

The Mistake Maker

Once, in the tide of Dunbar past, there was a many-named woman, and what a woman she was.

First, the name she was born with: Penelope Lesciuszko.

Then the one christened at her piano: the Mistake Maker.

In transit they called her the Birthday Girl.

Her self-proclaimed nickname was the Broken-Nosed Bride.

And last, the name she died with: Penny Dunbar.

Quite fittingly, she'd travelled from a place that was best described by a phrase in the books she was raised on.

She came from a watery wilderness.

Many years ago, and like so many before her, she arrived with a suitcase and a scrunched-up stare.

She was astounded by the mauling light here.

This city.

It was so hot and wide, and white.

The sun was some sort of barbarian, a Viking in the sky.

It plundered, it pillaged.

It got its hands on everything, from the tallest stick of concrete to the smallest cap in the water.

In her former country, in the Eastern Bloc, the sun had mostly been a toy, a gizmo. There, in that far-off land, it was cloud and rain, ice and snow that wore the pants – not that funny little yellow thing that showed its face every now and again; its warmer days were rationed. Even on the boniest, barren afternoons there was a chance of moisture. Drizzle. Wet feet. It was communist Europe at its slow-descending peak.

In a lot of ways it defined her. Escaping. Alone.

Or more to the point, lonely.

She would never forget landing here in sheer terror.

From the air, in a circling plane, the city looked at the mercy of its own brand of water (the salty kind) but on the ground, it didn't take long to feel the full force of its true oppressor; her face was dappled immediately with sweat. Outside, she stood with a flock, a herd, no – a rabble – of equally shocked and sticky people.

After a long wait, the lot of them were rounded up. They were corralled into a sort of indoor tarmac. The light globes were all fluorescent. The air was floor to ceiling heat.

‘Name?’

Nothing.

‘Passport?’

‘*Przepraszam?*’

‘Oh, Jesus.’ The man in uniform stood on his toes and looked above the heads and hordes of new immigrants. What a mob of sorry, sweltering faces! He found the man he wanted. ‘Hey, George! Bilski! I got one here for you!’

But now the woman who was nearly twenty-one but appeared sixteen gripped him firmly in the face. She held her grey-coloured booklet as if to strangle its edges of air. ‘Parshporrt.’

A smile, of resignation. ‘OK, love.’ He opened it up and took a stab at the riddle of her name. ‘Leskazna-*what?*’

Penelope helped him out, timid but defiant. ‘*Less-choosh-ko.*’

She knew no-one here.

The people who’d been in camp with her for nine months in the Austrian mountains had broken away. While they were sent, family after family, west across the Atlantic, Penelope Lesciuszko would make a longer journey, and now she was here. All that remained was to get to camp, learn English better, find a job and a place to live. Then, most importantly, buy a bookshelf. And a piano.

Those few things were all she wanted from this new world laid searingly out in front of her, and as time went by, she got them. She got them all right, and a whole lot more.

I’m sure you’ve met certain people in this world and heard their stories of lucklessness, and you wonder what they did to deserve it.

Our mother, Penny Dunbar, was one of them.

The thing is, she would never have called herself unlucky; she’d have placed a blonde bunch of hair behind her ear and claimed no regrets – that she’d gained a lot more than she ever lost, and a big part of me agrees. The other part realizes that bad luck always managed to find her, most typically at various milestones:

Her mother died giving birth to her.

She broke her nose the day before her wedding day.

And then, of course, the dying.

Her dying was something to see.

When she was born, the problem was age and pressure; her parents were both quite old to be having children, and after hours of struggle and surgery, her mother’s shell was shattered and dead. Her father, Waldek Lesciuszko, was shattered and

alive. He brought her up best he could. A tram driver, he had many traits and quirks, and people likened him not to Stalin himself, but a statue of him. Maybe it was the moustache. Maybe it was more. It could easily have been the stiffness of the man, or his silence, for it was a silence larger than life.

In private, though, there were other things, like he owned a grand total of thirty-nine books, and two of them he obsessed over. It's possible it was because he'd grown up in Szczecin, near the Baltic, or that he loved the Greek mythologies. Whatever the reasons, he always came back to them – a pair of epics where the characters would plough into the sea. In the kitchen, they were stationed, mid-range, on a warped but lengthy bookshelf, filed there under *H*:

The Iliad. The Odyssey.

While other children went to bed with stories of puppies, kittens and ponies, Penelope grew up on the *fast-running Achilles*, the *resourceful Odysseus*, and all the other names and nicknames.

There was *Zeus the cloud-compeller*.

Laughter-loving Aphrodite.

Hector of the glittering helmet.

Her namesake: *the patient Penelope*.

The son of Penelope and Odysseus: *the thoughtful Telemachus*.

And always one of her favourites:

Agamemnon, king of men.

On many nights, she'd lie in bed and float out on Homer's images, and their many repetitions. Over and over, the Greek armies would launch their vessels onto the *wine-dark sea*, or enter its *watery wilderness*. They'd sail towards the *rosy-fingered dawn*, and the quiet young girl was captivated; her papery face was lit. Her father's voice came in smaller and smaller waves, till finally, she was asleep.

The Trojans could return tomorrow.

The long-haired Achaeans could launch and relaunch their ships, to take her away the following night, again.

Next to that, Waldek Lesciuszko gave his daughter one other life-affirming skill; he taught her to play the piano.

I know what you might be thinking:

Our mother was highly educated.

Greek masterpieces at bedtime?

Lessons in classical music?

But no.

These were remnants of another world, a different time. The small book collection had been handed down as nearly the sole possession of her family. The piano was won in a card game. What neither Waldek or Penelope knew just yet was that both would turn out to be crucial.

They would bring the girl ever closer to him.

Then send her away for good.

They lived in a third-floor apartment.

A block like all the others.

From a distance, they were one small light in a concrete goliath.

Up close, it was spare but closed-in.

At the window stood the upright instrument – both black and brawny, and silky smooth – and at regular times, morning and night, the old man sat with her, with a strict and steady air. His paralysed moustache was camped firmly between nose and mouth. He moved only to turn the page for her.

As for Penelope, she played and concentrated, unblinking, on the notes. In the early days it was nursery rhymes, and later, when he sent her for lessons he couldn't afford, there was Bach, Mozart and Chopin. Often, it was only the world outside who blinked, in the time it took to practice. It would alter, from frosty to windswept, clearing to grim. The girl would smile when she started. Her father cleared his throat. The metronome went click.

Sometimes, she could hear him breathe, somewhere amongst the music. It reminded her that he was alive, and not the statue people joked about. Even when she could feel his anger rising at her newest foray of errors, her father was always trapped, somewhere between po-faced and thoroughly pissed off. Just once she'd have loved to see him erupt – to slap his thigh, or tear at his aging thicket of hair. He never did. He only brought in a branch of a spruce tree and whipped her knuckles with an economic sting, every time her hands dropped, or she made another mistake. One winter's morning, when she was still just a pale and timid-backed child, she got it twenty-seven times, for twenty-seven musical sins. And her father gave her a nickname.

At the end of the lesson, with snow falling outside, he stopped her playing and held her hands, and they were whipped and small and warm. He clenched them, but softly, in his own obelisk fingers.

'*Juz wystawczy,*' he said, '*dziewczyno bledow...*' which she translated, for us, as this:

'That's enough, mistake maker.'

That was when she was eight.