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PART I

Leaving Gdańsk Główny

The wheels on the suitcase break
Before we've even left Gdańsk Główny.

Mama knocks them on some steps and
Bang, crack, rattle –
No more use.
There are
plastic bits
Everywhere.

It's hard for Mama carrying a suitcase
And a bulging laundry bag.

It's hard for Mama
With everyone watching.

She's shy about the laundry bag,
An old nylon one
Borrowed from Babcia.

Tata took all the good luggage
When he left us,
When he walked out

On Mama and me.

‘There are clean clothes in it,’
Mama reminds me,
Like this were something
To be proud of.

And she won’t let me carry a thing
Except
my own
small bag.

‘You guard our passports, Kasienka.
Good girl, Kasienka.
And the money.
We’ll need those pounds.
Mind the money and the passports.
Good girl, Kasienka.’

Mama prattles as I scuttle along
behind her
Dodging business suits and
backpacks.

There is no one to recognise Mama

In the crowded station.

But all the same, she is shy
About that laundry bag.

‘Now keep close, Kasienka.
        Keep close,’
Mama mutters as we leave Gdańsk Główny
And step aboard a bus for the airport

While I cling to the belt of her coat,
Too old for holding hands,
Even if she had one free.

Stansted

We weren't on a ship.
Immigrants don't arrive on
Overcrowded boats any more,
Swarming wet docks like rats.
It isn't 1920, and it isn't Ellis Island –
Nothing as romantic as a view of
Lady Liberty
To welcome us.

We flew into Stansted.
    Not quite London
    But near enough.

At immigration we queue
Nervously and practise English in our heads:
    Yes-thank-you-officer.
I know I am not at home
When talking makes my tummy turn
And I rehearse what I say
Like lines from a play
Before opening my mouth.

At baggage reclaim
The laundry bag

Coasts around the carousel
And people look.

Someone points,
So Mama says, 'Leave it, Kasienka.
There's nothing in that bag but long
underwear.
We won't need them here.
We'll need galoshes.'

Mama is right:
The air in England is swampy,
The sky a grey blanket.
And rain threatens
To drench us.

Dwellings

Mama rented a room
In Coventry.

This is where we'll live
Until we find Tata:
One room on the fourth floor
Of a crumbling building
That reminds me of history class,
Reminds me of black and white photographs
Of bombed
out
villages.

There is a white kitchen in the room,
In the corner,
And one big bed,
Lumpy in the middle
Like a cold pierogi
For Mama and me to share.
'It's just one room,' I say,
When what I mean is
We can't live here.
'It's called a *studio*,'
Mama tells me,

As though a word
Can change the truth.

Mama stands by the dirty window
With her back to me
Looking out at the droning traffic,
The Coventry Ring Road.

Then she marches to the kitchen and
Plugs in the small electric kettle.
She boils the water
Twice,
And makes two mugs of tea.
One for her,
One for me.
'Like home,' she says,
Supping the tea,
Staring into its blackness.

Mama found the perfect home for
A cast-off laundry bag.
Yes.
But not a home for us.

First Day

Mrs Warren asks, 'Do you speak English, dear?'
Crouching down,
Resting her hands on her knees
As though summoning a spaniel.

Her voice is loud
And clear,
Her tongue pink
and rolling.

I nod and Mrs Warren smiles,
Then sighs,
Relieved.

'So what's your name, dear?' Mrs Warren asks,
And I'm glad, because I was afraid she had mistaken
Me for someone called Dear,
And that I would have to
Respond to that name
For ever.

'My name is Kasienka,' I say,
embarrassed to use my
crooked English.

Mrs Warren stands up straight
and stretches her back.
She sighs,
Again,
And ridges appear on her brow.
She looks at Mama
then back at me.

'Well . . . Cassie, welcome!'

I want to point out her mistake,
Give her a chance to say my
Name properly.

But Mama touches my shoulder.
A clear caution.
'We'll start you in Year Seven
And see how that goes.'