

My Polish Teacher's Tie by Helen Dunmore

I wear a uniform, blue overall and white cap with the school logo on it.
Part time catering staff, that's me, £3.89 per hour. I dish out tea and buns to the teachers twice a day, and I shovel chips onto the kid's trays at dinner- time.
It's not a bad job. I like the kids.

I am half-Polish.
I spoke Polish till I was six, baby Polish full of rhymes Mum taught me.
Then my father put a stop to it. 'You'll get her all mixed up now she's going to school.'
I can't speak it now.

One day I overheard the Headmaster explaining to his staff that he was trying to arrange a teacher exchange with some Polish teachers, but first they wanted to improve their English with the help of a penfriend.

I caught up with him in the corridor "Excuse me" I said "Could I have the address of one of the Polish teachers who want a penfriend".
The Headmaster looked at me as if it might be a trick question.
"Is it for yourself?" he asked.
"I'd like to write to a Polish Teacher" I said.
"Oh" he said. "Yes. Of course, Mrs...er...."
I took the address and smiled at him.

When Steve's first letter came I saw he'd taken it for granted I was a teacher.
In the second letter Steve told me that he wrote poetry.
I told him about the songs my mother taught me in Polish, the ones I used to know but I'd forgotten.
I didn't write anything about my job.

The first poem he sent me was about a bird in a coalmine. He sent me the English translation.
This bird flew down the mine shaft and got lost in the tunnels underground, then it sang and sang until it died. Everyone heard it singing but no one could find it.
I liked that poem.

I wrote back '*Send me the Polish just so I can see it*'
When the Polish came I tried it over in my head. It sounded a bit like the rhymes my mother used to sing.

At first we wrote each week, then it was twice a week.

One day I overheard the Head speaking to one of the teachers.
"I have news of progress on the Polish teacher's exchange." He said.
"A teacher will be coming over next month. His name is Stefan Jeziorny, and he will be staying with Valerie Kenward."

Stefan Jeziorny, I thought. Steve. Why hadn't he said he was coming?

There was a letter waiting when I got home. I tore it open. There was a bit about my last letter,

and poetry and then the news that he was coming to our school, he hoped that *“you will introduce me to your colleagues”* and that he was going to stay *“with an English family who offer accommodation.”*

I felt terrible. He sounded different, not like Steve. Not just polite any more, but all stiff and a bit hurt.

He must have thought I'd known about his visit from the other teachers, and I hadn't wanted to invite him to stay with me. What was worse he was expecting to meet me and be introduced to my colleagues.

Colleagues don't wear blue overalls and white caps and work for £3.89 an hour.

I didn't write, and Steve didn't write again either. I couldn't decide if it was because he was hurt, or because he knew he'd be seeing me soon anyway.

But each morning I woke up with a heavy feeling knowing something was wrong, looking for a letter that didn't come.

One day I overheard Valerie Kenward saying that her “Polish guest” had arrived. I never had liked her. Always holding up the queue saying she was on a diet, and then taking the biggest bun.

“How's it going?” her friend asked.

“Hard work” replied Valerie Kenward. “All he wants to talk about is poetry, and you can't make out what he's on about. It's the accent. And my dear you can't take him anywhere. His Clothes!! And his Ties!!!” went on Valerie “You've never seen anything like them”

I looked past both of them. I'd have noticed him before if I hadn't been so busy. He was sitting stiffly upright, smiling in the way people smile when they don't quite understand what's going on.

The Head was talking very loudly to him as if he was deaf.

Steve. Stefan Jeziorny. He was wearing a brown suit with padded shoulders. It looked too big for him. His tie was wider than normal ties, and it was red with bold green squiggles. It was a terribly hopeful tie.

“Isn't that tea made yet?” asked Valerie.

I looked at her. “No” I said “It's not. Excuse me,” and I lifted the counter flap and ducked past her while her mouth was still open.

I walked up to where Steve was sitting. He looked round at me the way a child does when he doesn't know anyone at the party and is hoping for rescue.

“Hello” I said. He jumped up, held out his hand.

“How do you do?” he asked, as if he really wanted to know. I took his hand. It was sweaty, as I'd known it would be. He was tense as a guitar string.

“I'm Carla” I said.

“Carla?” he couldn't hide his surprise. What was he going to do? And then I saw it. Pleasure. A

smile lit up his face.

“Carla! You are Carla Carter. My penfriend.”

“Yes”.

Then he did something I still can't quite believe. He stood there holding on to my hand right in the middle of the staffroom, his big bright tie blazing, and he sang a song I knew. A Polish song. I knew it. I knew it. I knew the words and the tune.

It was one of the songs my mother used to sing to me. I felt my lips move.

There were words in my mouth, words I didn't understand.

And then I was singing, stumbling after him all the way to the end of the verse.

“Good heavens. How very remarkable. I didn't realise you were Polish, Mrs..er” said the Head as he bumbled around flapping some papers.

“Nor did I” I said. But I wasn't going to waste time on the Head. I wanted to talk about poetry. I smiled at Steve. His red tie with its bold green squiggles was much too wide and much too bright. It was a flag from another country, a better country than the ones either of us lived in.

“I like your tie”, I said.