Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan

Ruth Gilligan is an Irish novelist and journalist. Her debut novel Forget reached number one on the Irish bestsellers’ list when she was eighteen, making her the youngest person in Ireland ever to do so, while her subsequent books Somewhere In Between and Can You See Me? were both published while she was still at university. She writes and reviews for the Irish Times, the Irish Independent, the TLS and the Guardian, and she teaches creative writing at the University of Birmingham.
First published in hardback and trade paperback in Great Britain in 2016 by Atlantic Books, an imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd.

Copyright © Ruth Gilligan, 2016

The moral right of Ruth Gilligan to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act of 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior permission of both the copyright owner and the above publisher of this book.

Every effort has been made to trace or contact all copyright-holders. The publishers will be pleased to make good any omissions or rectify any mistakes brought to their attention at the earliest opportunity.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN: 978 1 78239 856 1
Trade Paperback ISBN: 978 1 78239 857 8

Printed in Great Britain

Atlantic Books
An Imprint of Atlantic Books Ltd
Ormond House
26–27 Boswell Street
London
WC1N 3JZ
For Debbie, where it all began
and
For Alex, until the end.
There are those of us who haven’t yet told our stories, or refuse to tell them, and so we become them: we hide away inside the memory until we can no longer stand the shell or the shock – perhaps that’s me, or perhaps I must tell it before it’s forgotten or becomes, like everything else, something else.

—Colum McCann, Zoli
In the bloodless light of the foyer she feels herself nothing but a stranger.

The all-smiles nurse leads her through. Visitors’ Book. Autograph please. A set of coded doors and then a waft of luncheon smells, almost solid on the air. Cream of mushroom soup.

The first room is laid out with tables and chairs, the aftermath of last night’s Festive Bingo. Old games for old folks, two little ducks. She surveys, clutching her parcel to her chest; spots a leftover scorecard that has fallen to the floor. But she admits there is a polish to the place she hadn’t been expecting, a vase of lilies on the sideboard and the surfaces wiped so clean you could almost see your face in them, even if after three days without sleep she would probably just prefer to look away.

In the next room, a parliament of armchairs curves around a television – a Father Ted rerun – the volume turned all the way down to mute. Only, she can just make out a hum of classical music playing somewhere near, which turns the priests into a sort of silent film, a farce of dog collars and fags and mouths mouthing go on, Father, you will you will you will.

The television’s audience, though, won’t resist the distraction;
a ripple of heads for the arrival; wrinkled necks strained tight, young again. And eyes that cannot seem to place her – is she somebody’s granddaughter? A niece? Whose turn is it for a visitor anyway? Usually Sammy Harris is the safest bet, more relatives than marbles left in him these days. Or even Betty O’Meara – an age since she has had one – not after her brood decided to emigrate to Canada, something to do with these ‘recessionary times’, a second chance buried underneath the snow.

The imposter herself only has eyes for the floor. Still she hugs her parcel as she follows the nurse out towards the conservatory where another scatter of them sit, framed in the frail light.

Until, tucked up in the corner, they find him.

He wears a tatty shirt. A tie. A little hat, poised atop his head. It is a Jewish hat, apparently, though the symbolism is overshadowed by the other men’s jealousy – covers his bald patch nicely, so it does. He sits unmoving, staring out at the back garden where a cluster of pigeons takes lumps out of the mangy ground.

Two little ducks, lucky for some.

But the onlookers now are too curious for the birds, because this here is a revelation – the first visitor the old man has ever received – in here for years, like, and not a single one! Of course, they all have their theories about him, half-baked stuff whispered round. Even the staff, sneaking into the Records Room for a go of his file to see what family, if any, he has left; what his story could possibly be. The folder, though, doesn’t say a word. Totally empty. The most vigilant Home for the Elderly in all of Dublin, yet somehow he has slipped through the cracks.

The nurse leaves the unlikely pair to it, still-lifed in silence. The classical music changes track. The girl looks exhausted. After a
while the old man stands and leads her off down the corridor, much to the others’ annoyance – just when things were getting interesting – before they reach his room and step inside and finally, it is her turn to stare.

The entire bedroom has been covered. All four walls, from carpet to ceiling, bristle with layer upon layer of paper. Foolscap. Narrow-lined. Printer plain. Not a hint of wall left peeking. Each page is covered too in line after line of the old man’s handwriting – he transcribes another sheet every day, then pins it up with all the rest, stabbed deep with the rusty tacks he keeps in a drawer beside his bed. It is the strangest of rituals, the other folks think; odder, even, than most. Wonder sometimes if he kept going forever would the walls just close right in? Crushed to death by his own words and how about that for a way to go, eh?

The staff, meanwhile, try to have a read when they can – any excuse to nip into his room. To change his bed linen. To drop off his laundry. Tricky at first to find your way with the scrawl, but the words themselves, ah, now we’re talking. Melt your bloody heart:

What about a man and a woman who court via pigeon mail,  
until the woman falls in love with the pigeon instead?  
It all started on Clanbrassil Street in 1941, an unlikely place for love.

‘And do you suppose they are his memories?’ they speculate then, back in the staffroom over builder’s tea and biscuits that have been touched by too many fingers. ‘Events like, from his past?’

‘Or just ideas from his imagination? Maybe he was a writer in his previous life?’
‘Jaysus, and I wonder what was I in mine?’

Under the weight of confusion the girl sits – a wooden chair at the foot of the bed – still holding her strange bundle to her chest. Whereas the old man seems to have grown lively, skipping about, running his fingers along the overlaps of paper like the feathers of a swan that might take flight.

She bites her nail; flicks a white half-moon to the floor.

When the burden becomes too much she holds it up, an offering. He pauses; takes it from her.

Unwrapped, it is a book, a hefty thing with a black leather cover and gold letters indented so deep they catch the bit of sunlight finding its way in through the window to watch.

The tome looks so heavy in the old man’s lap – a paperweight as if he might blow away.

Slowly, the girl begins to talk, presumably to explain about the gift. That it is a great read? A family heirloom? No one is sure. Only that the more she speaks the further he seems to sink, lower and lower back into himself like he has just been told the most Godawful news. While she sprouts the other way, quicker now, reasserting the natural order, higher and higher until she is standing, smiling, a real beauty as it turns out, despite the cut of her; despite how she suddenly has to go, just like that, slamming the door behind her with an end-of-the-world bang.

The draught makes the pages on the walls flutter, a whisper that only the old man can hear. Though for the entire visit, he hasn’t uttered a word.

Two days later, the walls have shed their plumage. A large envelope sits stuffed on the chair, sealed with the single bit of spit he
managed to get going in the mirror that morning. The pins are clustered on the bedside table like a set of teeth, bared.

He waits until after lunch to take the nurse aside. The address on the envelope is in the same, stuttering hand they know so well – the last words, it turns out, he will ever write – and above it, the name is the same as the one from the Visitors’ Book the other day; the one that exited so quickly she didn’t even have time to sign herself out again so now it reads as if, really, she never left.

The residents have finished their soup and squabble over the Penguin bars brought out for dessert. They go calm again as they trade the feeble jokes hidden under the wrappers’ seams:

‘Why do seagulls always fly over the sea?’
‘Because if they flew over bays they would be bay-gulls, and they’re made out of bread.’

A drizzle of half-laughs. A lash of glances in his direction. But the old man is too distracted to notice, only nods a ‘thank you’ to the nurse then shambles back to the naked room, empty save for that single book – the black leather wedge with the gold indents; the gaffer tape stuck crooked down the spine to hold the wonk of a thing in place.

He picks it up. He stares at the title, still struggling to believe. And then he reads, knowing he might not stop, not tomorrow or even the tomorrow after that when the pigeons have flown off somewhere better again, resisting the urge to come home. Because in the end, it is the only story to have survived.
part one | In the beginning...
What if, in the beginning, they arrived by sea and then, in the end, they left by sea too, each in their own way?

‘North.
‘South.
‘East.
‘West.
‘Never once looking back?

‘Because maybe that’s all a compass can really show – the different ways a family falls apart. The pull of magnets, and the push of other dreams.’

Ruth heard the sound of bone before she felt it. The crack was clean, just below the shrivel of her knuckle; her body lurched forward from where it sat on the bed to land on that single, snappable point.

‘Tateh!’ she cried out for her father next to her in the darkness.
‘TatehIthinkIhavebrokenmy—’ the panic colliding all her words into one.

But the ship’s moan was so loud it drowned her out, its very own version of pain.

The prow buckled beneath the force of the crash, the impact
Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan

rippling along the hull. The waves leapt acrobatic. The propeller paused mid-propel. While above, the Atlantic stars spelled out a Morse code of dots.

S-O-S

Save our souls

Sinking our ship

Below deck, the bunk beds were nearly wrenched free from their fixings, the wood already gnarled with splinters that seemed sharp enough to prick the darkness and bleed it out, like a bullock drained the kosher way. As it happened, the ship itself had been for cattle once, herds of beasts sailing off towards the foreign slaughterhouses, the white-pink sinews of their shoulders knotted tightly together, hooves ankle-deep in the muck-splattered straw.

But now the stench of it was back again – the cold, meaty waft of fear.

Because the boat had crashed. An almighty thud. Ruth wondered if it was an iceberg they had hit. Or maybe a whale – she could still remember that story from Cheder; still see the gulp of the Rabbi’s throat as he acted out the moment poor Jonah was swallowed. Whole. But of course, she knew that this here was a different story; a different tale with a full cast of characters – two passengers per bed and sixty beds in total sailing from Riga to America on a promise of could-bes, suddenly thrown forward with hands out to stop the fall and bones that snapped in two like pencils.

‘Tateh—’

‘All right, Bubbeleh. All right, I am here.’

For a moment, Ruth forgot about the throb.

It was the first time her father had spoken in hours. In fact, he had been practically silent for days now, leaving her lonely there on
the top bunk, nothing to play with and nothing to listen to except for other people’s prayers; other people’s vomit as it backwashed on the floor below – ten whole days of seasickness worth. Unless, of course, homesickness spews just the same.

Her finger seared again. Eight years without breaking a bone, and now this.

And it had been strangest of all, her father’s silence next to her, because at the beginning of the journey he had barely drawn breath, filling the below-deck shadows with the usual stream of his latest ideas:

‘What about a famous mural painter who is tortured by being forced to watch his creations get covered with layer after layer of white paint?’

‘Or a man and a woman who court via pigeon mail, until the woman falls in love with the pigeon instead?’

‘Or—’

Until his wife had had enough – a lash of impatience from the bunk below. ‘Moshe!’ she cried. ‘Won’t you give us any peace?’

Even in the blackness Ruth could sense her father’s blush. ‘It’s all right, Tateh,’ she tried. ‘It is just too dark for stories. We...we cannot picture a thing.’

She had always wondered what her father did with his unused ideas – stones in his pockets, weighing him down, heavier even than the mounds of baggage they had managed to lug through the snow, across the Latvian border, up to Riga, down the port, along the gangplank to this – an entire existence condensed into a schlep-pable load. There were the stockings and the pans; the Kiddush candelabras; a compass wedged hard against a little leg making a NorthSouthEastWest bruise. And then of course there were Uncle
Dovid’s letters sent back from America, nearly as sacred to the family now as the Torah scrolls themselves. In fact, probably even more so. Because the ancient words could only tell them their past.

_In the beginning…_

Whereas these letters told the story of their future.

‘Tell it again, Tateh,’ Esther had asked when they first set sail. ‘I want to hear it again.’ Ruth’s beautiful sister Esther commanding their father’s voice to repeat his brother’s words.

So he had done as he was told; had adjusted his window-thick glasses and filled the bloated belly of the boat with tales of all the things that awaited them across the Atlantic. He told them about Manhattan with its buildings that scraped the sky; about the flag lined with stripes and a fistful of stars; about the giant lady with a crown and a torch who welcomed the weary ships in.

And it was only a few more days until their own ship would arrive – two weeks at sea, they had been told. Despite her nausea, Ruth had been counting. And she had even used her compass to try to plot a map in her head, a bit like the one Tateh had had pinned to his attic wall, back where they had come from. It was a yellowed thing, with crosshatch lines for the ocean and a red dot for ‘New York’. _Can you see it, Bubbeleh, can you?_ Only, the dot had been pointed to so many times that eventually it had disappeared, rubbed away by the poke of desperate fingertips, as if the place never existed at all.

And now her finger was broken.

She turned to ask her Tateh for a kiss; to feel the bush of his beard up against her. But suddenly he seemed busy with other things, the bash of the boat bringing him back to life. He clambered his way down from the bunk and reached up for Ruth to follow. Confused, she let herself be lifted, her hand stashed tight into her
chest, before he took her other hand and led her on through the
blackness, a wobble in her legs from the waves underneath. And
soon there were other legs too, other hands and other wobbles as
the rest of the passengers began to follow behind, the pied piper and
the rats.

‘What's happening?’ they whispered, half-terror half-delight.
‘Did somebody say...arrived?’

Ruth climbed the ladder to the deck as best she could, though
she was clumsy in Esther's old shoes, the buckles chafing stockings
chafing goosepimple flesh. Once across the gangplank she felt the
scuff of dry land beneath her; a breeze that was surprisingly warm.
But a fresh batch of whispers had already started to spread, a new
confusion doing the rounds.

‘Arrived? But—’

‘Nu, America is early.’

Ruth checked the sky as if the answer to their questions might
be there, but it was just as lightless out here as it was under the
deck – the middle of the American night. She half-remembered how
Tateh had mentioned something about ‘time differences’, not that
anyone had really bothered to hear – they had just assumed it was
another of his silly ideas – a story all about clocks. Ruth wanted to
ask him about it now, to get him to explain, only he and Mame were
babbling something else in a language she didn’t know. Russian?
Lithuanian? She could never tell – used to think they were just spe-
cial phrases only grown-ups were allowed to say until Esther had
explained it was called ‘different tongues’. So now the world had
time differences and tongue differences and how did they know
they weren't just different worlds altogether? And why was no one
sure if this was even the right one for America?
NINE FOLDS MAKE A PAPER SWAN

As soon as she saw her, though, Ruth’s head went mute.

The people around her stopped. Dead. Sea leg sways gone still. Their breaths stopped too, the whole cloud of them held tight in anticipation. But also in concentration. Because what if this was it – the moment they had been sailing for? The one they would have to remember now for the rest of their lives, to translate into words again and again for generations to come?

Arrived.
America.
The beginning?
Ruth tried to force some words of her own to stop her head from spinning away. She started with the ones she had been practising. ‘New York’ and ‘Subway tunnel’. ‘Centre Park’ where they would go to play and learn the names of different trees. And of course there was ‘Liberty’ too – wasn’t that the woman’s name? The one who stood now down the end of the port, a floppy crown on her head and an eager smile dimly lit by the yellow torch she held in her hand, guiding them in just like Uncle Dovid had said.

In a way, she looked smaller than Ruth had expected. In fact, totally different to the image in her head. But despite her father’s genes she had always struggled with her imagination, so really, what would she know? She just hoped that that side of her would grow up when the rest of her did, to make them all proud at last.

Still nobody around her spoke, unready to believe. Ruth looked at her Tateh, waiting for him to confirm. Or maybe even to call out a greeting – he was the only one amongst them who could speak any American yet, a whole library of borrowed dictionaries piled on the attic floor, building blocks for little girls to make forts. And Ruth wondered now if an idea stayed the same no matter how many
times you translated it? And what about a family, she wondered? Or even, a love?

But despite these questions, her father gave no answers. Nothing. The only time Ruth had, or ever would, see him lost for words. So she knew then that yes, they must have made it – that this here must be it.

Arrived.
America.
The beginning.
The right world at last, too perfect even to be said aloud.

While behind them Cork City lay slouched in sleep, snoring off last night’s dregs, dreaming of anything other than the unexpected arrival of a Russian slaughterhouse ship.

There is always a beginning before the beginning, and this one had started with a plague of rats.

He had been an aspiring young playwright in a village called Akmian, which meant ‘a river full of stones’. He sometimes went swimming to check if the rumours were true. He had a younger brother and a brand new wife and a skull that was full itself – an endless stutter of ideas like a tick or a twitch until one about a plague just stuck.

He felt the scurry of it, running through his dreams.

He wrote for five years; five years on one wooden, time-knotted desk, high away in an attic room where pillars of notes and ideas towered on every side – one sneeze and the pages would fly. While out in the shtetl, the locals all thought him crazy – calls his wife the Princess of the Bees and writes a play about rats?

‘Nu, inside his head must be a zoo.’
‘Noah’s Ark, two by two!’

But once finished, something about the play caught on. First in the shtetl’s tiny shed theatre, the local ramshackle treat; then in the town of Vilnius; then eventually it caught on in Moscow. And every night in the Empire’s biggest city, beneath the ceilings dripping gold, the audience would gaze at the swarms of rodents; at the valiant hero who did not slaughter them, but rather rhymed the rats to death with his poetry and wit. Though the biggest joke of all was that no one could ever know the name of the man who had created this magic. Anonymous said the theatre programme. Anobody. A genius with a pockmarked face and a pair of bottle-thick specs forbidden to catch even a glimpse of his own work.

Since 1882 it had been illegal for Jews to move to Moscow. So said the May Laws. The no-you-May-not Laws. After the assassination of the Tsar the conspiracy theories had rippled out from St Petersburg, all eyes burning on the underdogs. Until eventually, the truth came out – that yes, there had been a Jewish man involved. Just one. And not even in the killing – not in the hurling of the bomb or the years of conspiracy, just in the hiding, to give the rest of them a place to disappear under the cracks of his floorboards because his people had had a history of being refused such a luxury, so now, who was he to do the same?

In the end, he was a hanged man.

From that moment onwards, it was his people who were forced to hide. Banished from the big cities; forbidden to own land or to take up certain jobs.

To see their masterpieces on stage.

Until one of them begged and an exception was made – a one-night exception for the Ratman.
It took him an entire day to get there – a bus from Akmian then a local train to Moscow, the carriages filled with prostitutes heading to work. Each clutched a bottle of vodka in one hand and a bright yellow permit in the other, both needed to appease the guards. Yet, at the sight of the patchwork of fishnets the playwright didn’t so much as flinch. ‘Sorry to disturb, ladies, but is this seat taken?’ He buried himself amongst them with a smile as their cleavages rick- eted along in time with the tracks. The scent of musk lightened heads. The snow chucked fistfuls of itself at the windows. And the more they gossiped the more he began to listen, enthralled, flattering them with a kind of attention they had never known in all their lonely lives, so that soon he felt the slick of their ruby lips upon his earlobes, whispering, begging for more. Either down the back of the train or in the icy Moscow alleyways where they made their dens. ‘Come on,’ they pleaded. ‘We don’t even charge you…’ Just one chance to steam up the glasses of the Akmian genius who spoke to them nicer than any boychik ever had.

But ‘no’, he eventually managed. ‘No thank you.’ He had his Princess of the Bees waiting back home. And besides, the Commandments decreed – Mitzvah 69 to be precise – that there should be no intercourse with a woman outside of marriage.

The ladies cackled at that; the ladies who made a living out of those who flouted Mitzvah 69.

Eventually they waved him goodbye as he made his way towards the theatre’s back door. He smuggled up to the cheapest seats in the house and looked down at the gilded faces looking up to his rats in awe.

By the time he returned to the shtetl it was the following afternoon, yet he knew his Princess wouldn’t have slept a breath.
Nine Folds Make a Paper Swan

‘So?’ she asked. ‘How was it?’ Her black eyes had turned grey in the winter light.

‘Exquisite.’ He pulled her to him. Still his ears rang with the douse of the applause. ‘Austēja, I have been…I think…’ The same sound as torrential rain. ‘I think it is time for us to leave.’

She gazed out the window beyond his shoulder. The snowflakes landed soft thuds on the ledge. ‘Moshe,’ she said, suddenly. ‘You have something on your ear.’

He grabbed the stain between his fingers, ruby red. ‘I must have cut it,’ he replied. ‘Shaving.’ Even though he had been growing his beard since the day they were married, a hive for the honeybees.

It took them ten whole years to save; ten years and two daughters and one brother Dovid gone on ahead to work. A long wait. And then a crumpled letter arrived with some extra money for four tickets on an orange-rusted cattle ship – yet another beast to add to the zoo.

To America.

As well as packing his bags before he left, the playwright had learned his pillars of notes by heart, then built a giant bonfire in the middle of the Market Square. The whole shtetl gathered round to watch the flames feasting on years and years of work, their eyes streaming from the smoke almost as if they were upset; almost as if it were the man himself being burned.

‘In the beginning,’ he joked, perpetual patron of the upbeat, ‘God cremated the heavens and the earth!’

But even hours after the embers died, still the stragglers stood, staring, thinking of other lands. While mothers snarled at sons to breathe in the fumes, just in case the genius was infectious.

The following day they began their schlep, all the way to Latvia.
and onto the ship where the captain smashed a bottle on the prow – an ancient tradition to launch them out to sea. A bit like a groom breaking a glass on his wedding day to remember, always, the destruction of Jerusalem. A sailor married to his vessel. Though everyone knew the story of the playwright’s nuptials when the glass had refused to crack.

The chuppah had been a beautiful thing, the roses mangled into a perfect arch above the soon-to-be-happy couple. But below it the groom had started to sweat, stamping his foot upon the lump that just wouldn’t flatten, while his almost-bride watched on, forcing a smile, trying to find some symbolism in the glitch – that their bond was unbreakable? Not a single flaw or weakness? Until, finally, another foot stepped in – Dovid’s foot – putting them out of their misery as the crowd cheered and the Princess of the Bees kissed her husband, sucking away the panic and also the flicker of doubt as to which brother she had really married that afternoon; which one she wished she had.

But now, after ten days at sea, they had sailed away from that life. Those whispers. The Akmian playwright with his rats safely stashed in his pocket ready to be translated to a magical place called ‘Broadway’ where everyone would know his nobody name, the exhaustion worth it at last, the roses tossed on stage like a flock of birds scooped up to carry home for his wife, to keep her his and always his.

These were the things he had prayed for; the things he saw now as he slept in the dirt of a dockside shed. While all around him the ship’s passengers lay dreaming their own versions of American dreams.

*
NINE FOLDS MAKE A PAPER SWAN

Ruth was the first to open her eyes.

The throb of her hand had woken her, pulsing its way through her sleep. She breathed in. Metal and sweat. An aftertaste of sea.

It had been late last night – long past her bedtime – when the woman down the end of the port had led them here. Lady Liberty. Not a statue at all, as it turned out, but a landlady, touting for business; offering a place where they could rest their poor, tired heads. They had followed her in silence, exhaustion winning out over a thousand questions, each of them just content for the moment to sleep on solid ground again. Though actually, Ruth had found it strange dropping off without Mame and Esther below her. She had liked being in the top bunk on the ship, feeling their words as they vibrated beneath – secrets they never let her hear but at least now she could feel.

She checked her finger. Already the base had begun to blacken.

Beside her, her father snored, eight hours of ideas clogging his nostrils. The white patch of baldness gleamed out from the crown of his head, the first bit of him to come into the world usually hidden away beneath the circle of his kippah.

Next to him in the dust her mother’s curls mingled with her big sister’s – a carpet of black, oily and slick. Like the story Tateh used to tell about the trio of women who spent their lives knitting – a widow, a spinster and a divorcee – alone except for each other and their needles and wool. Until one day they had an argument and tried to pull apart, only to discover that they had knitted themselves together – their clothes, their hair, even their eyelashes, bound into one.

Mame had warned him to stop. She said it would give the girls nightmares.

20
‘But Austėja,’ Tateh had protested, eyes vast with the confusion, ‘it is supposed to be a metaphor. For family.’

Her family had begun to wake now, limbs stiff from awkward folds, and then the other bodies across the floor stirred too. Ruth watched as they opened their eyes one by one, each face registering a split second between waking and realising; remembering where they were.

_America._
_Arrived._

A sleep-crusty grin. And a look around for a bucket so that the men could wash their hands to begin their brand new day; their brand new everything.

‘Have a look for one outside, girls, would you? There’s bound to be one by the port.’ It was Leb Epstein who made the request, drowsy up on elbows, his gut still resting firmly on the ground.

He was a tailor who had come from the very same shtetl as Ruth and her family, accompanied by his thin little wife. She always looked at your shadow instead of at you as if her eyes were too skinny to fit too much at once. The couple planned to travel to America first and save enough money through waistcoats and pleats to send back to the rest of their clan, just like Uncle Dovid had for them – letters of advice; certificates of introduction; pale pink flushes from sisters-in-law that couldn’t always be hidden.

Ruth put her left hand behind her back. ‘A bucket, Mr Epstein? Yessir.’ She repeated the word in her head as she beelined for the door, _abucket abucket abucket_.

She had always been eager to make herself useful; to help the adults wherever she could – barely able to walk before she had sought out the orders, the chores, the tasks that made her feel more
important than she really was. Sometimes the villagers laughed at her diligence; told her she had a very old soul for her eight little years. But this morning especially she just needed an excuse – anything to get outside.

Ruth eased the shed door open, a low groan off the hinges as if they had been sleeping too. She craned her neck, preparing herself for the New York view. The skyscrapers. The cabs. The peanut vendors on every corner – every single one – Uncle Dovid wrote that he worried he was about to turn into a peanut! And Ruth thought now it sounded a bit like one of her father’s ideas, *A Plague of Peanuts!* *The Incredible Salty Man!* So she wondered if that counted as imagining; if maybe she should try and tell Tateh. *Guess what, guess what, America has fixed me!* Or if maybe she should just stay shtum and stop trying too hard to please?

Outside the shed, America hadn’t tried at all.
The dock was deserted, quiet as an inhale.
There were no sailors.
No peanut vendors.
Nobody.
Ruth craned a little further.
Beyond the empty quay the sea was empty too. There was no sign of their ship – not even an orange-rusted bruise smudged against the port – while above, the sky stretched away uninterrupted, untouched, no buildings or scrapers at all. Like an uncracked glass on a wedding day, Ruth thought – an omen she hadn’t ever understood.

Until now.

Behind the shed the warehouses sat in rows, abandoned. Smashed-out windows. A barrel leaking a tongue of rust where the
rainwater had spilled. The only sign of life was the maul of seagulls overhead, their wings making hard work of the breezeless air, currents that just wouldn’t run.

‘Right, you runt.’ Ruth’s big sister suddenly appeared next to her, eyeing the dockside wasteland. ‘Where would we find a pump?’ Not that, really, they looked like sisters at all. Even at ten, Esther was much too like their mother – the wool-thick hair; the black eyes; the stare that cut like wire – whereas Ruth, as Esther always liked to remind her, had been born deformed, one of her eyes green and the other one brown.

Ruth never understood why the world didn’t look different colours out of each one.

But this morning, the world just looked wrong. Felt wrong. Not even a shudder from the trains running under the ground – had Uncle Dovid just been making them up? And where was Liberty this morning, Ruth wanted to know – there had been no word from her either – so what if it had all just been a big fat trick?

‘Esther...’ She looked at her hand. The blackness had travelled even higher. ‘Esther, are you sure...’ She wondered if the nail would fall off soon; if the seagulls would swoop down to peck it up.

And normally she wouldn’t have said a thing about her confusion. She didn’t like to complain. Most of all, didn’t like how cruel her sister could be with her weaknesses. All of them.

But this was different – this was everything.

Or at least, it was supposed to be.

‘Esther, are you sure this is New York?’

Two days before they began their journey Tateh had taken the girls up to his attic, almost empty now that his papers had been carried off for the fire. He told them they could each choose one
remaining item to take with them when they left – a souvenir from this life to the next.

Of course, Esther had gone first; had marched right up to the Shakespeare that sat on the top shelf of the bookcase, swathed in pale blue leather – another cow in another life. She had struggled to even carry the ton-weight down, let alone for thousands of miles, but it seemed the impracticality was precisely what had made their father smile; the perfect after-his-own-heart choice.

His second daughter had opted for the compass. It was hidden half-forgotten in the clutter of the desk, a mere four words in total. *North, South, East, West.* But even as she held it Ruth had felt better; had run her unbroken finger around the rim so that her nail made a sound along the ridges, a buzz that almost drowned all the other noises out.

This morning, Esther’s voice was loudest of all. ‘Stupid girl!’ it cried, the disdain filling the whole span of her mouth. ‘Don’t you remember what Uncle Dovid said?’ It was a voice for the stage, her father always boasted – the finest legacy he could have hoped for. The only one, really, he would ever need. ‘Ellis Island,’ it said now. ‘He told us we had to come to Ellis Island first before we were allowed in.’ Reading from a script everyone else seemed to know – everyone except for Ruth. ‘All right?’

And to any audience the gesture that followed would have just looked like a kindness, a sibling affection, as Esther smiled and took her little sister’s hand in hers. ‘That’s why Tateh and Mr Epstein are about to go to the Immigration Office.’ She gave it a tug, a squeeze of reassurance. ‘That’s why you are shooing off with them too.’ And then a twist. An extra snap. A whimper barely heard. ‘You didn’t think we’d travelled all that way for *this,* did you?’
Two hours later, having woken from her faint, Ruth sat on the tram with her father and his friend, stiffening her face into a smile, nice and wide like her sister had shown her. And maybe someday, years from now, they would come to look alike, maybe even be loved alike. An American family healed better again, the scars you could barely see.

Just as long as she ignored the pull in her pocket where the compass tried to drag her down. It must be broken too, she told herself, the magnets somehow mangled when the boat slammed the shore, because as they boarded the tram she had checked it, just to be sure.

She had stood at the edge of the dock and gazed out at the Atlantic, knowing the sea was meant to be East. The arrow had dithered, stuttering like a lip before tears. And then it had fallen down. South. The sea spreading off the bottom of Ireland and away.

So Ruth smiled a little harder now, telling herself that once Tateh and his rats were rich and famous he would buy her a new one that worked, the four points back where they belonged again.

In the end, the smiles turned out to be more like a plague. A transatlantic epidemic.

They were only in the Immigration Office five minutes before the laughter caught on, the flatcapped men behind the giant oak counter in stitches at the Ratman’s wit.

‘New York?’ they screeched as they regarded the stranger with his scrap of a hat and his bush of a beard – a nest for the seagulls who squawked outside, taking the mick themselves. ‘America?’

While his face turned as pale as the tiny patch of white on the crown of his head. Or as white as a spot on a map that desperate fingers have pointed at again and again and again. Until it is gone.
In time, so many stories would be spooled out of that moment it would become impossible to count.

Some said that when their boat found land there had been cries of ‘Cork! Cork!’, but that in their exhaustion they had heard ‘New York! New York!’ instead; didn’t notice the difference for weeks.

Others claimed they had somehow known the English word for pork, and thought that that was what the sailors were heckling – ‘Pork! Pork!’ – a barrage of un-kosher threats to run them off the ship.

Other times it was just that the captain had told them this was the last stop, ‘only up the road’ from America; only a short, final shimmy in the wilderness – sure, they would be there in time for tea.

But for Ruth and her family, there was only one story; one version of the heartache.

After two weeks they sent Tateh off again, this time to the Housing Office on Lynch’s Quay, to try to find them somewhere to stay. Mame insisted it was just a temporary measure, just a matter of pride – anything to get them out of that shed. ‘We may be your family, Moshe, but we are not your rats.’

So the paperwork shoved them off towards an abandoned red-brick terrace, the houses huddled together like a crowd trying for warmth. Hibernian Buildings, they were called. Celtic Crescent. Monarea Terrace. Down the road from the port, as if the family could still be called up for the second leg of their journey at any moment.

They scalded the place with boiling water every day for a week, to annihilate the native germs. Mame refused to unpack a thing,
insisting the bundles remain untouched. ‘Temporary, remember – what did I tell you?’ But soon Tateh put up a mezuzah outside the front door, another matter of pride. Then he coaxed the girls to unwrap a couple of items they had lugged halfway across the globe (or, as it turned out, only a quarter of the way). So now there was a tub of tealeaves in the kitchen, a snag of lace around the window, a copy of Shakespeare and the Talmud sitting on the shelf, the latter with the words of different Rabbis written side by side.

And every Friday as Ruth sat side by side with her family for dinner, she could almost forget about everything else; could almost ignore the rage and the resentment that lay ahead that evening as soon as the girls had been banished to bed.

Because they had become nightly by now, her parents’ arguments – rituals forming even in the worst of times. It went food then prayers then pleas and regrets; the high pitch of her father’s optimism and the lash of her mother’s anger reaching up the stairs to the landing where Ruth sat, crouched in her nightdress, a covert Jewish playwright in the highest stalls of a gilded Moscow theatre.

She cracked her knuckles one by one. The fourth one wouldn’t give.

‘But Moshe, I have told you,’ she heard her mother cry now, the line almost on cue. ‘We do not belong in this place.’

She spied the back of Mame’s head, the neck tensed into bones, before it thrust itself forward for the usual swerve – the same-old new line of attack. ‘And what about Dovid?’

‘Nu, what about Dovid?’

‘Moshe, he is over there all by himself.’

‘Austėja, why must I keep telling you it does not matter about my brother Dovid?’
It was the only time Ruth heard her father raise his voice. It sounded like a stranger’s sound.

She checked behind to the bedroom door, though she knew Esther wouldn’t stir. Even during the day her sister barely bothered to listen, unwavering in her allegiances: ‘How am I supposed to become a famous actress,’ she had sobbed, ‘in some country I’ve never even heard of?’

‘But Esther,’ Ruth had tried to console her, eager to please as ever, ‘I think they speak English here too.’ Because she had heard them out in the street, all right, the melody in their talk; the bounce and skip to their tone; the word ‘boy’ after every lovely line.

‘Look, my dear.’ Downstairs now, Tateh was panting like he had been running, the heat of it steaming the inside of his specs. They said he was practically blind and yet still he was able to see things that no one else could. ‘My darling Austėja, I will do it – I will write another play.’ As he spoke he took a step closer to his wife. He seemed calmer in her orbit. ‘Not the rats, but a new one. I am telling you, there is something...I can feel it already.’ He had even enquired already after one of those newfangled typewriter contraptions – just the thing to set him off. ‘Nu, can you imagine it,’ he had exclaimed. ‘Letters flying through the air! Only, they do say that sometimes the letters get stuck…’

\[\text{Ltttrs\ f\y\i\n\g\i\i\t\v\n\h\i\r\ing\t\h\i\r\o\v\h\e\r\h\i\r\h\i\r\v\h\i\e\r\h\i\r\h\i\r\v\h\i\e\r\h\i\r}\]

And Ruth smiled now as she thought of it, because it sounded a bit like her own words; how they sometimes congealed whenever she got nervous.

\[\text{Wehaveeachotheristhatnotenough?}
\text{MamewhatistheIrishwordforhome?}
\text{Doe\the\second\child\al\always\get\loved\second\best?}\]
IN THE BEGINNING...

‘Just... just let me do this,’ Tateh concluded now. ‘Let me do it for you?’ Until it came, the highlight of the ritual. ‘For my Princess of the Bees?’ The silly pet name and the only story in the world the playwright refused to tell.

His daughters had pleaded with him over the years, begging for even the gist of the tale:

‘Tateh, why do you always call her that?’
‘What are the bees?’
‘Mame?’

But even Esther had failed to prise the truth from their mother’s lips, so instead they could only wonder at the flicker in her stone-black eyes whenever it was mentioned – somewhere between a warning and a delight. Sometimes, recently, the only sign of life that was left.

The Princess of the Bees.

Through the silence below the footsteps clipped away. Ruth turned and sprinted back to bed before she was caught and smacked to sleep, a hot face on a cold pillow. Only, as she lay there, she realised that tonight had been different. Because this time, Mame hadn’t objected – hadn’t said no, in any language – the ritual evolved and witnessed by two different-coloured eyes.

And Ruth remembered how Tateh once told her that bees sometimes communicated not by sound, but by sight; by watching each other dance. A ‘waggle’ they called it, making shapes with their flight that could be turned into maps for the others to follow. So then, no matter what, the rest of the hive would never get lost.