the chair across the polished floor, and the toppling of the chair to the ground. Berenice backed into her, her breathing laboured, and yet Nora still didn't turn. Nora bunched the linen cloth either side of her plate, her knuckles whitening. After a moment's bafflement, the rest of the table were watching as though this were one of Berenice's performances, with the stillness, the anticipation, of any audience at the Zurich Opera House. They were intent on understanding Berenice's actions. The Old Victorian, her eyes rolled upwards and her napkin poised mid-way to her mouth, was agog.

"A tragedy's coming," Berenice murmured.

The architect signalled for the attention of a waitress. One hastened to his side, and the architect whispered a few words to which the waitress nodded. She looked anxiously at Berenice and departed.

"A tragedy's coming," Berenice said more loudly, with greater urgency. "One of the guests here is in terrible danger. I see her! I see her in my mind's eye! She has a tattoo!"

Nora's hold on the cloth relaxed. Berenice was pretending to be in a clairvoyant trance; she did so often. She liked the attention and she used her fake reveries to manipulate people. Once she'd feigned a vision halfway through an aria, while Nora was in the theatre. Leo knew such visions were merely showpieces because Berenice had confessed to him before their marriage. She confessed just once, and resumed her pretence henceforth, as though she could

overwrite the truth if she only lied more forcefully. Most people believed her – and enjoyed believing her. That made Nora’s jealousy smoulder. To be taken at one’s word was enviable. *Charlatan*, Nora thought.

Through her yellow evening gown Nora could feel Berenice’s warmth.

A pair of housekeepers entered the room. Harvey was one; the other was doughy cheeked and stolid. As they advanced Nora turned to see how Berenice reacted. The Icon held her hand to her heart, the better to show the swift rise and fall of her breath. Fleetinglly, she met Nora’s eye. They were strangers as far as Berenice was concerned. She’d never seen Nora’s face before. Nora supposed she’d be taken for an avid spectator.

The housekeepers reached the spot where Berenice stood. She addressed them *sotto voce*, perhaps for added intensity. “Find the lady with flowers tattooed on her forearm. A *horrific* fate awaits her here! She must leave to save herself.”

The stolid housekeeper, who quietly introduced herself as Geraldine Frye, murmured: “You’ll be more comfortable in your room, Miss Oxbow.”

Although Berenice was married, opera singers were always addressed as *Miss* in public.

“Our chef will prepare dinner to your liking, anything you wish,” Frye continued. “We can serve it to you in your suite.”

“I couldn’t eat,” Berenice replied, on the verge of tears. “Not after what I’ve seen.”

Harvey placed a guiding hand upon the singer’s elbow. Berenice did not resist – she let herself be led away, her face anguished. Nora rose from her chair to watch her go.

The other guests regained their garrulousness.

"What remarkable behaviour," the architect said.

"She's a spiritualist of some kind," the Old Victorian replied. "Very highly strung. She has visions – of the future."

"Don't take any of that too seriously, Mrs R. She seems a typical hysteric to me."

Nora looked at Berenice's abandoned plate, with its intact meal. An expensive cut of pork – succulent, pale pink – was quickly cooling into greasiness.

"The other rumour I've heard – " the Old Victorian was gaining enthusiasm – "is that she escaped from revolutionaries in 1917 by disguising herself as a cabin boy and hiding in a trunk. But I may be confusing her with another Russian singer?"

"One can verify the details of an escape from Russia much more easily than spiritualist powers."

"Oh, Mr Crouch, I didn't take you for a sceptic! That voice pierced me to my soul. Those were the words of someone who has seen things beyond our understanding. I may have forgotten how she escaped from Russia but I know the sound of the otherworld when I hear it."

Berenice had capitulated to the housekeepers, so was presumably walking to her suite now. Nora should follow. Once she knew which room belonged to the Icon, she needed to keep track of who entered, who departed, and when. That was the information Leo wanted about his wife, above all: who kept her bed warm.

Without bidding the old woman or the architect goodbye, Nora hastened from the restaurant, into the dimmer lighting of the corridor. Apparently Berenice had already given her guardians the slip. One housekeeper was

checking side rooms for her; the other proceeded to the lift in case Berenice had gone on to her room unaccompanied. By the grand steps, Nora caught sight of a blonde woman in grey, just before the woman disappeared into the shadows beneath the stairway. Why was Berenice going that way, and not to her room? Nora drew closer to the alcove under the stairs, where she found a closed door, papered in the same swirling decorative pattern as the surrounding wall. She checked no one was watching, twisted the handle and craned to see inside. A plain white corridor stretched out, quite empty of other people; but it was clear a number of other doors lay ahead, providing staff with their own short cuts between private and public rooms. Berenice would have her own deranged reasons for exploring the hidden spaces of the building. She was of a defiant character.

Nora strode ahead. She saw signs, again, for the Reading Room, the Hagley Tea Rooms, the Pinfold Dining Room – she cracked the door each time, enough to check whether Berenice had exited there – and past those three, the corridor branched, forcing Nora to go down each path and return before trying the next one along. She saw portholed doors to the kitchens. The glass allowed her to see the steam and commotion. Men were shouting in Italian. Nora didn't think Berenice would be in the kitchen – the domestics would detect her, and expel her, in polite pretence she had lost her way. Next was something called a still room, then a suite of water closets. Nora rounded another corner (the corners seemed endless) only to see, up ahead, Berenice dive into a store room. Nora drew near the entrance. She looked through the porthole onto barely illuminated shelves, bearing stacks of tins. Berenice took a tin down and opened it with a key, too

engrossed in her purpose to note Nora's eyes upon her. With the tin opened Berenice scooped her hand inside, raising the contents to her lips. It looked like potted meat – corned beef, probably. A hot meal was surely preferable. But Berenice would feed in secret, because she insisted on the illusion, even before the hotel workers, that she was too drained by her vision to eat. What a deplorable woman.

Another door opened further down the corridor – from outside, admitting a draught. It shielded the entrant but Nora could hear she was mid-conversation, curt with a companion: “*All right*, James, don't harangue me, please. You have to uphold your part of the bargain.”

Harvey's voice? Nora retreated before the housekeeper could see her. She didn't want to explain why she was lurking outside the tinned meat supplies. Her observations of Berenice could resume shortly – in the bar, perhaps, after the Icon was sufficiently fed, or failing that at breakfast the following morning.

Just one encounter was enough, in Nora's experience, to cement the geography of a place in her mind; she couldn't recall ever getting lost somewhere she had visited before. And yet this time she repeatedly doubted herself as she retraced her steps. The winding, blank whiteness of these corridors unnerved her. She remembered the route she'd taken. But she did fear, quite irrationally, that the path had shifted and relaid itself while her back was turned. She scolded herself not to think such nonsense.

Back in her own room, soft with the flickering of the gas lamps – which still served for bedside illumination at the

hotel – she methodically put away every item of clothing from her trunk. She did not change from her yellow evening gown, though she did shiver, and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders.

A petite bureau was positioned beneath the window. She sat there now. Her room overlooked the city's cathedral – a baroque yet surprisingly small building, with a series of stained glass windows illuminated from within, and a clock in a domed tower that was visible by the moon. It was soon to strike eight o'clock. The streets were already deserted. A few flakes of the threatened snow drifted diagonally by.

She spoke into the darkness. She said, with Berenice's voice: *I've missed the pâté; it's dreadful of me. Isn't snow going to fall tonight? The train was comfortable but oh so unfriendly, with no one interested in conversation at all; I've heard that the old horse and carriages were much more congenial, in my grandmother's day – at journey's end you'd be lifelong friends with your fellow travellers!*

Nora repeated every sentence, exactly as it had reached her ears. She came to the last few words of the vision. *Find the lady with flowers tattooed on her forearm. A horrific fate awaits her here! She must leave to save herself.*

There would be more words to come before the end of the trip, and Nora would enact Berenice's words for Leo once she was back in Zurich. Leo, who called Nora his *ozalid*: his photocopy. Sighing, Nora rolled up her silken sleeve, to expose the skin of her forearm. A tattoo, of a yellow chrysanthemum, among pale pink spots like nettle rash. It was fortunate she'd brought panstick. She'd cover that little flower before she left the room again.

2

At nine, Nora checked the hotel's public rooms one by one in search of Berenice. The last place remaining was the Narcissus Bar, on the ground floor, so Nora followed the signs. Sitting just outside the entrance, on a velvet upholstered banquette, was the public works architect. He inhaled his cigar and narrowed his eyes at her.

"They won't let you in," he advised.

"I'm sorry?"

"You're alone. They won't let you in. It's a hotel of standing, they have to keep out the wrong sort of woman, you understand, and only the wrong sort of woman would be drinking alone."

"Are you saying I look like a prostitute?" she asked, but she was resigned; so many hotels did hold onto these antiquated notions.

He laughed. "No. Although I bet the prostitutes serving the Regent are quite well turned out, as a rule. In any case I'm offering a solution – I can go in there with you."

Nora rapidly calculated: if unaccompanied women were turned away, then Berenice wouldn't be in the bar either.