

Lolly

Tell me your story, I say. And she does. Again. And each time doors, windows, journeys open on to scenes which become almost familiar but shift each time. There are trains, wagons, ships and long muddy roads. Rooms, houses, entire cities flash past. People with fantastic names and even stranger roles wander in and out, pursuing stories of their own. Last time she told me her story, a man in a violet coat suddenly rode through it on a bicycle – one of those old-fashioned black ones with a wicker basket. He didn't walk, he cycled everywhere and when he didn't cycle, he stood still.

But how did he eat? I asked her.

He only ate outside, standing. His aunt brought his meals to the window. Or he ate a roll as he cycled, his feet going round and round as he chewed. I can't remember.

So he wasn't quite right, then. A bit mad?

Perhaps, although he seemed quite sensible to me. He just liked to be on the move.

Lolly admires movement. Above the kitchen bench her wall flutters with photos from magazines, catalogues and newspapers. A dancer nearly nude, magnificent in his flight, all muscle and sinew. An athlete, head back as she crosses the line and tangles the tape at her heart. A traveller with a case and heavy coat. A snowy heron lifting off from a wharf. A bicycle.

Lolly has been a beautiful object of motion herself, at times a child, a runner, an ice skater; always a dancer. Or so her stories tell me. These happen on baking day. I do her grocery shopping and then arrive at her tiny bowerbird flat to breathe in the scents of cinnamon rolls, a loaf of bread, a cake or two, perhaps a tray of biscuits. This is how a fine Saturday is: we sit on her narrow balcony, subject only to sun and a glancing breeze, we sip strong black coffee and break open the steaming, yeasty, sweet-spiced hearts of cinnamon rolls. I listen a lot and speak little.

It was the gypsy in Lolly that admired the violet man on his battered bicycle, who slept in a tent summer through winter. He slept with his bike so he didn't have to walk too far before he could ride again. When he finally replaced his bicycle after the wheels buckled under the strain of one last kilometre, he set it in the garden, slightly aloft, so the wind could spin the wheels and the bike could whirl along to wherever it had to go, taking part of him with it.

Madness is its own planet, Lolly said. She said that about Love too. There were places you could be with their own rules, where the wrong thing was right, where nonsense was wisdom. Like baking really – love and foolishness. I do the hard work, creaming butter and sugar until we can no longer hear the scratch of sugar on the bowl, and bending to lift trays and pans. She decides on the flavours and recipes, arranges the trays and then gives away the excess, feeding bewildered strangers she acquires. And as we stir, blend, sift, measure, pour, shape, bake, smell and taste, we talk. It is usually her story, or more of it is hers than mine. It's repeated each time with a twist. Like a cake where the basic ingredients are the same (cream, butter and sugar) but this time lemon, last time cinnamon. Like a riff in a jazz tune, a change to steps in a dance. I forget the annoying things during the week: my students who argue and procrastinate and approach their passions sideways like crabs. And lovers who do likewise. I let Lolly tell her stories.

Lolly's story goes – loosely, roughly, excluding most of the ancillary scenes, time shifts and characters – like this.

I was a girl at the far edge of Poland at a time when women wore skirts to the ground and horses were transport if you had money. We heard rumours of motorcars, trucks, tanks with fortified walls, but as these came from the west and the war, they were most probably lies. I walked barefoot in summer and in knitted woollen socks and clogs in winter. My mother and father had a proper house in the village, with a fence, a path and a larch tree with a swing. I had brothers and sisters then. Not now, no longer; I am the crumb that is left from the table.

I was quite pretty then – hard to believe now when you see these wrinkles and old twisted knuckles. Rosy cheeks, good teeth and brown hair that my mother only cut once each spring to look tidy for the festival, so by the time I left it was down to my knees. I went to school where I learned to read and write. And fall in love. The schoolroom was heated during the long winter by a tile stove in the corner; the best pupils got to sit close to it. I failed tests sometimes – not enough to disappoint my parents, but just so I could stay in the middle of the room, where the temperature was nice and I could see the fields out the window, and in winter, the world covered in

snow. Then it was a harsh place. Walking home, the wind would cut your flesh to pieces. You could get lost and die in the woods. People did, and as time went on more and more people were lost in the woods. I loved the dark-eyed boy who sat in the chilly far corner.

She pauses there, lost in a time when love was its own planet. The boy didn't have soft rosy cheeks or a smell of sweat. He was dry and lean and more interested in working the fields than learning lessons. But her parents betrothed her to Tedor, a boy who sat right next to the stove. A large, fleshy boy with a damp touch. He was kind, she said, but stupid. Tedor could not say no to anyone. In his kindness he was cruel. He slid through life as a pleasant, compliant man. He would side with the enemy, she was eventually to learn without surprise. He listened too much to his mother, then his teachers. And when his young wife didn't know what to say to him a lot of the time, he went back to listening to his mother, who of course found fault with Lolly, even though she had promoted the match. But there was always something about a bride that could and should be improved on by a caring husband. Not having babies was the most obvious error.

Babies, laundry, housework. Lolly laughs. If I have time to read, then I should be having babies, if I arrange flowers, babies. It wasn't that we didn't try, but there was no eagerness, no liveliness and what baby would decide to come into a family like that? And she laughs: Hah!? A question mark rises from the end of it, a small part of her is going back to that house in the village to ask if she had done the right thing, an ear still tugged by the dissatisfaction of the mothers (her own also joined in).

So I left, she says with a little bounce in her chair. She pours more coffee and pulls another soft layer from her roll and pops it into her red lipsticked mouth. I get up, stretch and go into the hot kitchen to put ginger biscuits into the oven. I open a window a little. It looks out onto a world that isn't really there, the hills wavering, vanishing as a snowy village appears.

I didn't leave at the first opportunity, oh no! she tells me with theatrical surprise. There was a carpet merchant, dark-eyed, prosperous, who tempted me with rose sweets. Then an artist – a portrait painter, fair as an angel, wickedness flirting around his soft mouth. She often giggles at this point. But what about her first love. Was he married? Dead in the woods? I never remember to ask.

These men passed through the town on their way from wherever to somewhere else, wooing as they went and leaving no regrets, except hers. She regretted that they could go, travel, get away from the small village where nothing changed. She had the courage to go with any of them, but she also saw in them a willingness to settle. Their mother's words were hooked onto their ears. They wanted to stay in the pretty village by the river more than they wanted to stay with her, while she wanted to go, but not to leave. If she could parcel up all that she liked most about the place and put it on a train and take it with her, it would be easy.

When she left, it was for a musician, a slender brown accordion player. Karol. The phrase "my mother says ..." never tumbled from his solemn mouth. His mother was so long dead she was a myth. He was his own person. She could tell by his eyes – sad, soft and often closed as if he was dreaming up a new tune or chord to himself. She danced with her plump, wheezing husband (of course he ate more of her cinnamon rolls than he should) and watched the musician dreaming his music.

What did he play? I ask, and she tops up the coffee. Red, yellow and blue flowers bloom around the cup.

Oh, the old tunes, folk songs you might call them, to help the old people remember and sing, and some new music from the cities so the young ones could be shocking. She laughs again and it's the laugh of a young woman.

So what happened?

The musicians stayed for the festival, for a week. I spoke to him often. I was a well-thought-of wife, with a solid, kind husband so there was no gossip. And when I left, it was not *with* Karol. I waited a month, told everyone I was visiting my cousin in the city, where I went only to catch the next train out, almost doubling back, to find him. I did not return to the village until much later – when the regrets had been overtaken by another war, a famine, cruelty and many frozen years. There are some things that should take their time, she says. I found his band playing at another festival. When he played his eyes were closed. I stared at him so hard he imagined I had come for him, and his eyes opened with tears of joy when he saw me standing there. Everything I owned was in one small suitcase.

Ahh! Karol. He was like a cinnamon roll, she says. Soft outside, and warm and spicy inside with a melt of butter. He died a long time ago. Of joy, she says, of utter happiness. This strong, lively man who did not remember a single word of advice from his mother about women, died while playing in a band, at the wedding of a fisherman in Wellington. So many miles from where they began. We were gypsies, she says. I learned to sing the songs from every place our feet landed.

There's a photo in the hall which she has pointed out to me many times: musicians, hand-tinted pastel, sombre, young, and a tall girl on one side holding up a tambourine dripping ribbons and sound. There I am, she tells me each time, as though she's not sure I would remember.

In Berlin they wandered after a performance and heard a new sound. Tango. He heard it with a musician's ear, his eyes shut to memorise the lines of notes. She heard it with a dancer's body and, eyes opened, watched the steps revolving on the floor. He took his accordion and learned, from anyone he could, how to play these songs from the new world, but with the old world still lingering.

That also was a new idea for us – that there was an ocean so wide that it would take weeks to cross. We had seen lakes so large they might as well be seas, and we glimpsed the Mediterranean once from a train – that surprising colour and those sun-baked islands. But we didn't know anyone who had ever left Europe, or come back. First we had to imagine an ocean, and people closed for weeks inside a boat bringing their music in instrument cases, furled like a secret national flag. This is how the music always sounds to me, in red, yellow and black. I learn to dance the steps, alone, to my lover's playing. I learn to dance with other men, always trusting that as long as Karol's eyes are closed he is with me.

She shuts her eyes sometimes and sways, still dancing with him through black, red and into a gold as bittersweet as autumn. Sometimes she will get up and put on a record, but today the breeze is enough.

This dance bought us here, strange to say. Karol hardened himself against the fear of being buried alive in a boat's hold and got a job in a ship's orchestra. I was a lady hostess, dancing with the lonely men who would try for their fortunes in South America. Karol fell in with the sailors, learned about ships and engines and explored the oily caverns until by the time we arrived in South America he was on his way to another trade. Ships are women; he always admired women. We stayed for a time learning the language, the food, the music. Learn a

new language and gain a new soul, they say. We did. He sailed up and down the coast on freighters, picking up new tunes at each port and making rough sailors gentle with music. But it wasn't safe, never safe, always something, some trouble. Money, papers. People.

She holds her breath and I can only imagine a world gone mad.

So! We came here. Gypsies in a place where everyone has come from somewhere else, so it doesn't matter, it becomes home. Lolly's palms pat a rhythm, one-two one-two-three-four, on her thighs. Swirls of flour waft up from the orange marigolds on her apron. Ahhhh! She breathes again and settles to enjoy the sun. She is everywhere and in one place.

Where are you? I ask.

Here and there. Here with you, my lovely young friend. But also with him on the ship, and at our wedding, where only our landlady and a fisherman came. We were so happy in our little room. The iron bed was like a warm brown nest. And Karol is with me in this flat. He is my love in the village and he is the old man in here. She holds her hand over her heart. And when I see my sons with my grandchildren, he is their fine father. A fine father. It doesn't matter where you go, you can keep it all with you.

She looks at me straight, her blue eyes clouded with age, as if everything she has ever seen sits there in layers across the cornea, able to be watched at a moment's notice like a magic lantern show. You need to get out more, she says.

I laugh and pick at a ginger biscuit. Sweet, sharp. I have huddled my hurt, struggling heart inside its cracked shell for a while now. It is a familiar way to be. I take Lolly dancing each Wednesday. She holds her diminished height well as she dances the steps – the salida, the ocho – sedately, in a way that forces the young men to bend and wait. It is a gracious way to alter the world.

There are good men out there, she instructs, wagging a thin, crooked finger at me. You need to be having adventures. But you won't find them in here, in this kitchen with me. Pat, pat. A cloud of flour, marigolds dance, a

violet man wheels past disguised as a cloud, the wind twists washing and startles the trees. I want to argue, you're wrong I want to say, but the oven timer shrilly interrupts and everything settles back into place.

That night I dream. I am a bird, living in a world of birds above the earth, under the open ceiling of the sky. We are part of no-one's lives but our own, but they are part of ours, those land-born, gravity-fed others. We believe in air, sun, branch, nest and the sudden thrill a turn of the wing can deliver. I wake up and understand the violet man with his endless bicycle. I had been trying to fall in love with a man who wouldn't learn to dance with me, perhaps ideal in every way but that. I end it with him within an hour of waking up.

I don't need to tell Lolly. She knows by the way I walk in the door the next Saturday morning and say Oranges! Mr Ngan had new season's oranges in the shop today! and hold up a gleaming gold planet.