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opening extract from

once

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Once I was living in an orphanage in the mountains and I shouldn't have been and I almost caused a riot.

It was because of the carrot.

You know how when a nun serves you very hot soup from a big metal pot and she makes you lean in close so she doesn't drip and the steam from the pot makes your glasses go all misty and you can't wipe them because you're holding your dinner bowl and the fog doesn't clear even when you pray to God, Jesus, the Virgin Mary, the Pope and Adolf Hitler?

That's happening to me.

Somehow I find my way towards my table. I use my ears for navigation.

Dodie who always sits next to me is a loud slurper because of his crooked teeth. I hold my bowl above my head so other kids can't pinch my soup while I'm fogged up and I use Dodie's slurping noises to guide me in.

I feel for the edge of the table and put my bowl down and wipe my glasses.

That's when I see the carrot.

It's floating in my soup, huge among the flecks of cabbage and the tiny blobs of pork fat and the few lonely lentils and the bits of grey plaster from the kitchen ceiling.

A whole carrot.

I can't believe it. Three years and eight months I've been in this orphanage and I haven't had a whole carrot in my dinner bowl once. Neither has anyone else. Even the nuns don't get whole carrots, and they get bigger servings than us kids because they need the extra energy for being holy.

We can't grow vegetables up here in the mountains. Not even if we pray a lot. It's because of the frosts. So if a whole carrot turns up in this place, first it gets admired, then it gets chopped into enough pieces so that sixty-two kids, eleven nuns and one priest can all have a bit.

I stare at the carrot.

At this moment I'm probably the only kid in Poland with a whole carrot in his dinner bowl. For a few seconds I think it's a miracle. Except it can't be because miracles only happened in ancient times and this is 1942.

Then I realise what the carrot means and I have to sit down quick before my legs give way.

I can't believe it.

At last. Thank you God, Jesus, Mary, the Pope

and Adolf Hitler, I've waited so long for this.

It's a sign.

This carrot is a sign from Mum and Dad. They've sent my favourite vegetable to let me know their problems are finally over. To let me know that after three long years and eight long months things are finally improving for Jewish booksellers. To let me know they're coming to take me home.

Yes.

Dizzy with excitement, I stick my fingers into the soup and grab the carrot.

Luckily the other kids are concentrating on their own dinners, spooning their soup up hungrily and peering into their bowls in case there's a speck of meat there, or a speck of rat poo.

I have to move fast.

If the others see my carrot there'll be a jealousy riot.

This is an orphanage. Everyone here is meant to have dead parents. If the other kids find out mine aren't dead, they'll get really upset and the nuns here could be in trouble with the Catholic head office in Warsaw for breaking the rules.

'Felix Saint Stanislaus.'

I almost drop the carrot. It's Mother Minka's voice, booming at me from the high table.

Everyone looks up.

'Don't fiddle with your food, Felix,' says Mother Minka. 'If you've found an insect in your bowl, just eat it and be grateful.'

The other kids are all staring at me. Some are grinning. Others are frowning and wondering what's going on. I try not to look like a kid who's just slipped a carrot into his pocket. I'm so happy I don't care that my fingers are stinging from the hot soup.

Mum and Dad are coming at last.

They must be down in the village. They must have sent the carrot up here with Father Ludwik to surprise me.

When everyone has gone back to eating, I give Mother Minka a grateful smile. It was good of her to make a joke to draw attention away from my carrot.

There were two reasons Mum and Dad chose this orphanage, because it was the closest and because of Mother Minka's goodness. When they were bringing me here, they told me how in all the years Mother Minka was a customer of their bookshop, back before things got difficult for Jewish booksellers, she never once criticised a single book.

Mother Minka doesn't see my smile, she's too busy glaring at the Saint Kazimierz table, so I give Sister Elwira a grateful smile too. Sister Elwira doesn't notice either because she's too busy serving the last few kids and being sympathetic to a girl who's crying about the amount of ceiling plaster in her soup.

They're so kind, these nuns. I'll miss them when Mum and Dad take me home and I stop being Catholic and go back to being Jewish.

'Don't you want that?' says a voice next to me.

Dodie is staring at my bowl. His is empty. He's sucking his teeth and I can see he's hoping my soup is up for grabs.

Over his shoulder, Marek and Telek are sneering.

'Grow up, Dodek,' says Marek, but in his eyes there's a flicker of hope that he might get some too.

Part of me wants to give my soup to Dodie because his mum and dad died of sickness when he was three. But these are hard times and food is scarce and even when your tummy's stuffed with joy you still have to force it down.

I force it down.

Dodie grins. He knew I'd want it. The idea that I wouldn't is so crazy it makes us both chuckle.

Then I stop. I'll have to say goodbye to everyone here soon. That makes me feel sad. And when the other kids see Mum and Dad are alive, they'll know I haven't been truthful with them. That makes me feel even sadder.

I tell myself not to be silly. It's not like they're my friends, not really. You can't have friends when you're leading a secret life. With friends you might get too relaxed and blurt stuff out and then they'll know you've just been telling them a story.

But Dodie feels like my friend.

While I finish my soup I try to think of a good thing I can do for him. Something to show him I'm

glad I know him. Something to make his life here a bit better after I've gone, after I'm back in my own home with my own books and my own mum and dad.

I know exactly what I can do for Dodie.

Now's the moment. The bath selection has just started.

Mother Minka is standing at the front, checking Jozef all over for dirt. He's shivering. We're all shivering. This bathroom is freezing, even now in summer. Probably because it's so big and below ground level. In ancient times, when this convent was first built, this bathroom was probably used for ice-skating.

Mother Minka flicks her tassel towards the dormitory. Jozef grabs his clothes and hurries away, relieved.

'Lucky pig,' shivers Dodie.

I step out of the queue and go up to Mother Minka.

'Excuse me, Mother,' I say.

She doesn't seem to notice me. She's peering hard at Borys, who's got half the playing field under his fingernails and toenails. And a fair bit of it in his armpits. I can see Mother Minka is about to flick her tassel towards the bath.

Oh no, I'm almost too late.

Then Mother Minka turns to me.

'What is it?' she says.

'Please, Mother,' I say hurriedly. 'Can Dodek be first in the bath?'

The boys behind me in the queue start muttering. I don't glance back at Dodie. I know he'll understand what I'm trying to do.

'Why?' says Mother Minka.

I step closer. This is between me and Mother Minka.

'You know how Dodek's parents died of sickness,' I say. 'Well Dodek's decided he wants to be a doctor and devote his life to wiping out sickness all over the world. The thing is, as a future doctor he's got to get used to being really hygenic and washing himself in really hot and clean water.'

I hold my breath and hope Dodie didn't hear me. He actually wants to be a pig-slaughterer and I'm worried he might say something.

Mother Minka looks at me.

'Get to the back of the queue,' she says.

'He really needs to be first in the bath every week,' I say. 'As a doctor.'

'Now,' booms Mother Minka.

I don't argue. You don't with Mother Minka. Nuns can have good hearts and still be violent.

As I pass Dodie he gives me a grateful look. I give him an apologetic one. I know he wouldn't mind about the doctor story. He likes my stories. Plus I think he'd be a good doctor. Once, after he pulled the legs off a fly, he managed to stick a couple back on.

Ow, this stone floor is really cold on bare feet.

That's something Dodie could do in the future. Design bathroom heating systems. I bet by the year 2000 every bathroom in the world will be heated. Floors and everything. With robots to pick the twigs and grit out of the bathwater.

Look at that, Borys is the first one in and the water's brown already. I can imagine what it'll be like when I finally get in. Cold, with more solid bits in it than our soup.

I close my eyes and think about the baths Mum and Dad used to give me. In front of the fire with clean water and lots of warm wet cuddles and lots and lots of stories.

I can't wait to have a bath like that again.

Hurry up, Mum and Dad.

Once I stayed awake all night, waiting for Mum and Dad to arrive.

They didn't.

They haven't.

But it's alright. Nobody drives up that narrow rocky road from the village in the dark unless they're Father Ludwik. He says God helps him and his horse with the steering.

Mum and Dad were never very religious so they probably wouldn't risk it.

They'll be here once it's daylight.

What I'm worrying about now is whether they'll recognise me after three years and eight months.

You know how when you have a haircut or a tooth comes out, your parents carry on about how you must be the kid who belongs to the shoe mender down the street?

Well I've changed even more than that. When I arrived at this place I was plump and little with

freckles and two gaps. Now I'm about twice as tall with glasses and a complete set of teeth.

I press my face against the cold window pane over my bed and watch the sky start to go pale and tell myself not to be silly. I remind myself what Mum and Dad said when they brought me here.

'We won't forget you,' Mum whispered through her tears. I knew exactly what she was saying. That they wouldn't forget to come and get me once they'd fixed up their bookshop troubles.

'We'll never forget you,' Dad said in a husky voice, and I knew exactly what he was saying too. That when they come, even if I've changed a lot, they'll still know it's me.

The sun is peeping up behind the convent gates. Now it's getting light outside I don't feel so anxious.

Plus, if all else fails, I've got my notebook.

The cover's a bit stained from when I had to snatch it away from Marek and Borys in class. It was to stop them reading it and some ink got spilled, but apart from that it looks exactly like it did when Mum and Dad gave it to me. It's the only notebook with a yellow cardboard cover in this whole place, so they'll definitely recognise it if I hold it in an obvious way when they arrive.

And when they read it, they'll know I'm their son because it's full of stories I've written about them. About their travels all over Poland discovering why their bookshop supplies suddenly went so

unreliable. Dad wrestling a wild boar that's been eating authors. Mum rescuing a book printer who's been kidnapped by pirates. Her and Dad crossing the border into Germany and finding huge piles of really good books propping up wobbly tables.

Alright, most of the stories are a bit exaggerated, but they'll still recognise themselves and know I'm their son.

What's that sound?

It's a car or truck, one of those ones that don't need a horse because they've got an engine. It's chugging up the hill. I can hear it getting closer.

There go Sister Elwira and Sister Graznya across the courtyard to open the gates.

Mum and Dad, you're here at last.

I'm so excited I'm steaming up the window and my glasses. I rub them both with my pyjama sleeve.

A car rumbles into the courtyard.

Mum and Dad must have swapped it for the old bookshop cart. Trust them, they've always been modern. They were the first booksellers in the whole district to have a ladder in their shop.

I can hardly breathe.

Half the dormitory are out of bed now, pressing their noses against the windows too. Any second now they'll all see Mum and Dad.

Suddenly I don't care if everyone does know my secret. Perhaps it'll give some of the other kids hope that the authorities might have made a mistake and

that their mums and dads might not be dead after all.

That's strange. The car windows are steamed up so I can't see clearly, but it looks like there are more than two people in the car. Mum and Dad must have given Father Ludwik a lift. And a couple of his relatives who fancied a day out.

I can't make out which ones are Mum and Dad.

I hold my notebook up for them to see.

The car doors open and the people get out.

I stare, numb with disappointment.

It's not Mum and Dad, it's just a bunch of men in suits with armbands.

'Felix,' says Dodie urgently, grabbing me as I hurry out of the dormitory. 'I need your help.'

I give him a pleading look. Can't he see I'm doing something urgent too? Finding out from Mother Minka if Mum and Dad sent a note with the carrot saying exactly when they'll be arriving. I've got the carrot with me to jog Mother Minka's memory.

'It's Jankiel,' says Dodie. 'He's hiding in the toilet.'

I sigh. Jankiel's only been here two weeks and he's still very nervous of strangers.

'Tell him there's nothing to worry about,' I say to Dodie. 'The men in the car are probably just officials from Catholic head office. They've probably just come to check that all our parents are dead. They'll be gone soon.'

I give a careless shrug so Dodie won't see how nervous I am about the officials. And how much I'm desperately hoping Mother Minka remembers the story we agreed on about my parents. About how they were killed in a farming accident. Tragically.

'Jankiel's not hiding from the men in the car,' says Dodie. 'He's hiding from the torture squad.'

Dodie points. Marek, Telek, Adok and Borys are crowding into the dormitory toilets.

'Come on,' says Dodie. 'We've got to save him.'

Dodie's right. We can't leave Jankiel at the mercy of the torture squad. Marek and the others have been after him since the day he arrived. He's their first new boy to torture in three years and eight months.

Since me.

Dodie shoves the toilet door open. We go in. Marek, Telek, Adok and Borys have got Jankiel on his knees. Jankiel is pleading with them. His voice is echoing a bit because they've got his head half in the toilet hole.

'Don't struggle,' says Telek to Jankiel. 'This won't hurt.'

Telek's wrong. It will hurt. It hurt when they did it to me three years and eight months ago. Having your head pushed down a toilet hole always hurts.

'Wait,' I yell.

The torture squad turn and look at me.

I know that what I say next will either save Jankiel or it won't. Desperately I try to think of something good.

'A horse crushed his parents,' I say.

Now the new kid is staring at me too.

I grip my notebook hard and let my imagination take over.

'A great big plough horse,' I continue. 'It had a heart attack in the mud and fell onto both his parents and it was too heavy for him to drag off them so he had to nurse them both for a whole day and a whole night while the life was slowly crushed out of them. And do you know what their dying words to their only son were?'

I can see the torture squad haven't got a clue.

Neither does the new kid.

'They asked him to pray for them every day,' I say. 'At the exact time they died.'

I wait for the chapel bell to finish striking seven.

'At seven o'clock in the morning,' I say.

Everyone takes this in. The torture squad look uncertain. But they're not pushing anybody down the toilet, which is good.

'That's just one of your stories,' sneers Telek, but I can tell he's not so sure.

'Quick,' says Dodie. 'I can hear Mother Minka coming.'

That's a story too because Mother Minka is down in the courtyard with the head office officials. But Marek and the others look even more uncertain. They swap glances, then hurry out of the toilets.

Dodie turns wearily to Jankiel.

'What did we tell you?' says Dodie. 'About not coming in here on your own?'

Jankiel opens his mouth to reply, then closes it again. Instead he peers past us, trying to see down into the courtyard.

'Have they gone?' he says.

Dodie nods and points towards the dormitory.

'Borys is putting mud in your bed,' he says.

'I mean the men in the car,' says Jankiel.

He looks almost as scared now as he did with the torture squad.

'They'll be gone soon,' I say. 'Mother Minka's dealing with them.'

Jankiel starts to look a bit less nervous, but only a bit. I find myself wondering if he's got secret alive parents too.

'Thanks for saving me,' he says. 'That was a good story about my parents being crushed.'

'Sorry if it brought back sad memories,' I say.

'Nah,' says Jankiel. 'My parents froze to death.'

I stare at him. If that's true, it's terrible. Their bath must have been outdoors or something.

Jankiel glances down at my notebook.

'Do you make up lots of stories?' he asks.

'Sometimes,' I say.

'I'm not very good at stories,' he says.

As we go out into the dormitory I find myself wondering if Jankiel is Jewish. He's got dark eyes like me. But I don't ask him. If he is, he wouldn't admit it. Not here.

Dodie stays with Jankiel, who's peering nervously out the window again, and I head off, hoping that Mother Minka has got rid of the officials so I can ask her about Mum and Dad.

As I hurry down the stairs I glance out the window myself.

In the courtyard Mother Minka is having an argument with the men. She's waving her arms, which she only does when she's in a very bossy mood.

I stop and stare.

What's that smoke?

It's a bonfire. The men are having a bonfire in the courtyard. Why are they doing that? It can't be for warmth, the sun's up now and it's going to be a hot day.

I can see why Mother Minka's so angry. The smoke is going into the chapel and the classrooms and the girls' dormitory.

Oh no, I've just seen what the men are burning.

That's terrible.

If Mum and Dad saw this, they'd be in tears.

The other nuns are down there in the courtyard, and some of them have got their faces in their hands.

I'm feeling very upset myself.

The men are burning books.