

PENELOPE FITZGERALD

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## Worlds Apart

Hester told her daughter that she ought to try and make Mr. Bergen feel more at home.

“He’s not at home,” said Tilly. “He’s in our house.”

At two years old, Tilly had been sympathetic to the whole world, a perpetual angel of mercy, keeping the whole house hushed in case her poor sick teddy bear should be disturbed. Now that she was six years old, where had this calm severity come from?

“He’s only in one room,” Hester persisted. “The things he has there are probably all he has in the world. I only meant you ought to make him think he’s at home.”

“That would be deceitful,” said Tilly.

Hester knew what the other mothers (all of them neighbours and her good friends, but still the other mothers) thought, and probably said: that Tilly had become hardened since her father left them. Hester, however, knew that Tilly never mentioned Rod, that he hadn’t left them but simply stayed away by agreement, that all was well and safely over, and about such things it was impossible to be mistaken. Probably it was a natural process. Probably time hardened women between the ages of two and six, just as it certainly did between twenty-five and thirty; that’s to say, during those years you get much harder on yourself.

Mr. Bergen was no trouble. Indeed, having made her point quite clear, Tilly added, as she sorted out her school case, “He’s no trouble.” The room was no trouble either. It was quite separate, having been built on, long before they came, over the little kitchen, which was itself built out into the back garden.

Tilly took some faded wild flowers out of the case.

“You can put some of these in his room, if you like. You know, you have to paste them on to pieces of brown paper, and write the proper name clearly under each one.”

“I don’t go into his room while he’s out,” said Hester indignantly.

Mr. Bergen had been “got”, though indirectly, through the Red Cross. Hester had a secretarial job for three mornings a week, and did some typing for the Red Cross Centre on Fridays. It wasn’t, she thought, wanting to be honest in all things, that she deeply cared about the work, but that she didn’t like to feel guilty about not caring.

She really would have liked to have volunteered out of sheer good nature, like Maisie Meade, whom she had met there, and who had evidently escaped any kind of hardening process. Shapeless, or rather not bothered by her shape, Maisie went everywhere with three large bags: one for shopping; one containing “my life”, as she called it—keys, addresses, lists, and so on; one in case she should be given something which had to be taken to somebody else.

“Your spare room, Hester dear . . . I know you don’t have to let it . . .”

“If I did have to, it wouldn’t worry me,” said Hester. “I don’t mind talking about money.”

Now she had been sharp with Maisie, which was not forgivable. “Of course I’ll help out, Maisie.”

“He’s from Poland, dear, and he’ll be out every day. He has a job, to do with refugee families over here in fact, but it’s so difficult to find anywhere for him that’s not too expensive . . .”

“What’s his name?”

“Ernst or Ernest Bergen, I’m not absolutely sure which . . .”

“What am I going to call him then?”

“I thought you might say his name rather quickly and quietly dear, so that it might be either . . .”

Ernst paid the rent punctiliously. He cleaned the room and took his washing to the launderette, where Hester glimpsed him once or twice, sitting in quiet correctness, watching the shirts and a recurrent two pairs of dark socks as they whirled round in foaming circles before him. He always had a book in his hand.

It wasn’t as though he had no friends, or nothing to do. He appeared to have both, and went out often in the evenings, and always on Sundays, as he told her to “gatherings”. These gath-

erings seemed to be at the place where he worked, and to consist of the people he worked with, which struck Hester almost as a definition of loneliness.

She showed him the shelf in the passage where Rod used to keep a few things. In fact there were probably one or two of them left. It would have been ludicrous to clear everything away, as though there'd been a death in the house.

"You can use that if you like, Ernst. There isn't much space upstairs, I know, if you've got a lot of books."

He had to stretch to reach the shelf. It was summer, he had taken off his jacket and, as he reached up, a little of his white shirt pulled out of his trousers, but was replaced so neatly that it was almost magical, as though he had the gift of never making an awkward gesture.

"Your husband must have been taller than I am," he said, with the rueful smile of the less tall.

Tilly came through the passage, walking as though in a dream, with each foot exactly in line, the toe of one trackshoe touching the heel of the other. She was singing to herself as she passed on into the kitchen.

"What is she doing?" Ernst asked.

"Oh, they're all walking about like that at her school. You know how it is, it'll be something else in a week or so. Do you have a family?" But that struck her as not quite the right question. "I mean, back in Poland?" That was worse. Where else, after all, could his family be?

"If I had had a family, I should not have left them behind me," he said. If that's meant as a reproach I shan't like it, Hester thought. But it could hardly have been one, because he was still smiling.

"I was only wondering if you had any plans . . . that's to say, if you had any idea how long you will be staying here?"

"I'm afraid I can't say. It is possible that I may be able to arrange a re-entry permit."

"And then you'll go home?"

He looked puzzled. "I shall go back."

There was a silence, and then he went on more urgently, "Unless that is—if you wish me to go. I don't want to be of the slightest nuisance to you. If you prefer it I could look for another room."

Of course he could. Diligently he could go through the small

ads in the local paper, underlining them with his silver pencil, or he could ask the resettlement agency where he worked, or indeed, Maisie Meade. But they were not, of course, talking about rooms.

No one could have missed the appeal in his voice, made with dignity and even pride—pride, as she well knew, being a useful protective habit: “I could leave tomorrow, if you find my presence inconvenient.”

As at so many important moments (but why, in heaven’s name, should this be an important moment?) Hester seemed—most unwillingly—to hear the reproachful voice of her elder sister: Go on, why can’t you say something kind? And surely Hester could; it wouldn’t be difficult. If Ernst was something more than far from home, if he was making a nakedly human appeal, there was nothing embarrassing about that for a sensible woman. Everyone thought of her as someone who conducted her life sensibly, and took people on their own terms. So surely she could say something kind. But she could do nothing of the sort.

Are there other women like me? Is there one single other woman, thought Hester, standing there and feeling the warm gusts of air through the open door from the summer garden, one single other person who knows exactly what they’re going to do and then does the opposite? Even Tilly managed better than she did, walking in again, backwards this time, and asking Mr. Bergen whether or not he could swim.

“I can,” he replied gravely.

“How many strokes?”

He didn’t know but told her that he would count next time. The strain of the moment evaporated into the air of the late afternoon.

Neither of them referred again to his going away, or, indeed, to his staying put. Ernst continued to travel punctually to and from his work with his briefcase and silver pencil. He took no holiday, having nowhere in particular to go. Hester and Tilly went for three weeks to the seaside—to Hester’s sister and her husband at Whitstable.

Here the great charm, for Tilly at least, was the beach hut. Suffocatingly warm, smelly, and close, with an ill-tempered butane gas stove on which a large tin kettle slowly came to the boil, it was not really much of a place to be, but Tilly reigned

there as hostess and much preferred it to her aunt's comfortable house. She was up early every morning, asking "When do we go to the beach hut?"

School, however, still imposed its tasks. Twelve natural objects had to be collected and brought back from the beach, so that they could be drawn and written about next term.

"Can't we just enjoy ourselves?" Hester asked her. "And not worry about the natural objects till just before we go?"

She loved her daughter. In the evening both of them emptied their shoes out onto the bedroom windowsill, creating a small heap of warm dry sand. If it didn't rain, the pile of sand gradually got higher and higher. "Do you remember we used to do that?" she said to her sister.

"You're losing weight," her sister told her. "There are problems about managing by yourself. If you find there are difficulties you can't cope with, you should get advice you can trust."

"Well, I can trust myself," said Hester.

She went to the library, which she never seemed to have time to do at home. She looked up the history of Poland, and felt in her bones what it must be like to live in a flat, spreading country, rolling away over countless miles to a white-skied horizon without sight of the sea, with Russia on one border, Germany on the other, both ready to roll their forces forward with nothing in all that flatness to stop them. Perhaps she ought to have known more about it before, but you can't know everything. Everyone knows something that nobody else does.

They were back in the last week of August. Ernst was at work when they got home, but he had neatly arranged the letters which had come for them, and the numerous bright folders offering five pence off their next purchases. The tiny bit of grass in the back garden was closely mown. Tilly went out to tea immediately with her next-door friend, to compare their collections of twelve natural objects. Hester got out her bike to go up to the cleaners, to fetch their winter raincoats.

"Could I have a word, dear?"

Hester put her foot on the kerb and then had to lift her bike on to the pavement as an old Mini drew up closely beside her and Maisie's urgent face appeared at the rolled down window.

"Such an awkward place to talk . . . but I just wanted to ask you . . ."

“Yes?”

“It’s just about your Mr. Burger . . .”

Why couldn’t Maisie get his name straight? In a moment she’d be calling him Frankfurter.

“That’s all working out all right, is it, dear?”

After all, Maisie had always had the greatest difficulty in remembering anyone’s name.

“Yes, it’s fine. I don’t know yet how long he’ll be staying, but it’s fine.”

“And your little girl, she gets on with him?”

“She hardly notices him, he’s no trouble.”

“It’s just that I wondered, dear, if you could tell me where you got him from, I mean, how you heard about him in the first place . . . I try to keep a sort of list . . . people are so good . . .”

Hester began to speak, then checked herself. “I was told about him by a very kind friend.”

The traffic urged Maisie’s car forward, and carried her away, still waving and speaking rapidly. Now, thought Hester, who is Ernst Bergen? One support after another has been lost to him, and even Maisie Meade, who presumably must once have known who he was, doesn’t know now. He has no family, otherwise he would not have left them behind. He is noiseless; everyone who dropped in said they wouldn’t have known he was there. What was his claim to identity?

In October the pavement’s rank of trees dripped and dropped, and Tilly’s new assignment was to make a selection of autumn leaves, Hester couldn’t remember of how many different kinds.

The houses, which had stood amiably open all summer, with neighbours and children running in and out, drew back into themselves and, brightly lit behind their drawn curtains, covered their private worlds, well protected from the dank streets.

Tilly, arranging her leaves, looked tranquil and absorbed. She had never been the worrying kind. Hester, on the other hand, was unaccountably melancholic, but determined not to be. I want something or somebody to tell me what’s wrong, she thought, about to pick up the phone and ring her sister. No, I don’t really want to be told what’s wrong.

The mornings were now hazy and chilly. “Mr. Bergen has a black suit on,” said Tilly.

It was quite true, and neither of them had ever seen it before.

Punctual as always, he was just shutting the gate on his way out, and they could see from the rear his sober, rather dusty-looking black jacket, with overlapping seams, like the seams on Levis, never to be found on an English suit. He wore black, perhaps, to mark one of the sadly-remembered dates in Poland's long history. Or, it might simply be, Hester suggested, that the suit was thick and he was wearing it because he was feeling cold.

"His shoulders are bowed," said Tilly.

Hester thought this nonsense, indeed Ernst walked off briskly enough into the damp. Just before he got to the corner, the familiar Mini overtook him. Maisie opened the left-hand door and shouted a friendly invitation which seemed, while he politely raised his hat, to draw him into the car as though by suction.

He'll be too early for work now, and he won't like that, Hester thought. But this idea by no means accounted for the piercing resentment which was so strange a feeling that, not having known it for years, she wasn't able at first to recognise it for what it was. She couldn't surely, be jealous of Maisie Meade. It couldn't be jealousy, could it?

It was jealousy, but of a peculiar kind. It was this: that until Hester could get things straight and see them clearly, it wasn't bearable that anyone but herself should be allowed to be with Ernst, or to speak to him. There was something that had to be settled between the two of them that had nothing to do with anyone else on earth, except perhaps Tilly.

She didn't even want Maisie to remember—as presumably she was doing at this very moment—who Ernst was. Because when the Mini's door slammed, like a sharp echo of separation, Hester's mind had been jolted in a flash into images of Ernst which had been there for how long? She saw, rather than knew, that she wanted to sleep and wake in the dark beside his darkness and preciseness and warmth, the preciseness of a man who never made an awkward movement.

Well, she would tell him so. There was no reason not to. She had plenty of time to think exactly how to put it, since Tilly's class was going on an all-day visit to a Road Safety Exhibition. There was no mystery about Ernst Bergen's movements. He was back always, even if he was going out again, at twenty minutes to seven.

Hester sat down to the kind of lunch that mothers eat when their children are on an all-day outing. It consisted of the last

triangle of cheese from a cardboard box, and a cold potato which had been in the fridge for some days. At a quarter past one, Ernst, in his black suit, came back. He didn't go upstairs, but walked into the kitchen, took off his hat and drew from his briefcase a bottle wrapped in paper.

Hester was surprised to the point of fear. "What are you doing here?"

"I am taking a half-day," Ernst replied. "I have earned one, it is quite in order."

It was a bottle of white wine, and Hester recognised the label immediately.

She had seen it in a tub at the cash-out at the supermarket: a Special Drink at a Special Price for Special Occasions.

"I have come to bring you this," said Ernst, "because I know that you need to raise your spirits."

Perhaps they were both going mad.

"I wanted to come back and bring you some kind of comfort and consolation, because I know that today is the anniversary of your great loss."

Hester stared at him as he gravely took a folding corkscrew out of his top pocket.

"Tilly told me, you see, that it was today, October 25, that you lost your husband."

"Tilly? But how could she? When did she tell you?"

"She mentioned it to me yesterday evening. We were speaking when I returned from work."

"But she can't have done! She doesn't remember what day it was! For that matter, I don't remember what day it was either!"

Now she was furious. It was betrayal. Not even to her did Tilly ever say a word about such things. She knew it was betrayal, she knew by the wound she felt.

"Tilly doesn't know anything at all about it!"

Ernst looked graver still.

"She does not know that her father is dead?"

"He's not dead!" Hester shouted.

"He's perfectly well, as far as I know. He's married and living in Huddersfield. It's all over and done with long ago."

She was standing with her hands flat on the kitchen table, trembling, and more wretched still, because now that she had said, as she certainly hadn't intended to do, that her marriage was

over, why couldn't he show that it was important to him? Why didn't he say something kind?

But he stood there entirely sombre in his black suit.

"I don't know what we're talking about!"

"I can see I have displeased you. That is the only thing that matters."

Immediately he uncorked the wine and poured it down the sink. It was terrible to see the pale golden level of the wine tilt up and escape in great throbs, while through the glass of the emptying bottle the kitchen taps behind it appeared, bit by bit. Quietly he put the bottle down, and just as he had come in, he walked out.

She wasted time looking for her showerproof, and then when she found it and ran out after him the rain was coming down heavily and soaked her through in a moment. She took the bottle with her. That seemed to her at the time quite clearly necessary, to prove to him that she had not been displeased. She must take something with her to prove that.

So from one house after another, along the street, Hester, who was known to be sensible and conduct her life sensibly, could be seen pelting along with her hair hanging in damp streaks, and waving an empty bottle.

She caught up with him at the corner, too out of breath to speak clearly. She held up the bottle.

"Waste!"

He clicked his tongue slightly in distress, took it from her, and put it carefully into a bin. Then he smoothed her wet hair.

"Ernst, what are we going to do?"

Mr. Bergen replied that he was going to take her home.