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opening extract from

# Angel Cake

written by

## Cathy Cassidy

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The last few bits and pieces are packed. Mum is running around the flat with a duster, trying to make it all perfect for the next tenants, and Kazia's sitting on her suitcase hugging the old rabbit Gran knitted for her and trying not to cry.

I know how she feels. I'm excited about moving, but scared as well. I've tried so many times to picture this day, but now that it's finally here I feel numb, shaky. My stomach is full of butterflies, some of them in hobnailed boots.

Gran and Grandad arrive to take us to the airport, and then it all moves too fast. The worst bit is saying goodbye. Gran and Grandad hug me so hard it feels like they are trying to memorize the shape of me in their arms, and both of them are crying fat, salty tears even while they are telling us to be brave, to think of the future, to make the most of the new life that's waiting for us in Liverpool.

'We'll write, and phone, and email,' I promise.

'And we'll visit, and you can come over at Christmas and visit us . . .'

'Of course,' Gran says, but I know they won't. They will be with Uncle Zarek and Aunt Petra and the cousins this Christmas, in their big flat with the log fire crackling and the festive table always set with an extra place in case a lonely traveller should come knocking at the door.

By the time we get through security, Mum is crying too, and Kazia, and even I have to take a deep breath in and wipe the tears away. It is hard to leave Krakow, to leave Poland, and step into the unknown. It is hard to leave my family, my friends, the place I once called home.

It's hard, but it's what I've dreamt of too, for years.

Dad went away to work in Britain when I was nine. He could earn better money there, Mum explained, and one day, maybe soon, he would send for us. In Britain, we would have a better life. I didn't know I needed a better life, back then. The one I had seemed good enough, until Dad went away.

I missed him. I'd sit by my bedroom window, looking out beyond the city rooftops to the big, blue sky where the swallows that nested in the eaves just above our apartment swooped and soared in the late summer sun. I wondered if there were swallows

in Britain, if Dad could look up, as I did, and see them dip and glide through the blue.

I wished I could fly south for the winter, like the swallows, to a place where the sun always shone. I wished we could all be together again.

In Krakow, the winters are cold – thick snow lies on the ground for months at a time. The rooftops are dusted with white sugar-frosting, and you have to wear two pairs of socks inside your boots just to stop your toes from turning blue.

'Does it snow in Britain?' my little sister, Kazia, wanted to know, when Dad came home that first Christmas.

'Sometimes,' he told us. 'But it's not as cold as Krakow!'

'Can we go back with you?' I asked.

Dad smiled. 'One day, Anya! Britain is a land of opportunity, a place where hard work is rewarded. The streets are paved with gold. Not real gold, of course, but you know what I mean.'

I kind of did. I imagined a place where everything was beautiful, where everyone smiled because they could have whatever they wanted.

'We could have a future there,' Dad said softly, his eyes bright with dreams of his own.

'Are there swallows?' I asked Dad, and he just laughed.

'Yes, there are swallows,' he said. 'Just like the

ones in Krakow. Britain is not so different, really, Anya.'

But I knew it was a world away.

It took three years for Dad to settle enough to bring us over to England, three years of postcards and letters and long-distance phone calls. Sometimes, if we were really lucky, there were little wooden toys, animals mostly, that he'd carved and painted on the long, lonely nights in England, just for Kazia and me.

Dad had to take whatever work he could find, picking fruit, on a building site, night shifts in a pickle factory. I wasn't sure how any of that could be better than his job in Krakow, managing a team of joiners and woodworkers for a big firm in town, but I didn't argue.

Then Dad came to Liverpool and met Yuri, a Ukrainian guy running an agency that placed migrant workers in jobs all over the city. Dad went into the office looking for a job and ended up as a partner in the business.

'Yuri wants to use my management experience,' Dad told us over the phone. 'And my language skills, of course. I can bring many Polish workers to the agency. With my skills, the business can grow, become the best of its kind in the north-west.'

'Wonderful,' Mum had said, but her eyes were

anxious. I could see that living in Britain was Dad's dream and mine, not hers, but she didn't argue.

'This is our chance,' Dad explained. 'This business will make a fortune for us. This is the start of our new life!'

Dad said he had a house for us, in a nice area, with a garden. I imagined a pretty cottage with whitewashed walls and a glossy red door and climbing roses clinging to the walls, like pictures in the books Dad used to send to help me with my English.

I imagined a new school, where the pupils wore neat uniforms and played hockey or quidditch and had midnight feasts. I imagined new friends, a boyfriend maybe.

Mum gave up her job at the bakery in town, where she had been in charge of making wedding cakes and birthday cakes and the rich, dark poppy-seed cake everyone loved to eat at Christmas. 'No more cake,' my little sister Kazia frowned.

'There will always be cake,' Mum promised. 'Life would be dull without a little sweetness now and then.'

We packed up our possessions, said our goodbyes.

And now we are on the plane, which is scary and exciting and wonderful all at the same time. None of us have ever been on a plane before, and Kazia looks scared as Mum buckles her seat belt. She hugs her knitted rabbit tightly. We are leaving our old

lives behind, building new ones from scratch, in a city called Liverpool where the streets are paved with gold.

I bite my lip. The plane climbs through grey cloud, finally emerging into clear blue skies and sunshine. The clouds are far beneath us now, a carpet of soft white candyfloss. Everything feels fresh and new. It's like being on the edge of something wonderful, something you've dreamed of for years and years but never quite had within grasp until now.

Britain, at last.

I am ready for this. I have worked so hard on my English – in my last school test I came top of the class. Beside me, Kazia slips her small hand into mine. 'I won't know what to say to anyone,' she whispers. 'I can't remember any English words. It's all right for you, you're good at English!'

'So are you,' I tell my little sister. 'We'll be fine!'

'It won't be as easy outside the classroom,' Mum reminds us. 'There are accents to unravel, and your dad says Liverpool has quite a strong one. But we will settle in, I know.'

I smile and lean back against the window. I think about the swallows, making their long journey south, year after year, never knowing just what they will find. I try to be brave, like them.

We can't stay above the candyfloss clouds forever, of course, and eventually the plane begins its descent

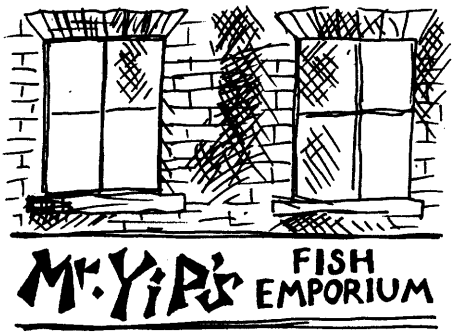
towards Liverpool John Lennon Airport. The three of us hold hands as the plane lands, our eyes wide, our hearts thumping. Climbing down the plane steps on to British soil, we find ourselves in a dark, grey world where the wind whips our hair against our faces and the rain slants down in sheets.

'Just like Krakow,' Mum jokes.

We collect our cases and go through passport control and immigration, and then we are at the gates, and Dad is there, waving madly, his face breaking into the widest grin I have ever seen.

'My girls!' he yells. 'My beautiful girls!'

We fall into his arms.




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Nothing about Britain is the way I thought it would be. Instead of blue skies and sunshine, there are grey clouds and endless rain that seeps into your bones, your soul. It's October, and there are no swallows, just noisy pigeons and squawking seagulls.

It's funny how quickly a dream can crumble.

The house Dad promised turns out to be a poky flat above a chippy called Mr Yip's Fish Emporium. The faded wallpaper curls away from damp walls and the smell of stale chip fat clings to everything. Dad has fixed the broken window, mended the kitchen cupboard, but still, it's a dump. There are no roses around the door, just yellow weeds between the broken paving stones and a litter of scrunched-up chip papers.

It turns out that Dad's new business isn't making his fortune after all. Instead, it's eating up most of his time and quite a bit of his savings.

'It's just a little cash-flow problem,' he explains. 'I promised you a proper house, and we will get

one, definitely, once the agency is doing well. This flat – this area – is just temporary.'

Mum looks around the flat as if she might cry.

'The agency *will* take off,' Dad promises. 'You have to trust me on this. We've had a few problems, but with the cash I've been able to put into the business, we will soon be in profit. I didn't want you to change your plans – I wanted us all to be together. We've waited so long to be a family again.'

Dad puts his arms round Mum and me and Kazia, and for a moment the nightmare flat fades. We are together again. That's what matters, isn't it? And this is an adventure . . .

That's what I tell myself, curled up in a creaky bed with the moonlight flooding through stringy curtains and the sound of my little sister Kazia crying quietly into her pillow.

That's what I tell myself the next day, as we walk into town to go to Polish Mass at the Catholic cathedral. Mum, Kazia and I look around at the tall Victorian houses, which look like they've seen better days, the ragged pair of boxer shorts hanging from a tree like a flag, the beer cans in the gutter.

Even the cathedral is a disappointment. It's like a giant ice-cream cone dumped down on to the pavement, or a shiny spaceship that has landed by accident and can't quite get away again. It's a million miles from the tall, elegant churches of Krakow.

Inside, though, light streams through the stained glass. It's like being inside a giant kaleidoscope, with patches of jewel-bright colour everywhere. I listen to the Mass, close my eyes and pray for a miracle, something to rescue us from the sad and scruffy flat, the endless grey drizzle. I want my dream back, because it was way better than the reality.

After Mass, we stand on the cathedral steps while Dad introduces us to his friends and workmates.

'This is Tomasz and Stefan, who work with me,' he says, beaming. 'This is Mr and Mrs Nowak, and Mr and Mrs Zamoyski . . .'

'Pleased to meet you . . . of course, this is a difficult time to be starting out . . . there's not quite as much work in the city as there once was, but I'm sure you will be fine! Welcome, welcome!'

We shake hands and smile until our faces hurt.

'You'll find it very different from home,' one girl tells me. 'I hated it, at first.'

'Just don't show them you're scared,' another tells me.

'I'm not scared!' I argue, and the girls just look at me, smiling, as if they know better. Well, maybe they do.

The next day, I pull on a white shirt and black skirt, ready for school. I slip on a second-hand blazer, black with red piping, two sizes too big for me. It belonged to the teenage son of one of Dad's workers,

who went to the same school I will be going to. He doesn't need his blazer now, because the whole family packed up and went back to Warsaw.

I look out at the grey rain, and I almost envy them.

Mum walks us to school, her lips set into a firm, determined line. The playground of St Peter and Paul's is quiet as we walk over to the office, with just a few kids in blazers hanging around in little groups.

In the office, we fill in forms, slowly, with lots of sign language and mime to help us along. Mum keeps looking at me to help explain what the office staff are saying, but it doesn't sound anything like the language I've been studying so hard at school in Krakow. It makes no sense to me at all.

The head teacher, Mr Fisher, shakes my hand and tells me, very loudly and very slowly, that he hopes I will be happy here. And then Mum and Kazia are gone, to go through the whole thing again at Kazia's new primary school, and I am left alone.

When I step out into the corridor this time, there is a sea of teenagers, pushing, shoving, laughing, yelling. A school secretary leads the way, bulldozing through the crowd to deliver me to Room 21a. She ushers me inside and disappears back to her office, and kids descend on me like crows picking over a roadkill rabbit.

They prod, they poke, they tug at the sleeve of

my too-big blazer, and all the time they are talking, laughing, asking questions. I can't understand anything at all. By the time the teacher turns up, the questions have got louder, slower, with accompanying sighs and rolling of eyes.

'WHAT . . . IS . . . YOUR . . . NAME?'

'WHERE . . . DO . . . YOU . . . COME . . . FROM?'

I open my mouth to answer, but my voice has deserted me, and the teacher raps on her desk for silence. I slump into a front-row seat, shaken, my eyes suddenly brimming with tears.

I remember what the Polish girls said, at Mass yesterday, and try to look brave. On the way to my next class, a couple of kids adopt me, dragging me from classroom to lunch hall like a stray dog on a bit of string.

'This is Anya,' they tell everyone. 'She's from POLAND! Go on, say something, Anya!'

Every time I open my mouth, people laugh and roll their eyes. 'What?' they yell. 'Don't they have schools, where you come from? Stick with me, I'll look after you . . .'

I am a novelty, a joke. By the end of the day, I am exhausted. I am so far out of my depth I don't know how I'll find the courage to ever return. This school is nothing like the ones in the English books Dad used to send me, nothing at all.

I will never fit in here, not in a million years.

When I get home to the poky flat above the chippy, my little sister Kazia is dancing around the living room, singing a song she has learnt in English. She runs up to me, waving a reading book at me.

'I made three new friends today!' she tells me. 'Jodie, Lauren and Amber. My teacher is called Miss Green. She's really nice! How was your school?'

'Fine,' I tell her, through gritted teeth.

'I like it here,' Kazia decides. 'Everyone is really friendly.'

I can't be jealous because my little sister is settling in so easily . . . can I?

'And guess what?' Mum chips in. 'I've found myself a job, so I can help your dad out with the cash flow, and hopefully get us out of this place and into somewhere a bit . . . well, nicer.'

'Right,' I say. 'What's the job?'

Mum looks shifty. 'It's just cleaning work, actually,' she admits. 'My English isn't good, so I couldn't expect much more. Still, I've never been afraid of a bit of elbow grease. It's a start.'

I try for a smile, but it's a struggle. 'Mum?' I ask in a quiet voice. 'What happens if we try and try, and just don't settle in? If we decide we don't like it here? What if Britain is not for us?'

Mum frowns. 'We will settle, Anya,' she tells me firmly. 'I know the flat is not what we expected, and

that school will be hard for you at first. It was always going to be difficult, but we have opportunities here, a chance for a better future. Your dad has worked so hard for this . . . we must make it work. There's no going back.'

No going back. I think of the sunlight glinting on the River Wisla, the swallows swooping, crisp white snow on the rooftops, of my best friend Nadia sitting alone next to an empty desk that used to be mine.

My heart feels cold and heavy, like a stone inside my chest.