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At Home

At first there was the Rock; nothing else. Only the Rock and the sea beyond it, which was like the sky in the place I am now as I write: vast, changeable, terrifying to contemplate and so easy to ignore. It is where I once began and so it is where I will begin this story that you have asked me to set down for you. Even though you cannot read what I am writing, I will put as much of myself on the page as I can, so you will know and understand me, when it is finished and I share it with you. This is what you have told me you want, but it will not be easy for me to do. I am unused to speaking about myself, and I have to be sure I can avoid exaggeration, pettiness and self-righteousness, which would all disgust you. I do not know if I can do it to my own satisfaction, without disgusting myself. But if it will please you, it is worth trying to do, and do well. And I will be able, as I write, to record the ordinary, extraordinary woman who was my mother. So I will start, and then it will be done. With the Rock.

I was born in Gibraltar, in the building where I lived until May 1940 when I was twenty-three years old. I was my mother's seventh child but only the second who lived. She

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christened me Milagros, which means ‘miracle’ in Spanish, the language she spoke most often and most fluently. It is not an unusual name, in Spanish. My father spoke English most often and most fluently. If he could have managed it, he would have cultivated a Scottish accent because his surname was Dunbar. He was Duncan Dunbar, and proud of it. My name on my birth certificate might have been Milagros Dunbar, but he called me Rose, and Rose is what I have always called myself. There are few roses growing on the Rock and I did not think to wonder whether I deserved to be linked in this way with a flower that inspires thoughts of beauty and fragrance. I was Rose Dunbar from MacPhail’s Passage. A category of one, defined by the family to which I belonged.

My mother never walked again after my birth. She could stand, take a few steps, hobble from one chair to another, but nothing that could truly be called walking was possible, afterwards. The arthritis that gripped and crippled her was not brought on by giving birth to me. It was present in her joints from the time she was the age I was when this story starts. But I was a big baby and dislocated her pelvis as she pushed – and Maria the midwife pulled – me into the world. I was what sent her over the edge from being a woman in pain who managed, despite it, to keep her house and tend to her husband and son, into a woman so severely limited in her movements that my earliest memories are all of my father, giving me my bath, cooking my food, dressing me, hugging me.

By the time I was a teenager I was doing everything that Ma needed doing to keep her clean, tidy, fed. All these being things she could not do for herself. My brother, Jamie, did much of the work in the house with my father’s help. We were a household of two women, two men, but the two men did

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what might usually be described as women's work and the two women were reduced to one unit, like a cart and horse. The cart (Ma) only being able to be of any use with the help of the horse (me). We were not usual. But we fitted in. There was a Dunbar-shaped piece in the jigsaw of life in the back streets of Gibraltar that interlocked with all the other pieces. We were part of the picture, however odd.

My mother was Mercedes Dunbar, and she had a reputation. 'Never a good word to say for anyone', as the women on the street or on the staircases and landings said, talking about their neighbours. If they had known I could hear them, I think it would have made no difference. And of course they were right. There was no softness to Ma, no tolerance. She did not, as I suspect the staircase gossips thought she did, hold herself to be superior to them. It was just that she fought, every day of her life, with pain and the indignities of being dependent on others, and she used all the mental and physical strength she had to keep herself from falling into despair, to avoid letting herself slip into sloth and dirt and self-pity. She could not tolerate those who would not make the effort, small in comparison to hers, to set themselves standards. She had expectations of other people that, if met, were rarely exceeded, and for this reason she did not pay compliments. The most that could be hoped for was that she did not point out the ways in which you had fallen short. The mothers of my friends would often suggest she did not demonstrate any gratitude to me or Jamie or my father, but this was to wish my mother a different person, and I would never have wished that. She was thankful that we were there and able to care for her. If she had told us so, each time we helped her, or even randomly, on occasion, she would have had to be the sort of person who

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thinks it is important to say only what others want to hear. Ma was not that sort of person. I loved her, which was, I know, a mystery to many. Though loving her did not prevent me from resenting that her distorted limbs had similarly misshaped my life.

My father worked on the docks. Every morning men would come out of the houses and walk down Castle Steps to Main Street to meet a truck with flapping canvas over hoops covering wooden benches. They would climb into the back, grabbing hold of one another's shoulders to pull themselves up, hanging on to the hoops or the edge of the canvas to steady themselves as the truck drove away. My father and the other men in the back of the truck wore overalls that were clean on each morning, filthy by nightfall when the truck rattled back and emptied the men into the street.

'When will you be old enough to go on the truck?' I asked my brother. He might have been eleven or twelve, so I would have been seven.

'I'm never going on it,' he said. 'I mean to have more control over my life.'

Until then, I had thought climbing on to the truck was the pinnacle of achievement, something only men could aspire to, and only the best men. There were others who had jobs in the town, but I assumed these were the ones left behind, like the women, because they were not rated highly enough to be given space on the benches. They worked in shops or on market stalls or in the hotels.

As we talked, I would have been cobbling together the edges of the rips in my father's overalls, or unpicking the hems of my brother's trousers or my skirts to find an extra inch of length to keep the outgrown garments in use for a few months

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more. We would have been sitting in the alleyway behind the building where we lived. I picture us with our legs crossed and backs against the wall under Mrs Echado's window, me with my wiry curls bent over a piece of cloth and Jamie with his much shorter, sleeker hair bent over his homework.

'How are you going to do that?' I asked, having no idea what he meant.

'Studying,' he said. 'Passing exams.'

I was still thinking of control as a physical thing; I had a notion that it was the unsteadiness of the men in the back of the moving truck that he had in mind.

'How does that help?' I asked, not able to see how reading a book would keep you from falling.

'It means I can get a job where I don't have to wear overalls,' he said.

'What would you wear, then?'

He turned his head from his book to look at my legs crossed under a thin covering of faded, once flowery, cotton frock.

'A suit.'

Almost all the men I saw in Gibraltar wore working clothes or uniforms. Or clothes that announced their religion, or their background.

'No one wears a suit,' I said.

'Teachers do.'

'Are you going to be a teacher, then?'

'No,' he said. 'Because I don't like children.' We would both have laughed at this. Because he loved me, and he knew I never doubted that. I began to doubt my father, though. I was less sure he was the hero I had always thought him.

When Jamie left school he went to work for Mr Mifsud, who had a tailor's shop. It was a clean job. Which was a good

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thing, since water was scarce and washing clothes was hard. He wasn't a tailor but sat in a back room and did all the paperwork for Mr Mifsud, who was old and wanted to protect his remaining eyesight for the business of cutting and sewing cloth. Jamie was good with figures. But he was not where he wanted to be; he had ambitions for more. For the authority and the respect he knew he could never hope to have. The chance to challenge and to change what seemed to him badly arranged.

The families in the streets around spilled out of their houses and walked up and down, arm in arm, in the evening time, chattering. Out of this crowd first one girl then another would make herself agreeable to Jamie, who had a good job, was good-looking and had a reputation for being safe and solid. When he was twenty-one, he allowed Conchita Macombo to claim him for herself with the sanction of society and the Church. I don't know why he chose her. She was beautiful but restless, and no good at all for anyone's peace of mind. She was like him in that she wanted her future to be better than her past, but in unimaginable, impossible ways. Out of anyone's reach.

I think Jamie decided to marry her for a number of what seem like small reasons which all occurred at the same time – and isn't it often so, that big decisions don't arise from serious contemplation and weighty concerns? A couple of rooms became available. I turned sixteen, left school and had more time to look after Ma; he wanted to be able to sleep with a woman without subterfuge or inconvenience. And Conchita was the girl who was just then holding his arm.

I have considered the sort of girl I was, before May 1940, and how little I thought then about what my life was like and

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what it might become. Up to a certain age, I believed the world had been created for me; every stone and grain of sand, every sunrise and sunset, every crumb of cake or crust of fresh bread made for me by God, who was more than an idea in our lives. He was a man who lived in the church but just out of sight, behind a curtain, obscured by the bulk of the priest's body, in a dusty nook over our heads. We knew what he looked like, though. He looked like a European, which was not how all the children in my class at school or the men and women in the streets looked, though this did not occur to me at the time. As I grew older, I lost the certainty that God had created a world around me. More than that, I began to think of myself as something tacked on to the edge.

My best friend was Sonia Gutierrez, who lived in the same building. The whole Gutierrez family, all nine of them, were my best friends when Sonia and I were toddling about on the stairs and in and out of each other's rooms, but when we started to go to school together, we became a unit that was separate from either of our families. We remained a unit, even when we were mocked by the other children, who could only see how different we were in appearance. She was small, sleek, agile, quick in everything physical – quick on her feet, to smile, to speak and speak quickly. I was tall and wiry, my light, curly hair a perfect reflection of my body, as Sonia's straight, smooth, glossy black hair was of hers. I was only quick where she was slow, at learning. I would have traded my ability to do equations and read *Great Expectations* without difficulty, just to have Sonia's hair.

It was important to us to remain friends because we were like two halves of a bridge between two shores; each of us could only see the far bank with the help of the other. By

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listening to me talk, she had a glimpse of the places I knew about from reading.

‘How can you bear to read?’ she would say. ‘Read a word. Then the next word. And so on to the end of the page, then there are more words on the next page and more pages after that, on and on.’

She, on the other hand, knew everything about how to be a real girl in the real streets of Gibraltar. She understood how to have relationships with boys, and with which boys it was safe to have relationships. She understood how to have fun. When I went up and down the streets with her, she would see something happening, or learn of something about to happen, and join in. I would hang back. Sometimes Sonia would let me do this. Sometimes she would not.

‘Picnic tonight,’ in a whisper. ‘In the Alameda Gardens. After your mother’s gone to bed. There’s a gap in the fence on Europa Road. Don’t say you won’t.’

It was warm and dark in the gardens, the lights of Algeciras below us, the lit-up windows of the Rock Hotel above. The picnic came from the hotel, leftover food slipped into pockets and bags by the kitchen workers. We spread ourselves out in the calm and beauty of the garden, couples embracing in the shadow of palm trees and clusters of friends speaking in whispers. We might have been part of the vegetation. Had we been caught, our names could have featured in the police court reports in the *Gibraltar Chronicle*, alongside the drunks from Irish Town or the unlicensed cab drivers, but we owned the Alameda Gardens that night.

I was a clever girl. Ursula Gonzalez and I were the clever ones. We won prizes and had our names read out first when

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students were ranked in order of achievement. I treasured my cleverness because, by this time, I knew I wanted a job, as my brother had, where I would be able to use my brain, not my hands. A job that did not require overalls. But being clever was not enough: I needed to be able to type, so I took a part-time job in Povedano's greengrocery to pay for a course. If I had thought this was what I would do for my whole life, I would have despaired, but it was not a hard job. Every morning, early, I went down to set out boxes of tomatoes and peaches and onions at the front of the store, and every Saturday I served the customers, who were more of a problem to me than the vegetables and fruit because they always wanted to chat, or to complain. I liked Mr Povedano, and his son, Peter, was the most persistent of the young men who had attached themselves to me, out of the group that Sonia gathered around herself. I was not in love with Peter Povedano, but my indifference did not deter him as it had others. He came to be more than a friend to me as none of the others had. He was a sturdy young man, barely as tall as I was, with a round face and a quiet voice and muscles he had built up, working in his father's business, hidden under the shabby, badly fitting clothes he wore.

When I finished the course, I applied for a post in the Garrison Library. It was not a place where I should have felt comfortable; it was somewhere for the men from the garrison to go and read books or play cards or do whatever men do when they are alone together. But I did. This was partly because of the books. The way they covered the walls as if this was a building built with books instead of bricks. Apart from the books I had read at school, my only source had been the Exchange and Commercial Library, which I had been able to

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join for a subscription of four shillings a quarter, and before I started working I made sure of having the money for it. I was in charge of shopping for the family food and I had learned how to make savings by waiting until the end of the day to buy the fish and meat and vegetables. I knew where there were traders who sold things just a penny or two cheaper, and if this meant I had to walk further, and carry my shopping back up long, hot streets and steep, dusty stairs, then so be it. Jamie did the household accounts and whenever we spent less than we had expected to spend in a month, a share of the savings came to me, most of which went on paying this subscription.

My teacher wrote a reference and showed it to me. I was conscientious, attentive to detail and reliable, she said. In comparison to my classmates, this was true. I was more serious, and the rest of it, than they were. But was this enough? I went to the interview convinced I would not be offered the post, but equally certain that I deserved to be given it. Ma did not believe in false modesty, or in birthright.

'You may not be offered it,' she told me, 'but you deserve to be given the chance. Remember that, and look them in the eye.'

I was interviewed by Mrs Mason-Fletcher, who would be my supervisor, and Major Vereker, who was part of the committee running the library. He wore a uniform and so did she. His indicated his rank in the army, hers confirmed her status in society. It was an effort for me, in my best cotton frock, to lift my eyes above his brass and her pearl buttons, but I wanted this job with a fierceness that had not possessed me before, so I looked at their faces and told them why I was the person they needed. They gave me the job.

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Mrs Mason-Fletcher, who was a kindly woman, pointed out to me that, although it was not my job to read the books, it was nevertheless not forbidden to do so, as long as the work was done satisfactorily. I was not allowed to take books home, so I read in my breaks, and added ten minutes to the beginning of my working day and ten minutes to the end. I could not afford the time for more, having still to look after Ma and do my share of the cooking and cleaning and laundry.

With my hours full of tasks and my head full of the stories I was reading in those few minutes when I was not required to do anything else, I was not as conscious of what was happening around me as I perhaps should have been. I relied on Sonia to keep me in touch with life on the streets. She had a job looking after the children of Captain Thrupp, a naval officer who lived in the sort of house Sonia would have liked to live in, so I suppose she had also chosen a career where the setting in which she worked was the embodiment of all her dreams, but was nevertheless not hers to feel part of, only hers to serve.

If I sound bitter it is not because it is in my nature to be bitter; it is because I am my mother's daughter. I do not want to pretend that what is wrong is right. But when I started work in the library, I was not preoccupied with who won and who lost in the hierarchies that kept us in an inferior position. I was too happy to have found myself a job I loved to pay attention to the war that was taking place over the border in Spain, or the rumours of a war in which Britain might fight.

Before I left for work, I would settle Ma by the window that let in the most light, with a drawing board and pencils, charcoal, pen and ink within reach. This was the way she filled the time she had alone with her pain. She drew birds. There

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was almost no sky visible from our window and it was rare for her to catch sight of a bird, but my father took photographs, and in the spring, when flocks of birds migrated across the Rock, we would hire a cart to take us up to the top and we would sit all day, while she looked and looked and maybe drew a little, but mostly just looked. Then for the rest of the year she would draw from memory and beyond memory, so not all the drawings she did were birds you might recognize. They were all, though, bird-related. When I was a child I had been frightened of the pictures she drew. I could imagine the wicked eye and the evil beak taking flight from the page and perching at the turn of the stairs, half hidden in the darkness. But her drawing was not something she wanted to share and I was able to avoid looking until I became old enough to appreciate the skilled draughtsmanship and to see that the eye, the beak, the wing, the claws were expressions of her own pain.

2

Living with Uncertainty

When war was declared in September 1939, we all held our breath. Then we let it out again as nothing happened. In the history books there will be pages on the preparations made, but this was not taking place at our level, in MacPhail's Passage. We talked, for a week or two, about this new threat to our way of life, but we had no idea what we were talking about and our way of life changed not at all. So while we may have remembered, from time to time, to look up at the sky and imagine a squadron of planes arriving to drop bombs on us, in fact we carried on doing what we always had. I would prepare my mother for the day ahead, go to the library, come home and cook and clean and prepare my mother for the night. I might find time to go out and walk around the streets or to visit a bar with Sonia or with Peter Povedano.

While the war had only been in prospect, Jamie had been made restless by the idea of it. His life in the back room of a tailor's shop, which had never felt like the life he had wanted, was made even more burdensome by the idea of conflict. He wanted to join the army, or the navy, and to go off to fight. Conchita reacted badly to this ambition.

'Why would you do this? Why would you leave me? Is it so

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hard to be my husband, to be the father of two beautiful babies, that you want to run off and be killed? What have I done to deserve this!

My mother was blunt.

‘You have responsibilities here. If we are attacked, then you must fight. Until then, you must do what you have committed to do.’

So by the time war was declared, Jamie had stopped talking about going to meet it. He was like the rest of us, leading the life he had led before. But, unlike the rest of us, he was hoping that the war would change everything. And of course, in the end, it did.

‘You know, Rose,’ Mrs Mason-Fletcher said to me one day, a month or two after the beginning of 1940, ‘this work you do won’t be classed as essential.’

I thought she was speaking in general, was letting me know that cuts were to be made and the job I felt so privileged to have had been found to be no job at all.

‘I’ll have to leave, then?’ I asked, meaning ‘leave the library’.

‘Not if you can transfer to essential work,’ she said. ‘In the hospital, for example. You’re a clever girl, you should be thinking about training to be a nurse.’

I could see no connection between working in the library and nursing, but I did not ask her to explain. I did not find it easy to talk to Mrs Mason-Fletcher, even though she was kind, because she wore corsets and make-up and had her hair in a rigid permanent wave and I could not imagine what she saw when she looked at me. So it was only when I took this conversation home and repeated it that my father explained to me that there were plans to evacuate the civilian

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population. The women, and the children, and such of the men as could be of no use to the garrison.

‘Mrs Mason-Fletcher is right,’ he said. ‘If you applied to do nursing training, you would probably be allowed to stay.’

‘Is it real, then?’ I said. ‘Can they do that? Make us leave? Where would we go?’

‘They will tell us,’ said Ma. ‘They will say that we will not be safe on the Rock. That the Germans will drop bombs and there will be nowhere for us to shelter. They will say it is for our own sake that we have to go wherever they choose to send us.’

‘Perhaps they are right, Mercedes,’ said my father.

I realized this topic had been discussed between the two of them and I had been oblivious, thinking only of the book I was reading or some idea triggered by the book I had just finished.

‘It may not happen,’ my father said to me.

‘It will,’ said Ma.

As the rumours spread, the subject began to dominate conversation. Conchita and Jamie had two sons – Alf was five and Freddo three – and she was three months pregnant with the third.

‘How can I be sent goodness knows where?’ she said. ‘I’m about to have a baby. I need to stay here.’

‘That’s why you will be top of the list to go,’ said Ma. ‘The doctors and the hospital will be needed to patch up wounded men, not deliver babies.’

‘Well, in that case, anyone who isn’t completely fit should be on the list, too.’ Conchita lacked the courage to add, as Ma would have done in her place, ‘You’re a cripple, they won’t want you.’

‘It might not happen,’ said my father.

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‘Perhaps,’ said Jamie, ‘you might be sent somewhere you could be more comfortable than you are here.’ He knew his own wife; if it was going to be better, she would fight to be first on the boat.

‘If Ma has to go,’ said Conchita, ‘Rose will have to go with her.’ Everyone looked at me.

‘I think so, too,’ I said.

‘It’s a sacrifice you can choose to make. You don’t have to make it,’ said Ma. ‘You could apply to be a nurse. You have had practice.’

‘If you have to go, I’ll go with you,’ I said. I endured the nursing care I gave my mother because she was dear to me; I did not want to do the same for strangers.

The rumours persisted, became more coherent and consistent until we all knew to expect that we would have to leave. I was comforted by knowing that, when it happened, Sonia would go with me. Her mother had died just before the outbreak of war; her elder sister was married to a Spanish man from Algeciras and, though it seemed to Sonia and to me a risky choice to make, they were going back to his home town to ‘wait it out’, as, Sonia said, her sister had described it to her. We didn’t know what Spain would do. Become another enemy trying to kill us, stay out of it altogether or (and this the papers and Sonia’s employers deemed unlikely) join in on our side. If we didn’t feel safe on the Rock, I would have felt even less safe, as a Gibraltarian, in Spain.

Sonia’s brothers and her father had what now turned out to be ‘essential’ jobs, on the docks or, in the case of her father, Luis, in the kitchen of the Rock Hotel, where there were plenty of people needing to be fed. The Thrupps, Sonia’s employers, were due to return to England and nothing had

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been said about taking her with them. So she would come with me. Then, at the last minute, they told her they could not manage without her. I was devastated, but I have seldom seen her more excited. Like me, she had evaded marriage, even though her family urged her to it, as mine did not. My own failure to chase up the possibilities that presented themselves was to do with an incoherent expectation that this was not my destiny. Sonia's was to do with fun. There was more fun to be had, she told me, reporting yet another proposal rejected, and now was not the time to walk away from it. Now, her fun horizon had just been extended beyond her dreams. She left before we did, and hugged me for so long I had little bruises on my shoulder blades.

On 20 May 1940, the first evacuation notice was posted, requiring all women with children under the age of fourteen to be available for transportation to French Morocco. On 1 June, Conchita, Alf, Freddo, Ma and I boarded the *Mohammed Ali el-Kebir* as the first step of our journey.

3

Leaving the Rock

The rail was wet and after I lifted my hand to my face to wipe away the spray, I could taste salt on my lips. The ship that had seemed the size of a street full of houses was being thrown about by the waves as if it were no bigger than the empty bottles washed up in the surf at high tide. Beside me, my mother sat, as still as the boat was skittish, wearing, as I was, a dress over a blouse and skirt and a coat over the top. So the suitcases on which she sat could have room for a few more of the things we knew we would miss if we didn't bring them with us. She was holding a roll of blankets to her chest and looking to her right, away from, not towards, the Rock. Which neither she nor I had ever left before, except to cross the *campo* into La Línea.

I bent my head and put my face against the chilly, salty rail. 'What are you doing?' Ma asked.

'I don't know,' I said, standing upright again.

'Keep hold of yourself,' she said. 'Look at them' – she made a motion with her head to indicate the people around us on the deck – 'and what do you see? I will tell you. All manner of weakness. I do not expect you to be weak.'

It was true that many of the women on deck were crying,

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and making a great deal of noise. Others just looked frightened, held their children and their belongings close. I did not feel like crying and I did not feel frightened; at least, such fear as I felt was not for now, and the future was too unknown for the fear of it to have a shape.

‘I won’t be,’ I said. ‘Weak.’

She shut her eyes, briefly. Then opened them again. I turned back to watch the Rock growing smaller. Darkness fell before we lost sight of it.

Ma and I sat side by side on the suitcases, wrapped in the blankets we had brought. Conchita and the boys, all three unnaturally quiet, had created their own island of belongings behind us. The wind was chill, even through our layers of clothing, and there was dampness in the air, spray or rain, it did not matter which. We had to endure it. There were not cabins enough for us all. At some time in the night I fell asleep and woke to the feel of my mother’s body pressed against mine, and the sound of the wind and the waves striking the ship, and the smell of vomit.

Ma was awake. I could see the glint of her eyes in the reflection of the ship’s lights on the polished metal rails. I had the strange sensation that she was looking after me as a mother might be expected to, but as mine had never been able to do.

‘I need the lavatory,’ she said. At once we were back in the relationship with which we were familiar.

When we reached Casablanca, we were among the last to disembark. Conchita and the boys had gone ahead, but I waited until there was no risk Ma would be jostled on the way down. I carried the suitcases and dragged the roll of bedding along behind me while my mother walked step by painful step,

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leaning on the rails, down the gangway. There was chaos in the shed where we, the landed cargo, were being processed. Women behind counters handed out cups of tea while men behind desks tried to sort out where we were to go next. I could feel from the weight of her that my mother was close to exhaustion, nearly at the point of collapse, looking down at the surface beneath her feet as if she knew that, any moment, she might have to slide off the support of my arm and arrange herself as best she could on the stones. Someone – a woman so like Mrs Mason-Fletcher from the Garrison Library that I nearly greeted her by name – found a chair. When a weary while later we were directed to a bus, this same woman said:

‘I hope you find somewhere comfortable to live.’

‘I’m not expecting comfort,’ Ma said.

I was, though, I realized, when we reached the end of our journey and comfort was not what we found. The reports on the first evacuations had made me think we would be going to a hotel, that we would be taken to rooms that were bigger, brighter, better furnished than our own rooms at home. And we would not have to clean them ourselves, or cook our own food. I didn’t expect this to last, but I didn’t expect the whole strange situation to last. It was temporary.

In the seat behind me on the bus was a woman called Eugenia who had been at school with me. She had married, by now, as so many of my schoolmates had done, and was sitting with a baby on her lap and a toddler leaning against her shoulder. Both the children were asleep, and Eugenia’s face was so empty of emotion that I wondered if she, too, had fallen asleep but forgotten to shut her eyes. The front of her dress was stained and damp where her breasts had leaked milk.

‘Eugenia,’ I said, quietly, ‘do you know where we’re going?’

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She hoisted the baby further up her lap and shook her head.

‘Will we ever see Gibraltar again?’ she whispered.

‘Of course,’ I said at once, because I was revolted by her expression of defeat, and because it had not occurred to me that this was anything but a rude interruption of normal life which we ought all to be enduring, if we were not capable of making the most of it, until it was over. Eugenia shook her head again, not looking at me but staring out of the window at the dusty landscape. I turned back to face forwards.

‘So you believe that, do you?’ said Ma.

‘Why?’ I said. ‘Don’t you?’

‘No,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure I will ever see the Rock again. But I’m being realistic. She’ – with a jerk of the head towards Eugenia – ‘is being emotional. She’ll forget to be miserable, soon enough. Whether she goes home or not.’

‘And what about me? Am I being stupidly naive?’

‘No, you’re being optimistic. Optimists are frequently stupid and naive, but as long as there is some basis, however small, for the optimism, you are lucky to be one.’

The bus stopped outside a building that was not a hotel. That piece of optimism was misplaced. There again, we did not have to cook for ourselves. We could not have done so even had we been eager to, for this was not a house of any sort, with the usual facilities for preparing food. It was a dance hall. A rectangle of space with nothing in it but a network of wires over which sheets of cloth had been hung to curtain off cubicles. One cubicle per family, or such was the idea. Into our cubicle we fitted Ma and me, Conchita and the two boys, and Eugenia, following us in a daze of misery, with her baby and her toddler.

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It was hot and noisy. There were mattresses on the floor and nothing else. Eugenia sank down, unbuttoned her dress and fed her baby. Conchita's two boys started playing with the sheet walls, rolling back and forth underneath them, lifting and letting them fall. Conchita sat on a mattress and began to unpack her suitcase, looking for something that would make her feel better about the situation she was in – a mirror, I imagine, a lipstick, a jar of face cream. I settled Ma as best I could and went to see where everything we needed could be found – food, lavatories, water.

Food was being prepared in an annexe on the side of the building. The cooks and the people serving it were all locals, but the food smelled good, familiar, and the line of evacuees waiting to receive it was long. I found a row of lavatories in the main building; queues had already formed here, too. There were no showers; mothers were stripping the clothes off their children and standing them in the sinks to sponge them down, then unbuttoning their own dresses to wipe themselves clean. The smell was already close to unbearable. I went back and joined the queue for food, which was being dished up on to metal plates. There was a woman standing beside the serving hatch saying, again and again, that the plates must be brought back. The plates must be brought back. She spoke in French, which I doubt many of those who heard her understood. I carried two plates and a jug of water back to our cubicle; it was all I could manage. Conchita came back with me for more food, and I stood in line while she wandered along the queue talking to those of her acquaintance she could see. Even after a night on a boat, still wearing the same clothes, with the dirt of the journey on her face, she managed to look so much better than the mass of us that she

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might have been a visiting dignitary come to cheer us as we waited. I think this was the role she was playing, as she walked up and down, barefoot because she had left her shoes in the cubicle, skirt swaying with the swing of her hips, because the people she paused beside and spoke to looked brighter, while she stood in front of them. For a moment, they could have been any crowd at a dance hall, come out to fetch refreshments, about to go back to where the music was playing, ready to dance.

After we had all eaten, I took the plates back and joined the queue for the lavatory. I had no idea what time it was; the day was passing in a curious mixture of urgency and boredom. There was so much to do and yet everything took so long to achieve, and could only be achieved by standing still. There was a Gibraltar man in our cubicle when I returned. He was shiny with sweat and looked as if he would like to lie down on a mattress and go to sleep and never have to talk to or listen to anyone again. Especially not women like us. He was trying to explain, to Conchita, Eugenia and Ma, that it was up to us to find ourselves better, more permanent accommodation in Casablanca. That there would be help provided to enable us to do this, over the next few days, and also help with claiming the money we needed to live on from the government. Eugenia had obviously only listened to his first few words – ‘It’s up to you to find accommodation . . .’ – and was rocking back and forth repeating all the reasons why, for her, this was impossible. She was exhausted; she didn’t know the town; she couldn’t speak French; she had a baby to look after. She wanted to stay here, where she felt safe. From time to time the official managed to repeat that help would be available, but Eugenia had found a corner that was not moving,

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and was therefore better than a ship, and where food was available, and for the moment this was enough. It represented happiness.

Conchita was stroking the mound of her pregnant belly and pouting. Couldn't he find us somewhere, she said, stretching her legs out in front of her, not adjusting her skirt to cover herself. I don't believe the official even looked at her. He had been going from cubicle to cubicle all day; he was beyond blandishment.

'When will the help you suggest is coming arrive?' asked my mother.

'They will be here tomorrow morning, but I must ask you to be patient. We cannot sort out everyone's problems in one day.'

'Obviously,' said Ma. 'You have told us all we need to know.'

He drew himself up a little straighter and looked as if he was remembering that he was an official, and therefore in control.

Madame Goncourt

We stayed in the dance hall for three days. It was three days of queuing up and feeling helpless. Inside the hall, the heat, noise and smell were close to unbearable on the first day, but by the third day these had come to feel like just the way it was, and there was no point even thinking about it. Outside the hall was hot and there was nothing to do, no queues to join, so we stayed inside, where it felt safer. By the fourth day, I had been supplied with a list of possible addresses. A young man, so young his upper lip was filmed with a few dark hairs he did not yet have the years to cultivate into a moustache, had circled one of these for me.

‘I’d go there, if I was you,’ he said, dropping his voice, though it was hardly necessary as the volume of voices around us was so great he could have shouted and been heard by no one but me. ‘I think it might suit you.’ He gave me a map, marking with a cross where the bus that would be coming to take us into town would drop us off, and the address he thought I should visit first.

The next morning I got up early and washed before the queue had formed. I unpacked a dress I had not worn since I

folded it away in Gibraltar and which still smelled of home. Conchita lay on her mattress watching me dress.

‘You shouldn’t wear patterned frocks,’ she said. ‘You’re too tall. All that fabric – it looks as if you’ve wrapped yourself in a curtain.’ She sat up and ran her hand round her belly. As if she was loving the fact of being pregnant. But I didn’t think she was. I thought she only made the gesture for my benefit, to point out to me just one of the many ways in which she was a woman and I wasn’t.

I looked round at Ma. I had taken her to the lavatory, helped her wash, dressed her, fetched her some breakfast from the kitchen, and now she was sitting up in the chair I had fashioned from suitcases and blankets.

‘She may be right,’ Ma said. I had been thinking the same. Conchita was no longer paying us any attention. She had been talking to be spiteful, but that didn’t mean she was wrong. She had good judgement, in respect of how to make the most of her appearance.

Alf and Freddo were playing with Eugenia. She was covering her face and pretending she couldn’t see them, then jumping in mock fright when they crept up and touched her. Her daughter, whose name was Anna – I had had to ask, as Eugenia only addressed her with a string of diminutive endearments – was sitting on her mother’s lap, giggling. As I sat on the bus, I thought how both Eugenia and Conchita had begun to find reasons to be pleased with life. Eugenia in playing with the children, Conchita in having nothing to do that required her to make an effort. Not even looking after her own children. Whereas I had been oppressed by the neediness of my mother, without the comfort of even ten minutes alone with a book. But now my spirits had begun to lift with the

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