

Words Stretch

A chapter from the work-in-progress *Vodka & Vegemite*

Lee Kofman

Words stretch between Melbourne and New York. The distance smooths the rough feelings. We both appear more mature, more English, rubbing shoulders with our new cultures of *sorry sorry* and *thank you thank you*, and teatime, and brunches, and civilised conversations between nodding heads and voices humming understanding (*hmmmm...*).

And anyway, the Jewish gestures of pointed fingers and arms splashing in the air do not transmit over the phone.

We like it this way.

"I'm worried about you," says my mother. "I had an appointment with the rabbi from the *Seven* synagogue and asked about you."

Her voice purls.

I wish she was like her voice, like she once was – a young dragonfly, her charcoal circles of curls lying very still over her high forehead; dark eyes outlined heavily in kohl.

I can guess her on the other side of the line – her short hair covered with a navy-blue headscarf, skin still smooth, the sweet red puffs of her cheeks, and her swollen legs concealed under a long, wide flannel dressing gown.

"You won't believe it ..." She hasn't lost her taste for drama. "But you can ask Gershom. We went together. If you don't believe me, surely you'll trust your brother ..."

"I believe you. What did he say?"

"Oh, *dochenka*, it was just amazing. This rabbi, he is the keeper of volumes of letters written by the *Zibrono Lebraha*, the Rabbi Lubavitch to Jewish people from all around the world."

"Aha ..."

"So when people ask him questions, he randomly opens a page in one of the volumes and looks for an answer."

"Who, the Rabbi Lubavitch?"

"No, the rabbi from *Seven*. So Gershom and I went to him ..."

"Yes, you already said."

"Okay, okay. And the rabbi, you should have seen him. You just look at him and have this feeling; he radiates this holy energy... His face, you know ... He is usually booked months in

advance. We were lucky..."

"So what did he say?"

"... and he opens this thick, thick book, over five hundred pages ..."

"Yes?"

"Randomly, as I said. And he shows it to me. It's a letter written at the beginning of the twentieth century by the rabbi to a Jew who had asked him for a blessing. It's in Yiddish, but you know I can understand some. And the rabbi of *Seven* translates it to me fully. The letter says: *God is with you. You chose well, Melbourne is the place for you. You will have luck there.* Can you imagine? Out of all those letters that's what he picked when I asked about you. How would he know?"

"What? You can't be serious!"

"I told you, you wouldn't believe me. I'll call Gershom ... Gershom!"

She sent me a copy of the letter and attached a Russian translation. It arrived in a big, padded envelope stamped with tiny portraits of Ronald Reagan and American spaceships. My letters to her now bear gaudy depictions of kangaroos and koalas.

I used to collect stamps up until junior high school. I had a thick album with a blue cover which I marked in Russian, *marki* (stamps). I favoured the Australian stamps for their appetisingly coloured fruits and vegetables, so real that I could spot the tiny drops of water on their smooth surfaces even without my magnifying glass. American ones were boring, unless they showed cartoons. Israeli stamps were duller still: uniform pieces of paper with a long series of faintly coloured landscapes blurred in such miniature scale. I felt guilty, and pretended to like them allocating them the first pages of the album. I hoped that when we got the permit to leave Russia, I'd find Israel different from its stamps.

I dreamed then that Israel would smell of the oranges (so seductively depicted on the Australian stamps that I could smell them) and be coloured with the dreamy yellow of the desert. Yellow had always been my favourite colour. From an early

age I painted sad, pale princesses with golden locks. I painted fluffy, yellow chicks and triangular suns sitting sharply in the corner of the page (always the top left). I used the brightest yellow I could find, but at seven, just when the Israeli stamps started arriving, my yellows had paled into hues of the desert sand.

Israel was *home*, or so I thought back then amidst the Odessa's snow dotted with greasy, black puddles of rainwater. I paid my respects in all the ways I could at that age.

We speak, and speak, and speak about what is the best medication for a flu; which university my brother should choose; Melbourne's volatile weather; my father's behaviour; the hidden meaning of the *Master and Margarita* for my essay; the best place in Brooklyn to get a kosher stuffed derma; my second brother's loneliness; my mother's picaresque working at a New York call centre at her age, amongst the willowy high school graduates with bird-like voices; my third brother's school results. We exchange some gossip about distant family members, and even talk about God (briefly, to avoid conflict). Finally we agree that vitamin C is the best (we learned it from my father who uses it for any ailment).

We speak – our voices entangled like lianas. Our vocabularies are dense jungles of Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish (that neither of us mastered) and recently English. The telephone magic softens the wildness in the verbal landscapes and we laugh, blurring further and further the unsaid things that silently inhabit the Melbourne-New York lines – like ghosts.

We don't speak of our homelessness; that there has never been a place for us to be free from our accents, foreign gestures and thoughts.

We cannot blend in. And we have tried, oh how we have tried.

I do not speak about one of my Australian workplaces, where I was asked as usual, "So what kind of accent is that?" And then: "Israel... but you probably don't all hate the Arabs? I'm sure there are good Jews too ..."

We also don't admit that the Land of Honey and Milk we once craved never really became home.

My mother, who once threatened a Russian bureaucrat (who smoked only American cigarettes and had an appetite for imported, canned

food) she would burn herself in Red Square if she didn't get a permit to leave Russia. There she stood on her own with her large, pregnant belly, her fourth child on its way to becoming a Soviet captive; but she didn't let it happen. The empty-gazed official somehow believed her, finally, after six years of waiting, and so my brother was born shortly after we disembarked from the El Al plane. She called him Israel, as he was the first *sabra*, a native Israeli, in our family.

My mother, heavy-bodied but agile, who climbed the Golan Mountain in a long dress, opaque stockings and sneakers; took a bus full of new immigrants to the West Bank settlements to smell the paddocks of the holy land; and in Jerusalem's eastern part of mosques and *Allah Akhbar* she walked the streets alone and patted a camel which belonged to a local Arab, and talked to him about the meaning of life. How she loved every centimetre of that land for so many years.

My mother, who was all that and much more, tells me the following story on the phone:

"At the airport, after your father boarded the plane back to Israel, it was very late and I took a taxi home. I saw on the tag the driver's name was Boris, so we spoke Russian. Of course he turned out to be an engineer. Anyway, I asked how long he had been living in America. It is not America, he replied. It's *Americhka!*"

"I'm not sure I understand."

"I'll give you an example. Here if your income is under a certain amount you get a tax return in the end of the year. Can you imagine a law like that in Israel? This is exactly what he meant. Darling *Americhka.*"

Mama, keep talking. I can see you clearly in your Crown Heights two-room apartment with a heavy, brown door just like that of your next-door neighbours. That black fellow from the floor above you who lives on a disability pension (a brain injury? mental illness?) likes playing cards with my brother Israel. They sit outside your building full of mice and people, tell jokes in English, and occasionally drink beers.

Israel's English is broken and husky. He tries to find a new voice and thinks he is starting to lose his hair. When one is eighteen, he resents being a foreigner. I wonder what he says to you after beating at poker a man who is old enough to be his father and climbing the stairs (he won't

use the elevator on Shabbat) all the way up to you.

Israel climbs the stairs in a sticky New York summer, whereas your husband now has to cross an ocean to embrace you. This second immigration hasn't broken your marriage (not yet, at least), nevertheless you two now meet like lovers from *Casablanca*: a few times a year, airports and the tension of anticipated departure. My father, cast accidentally into the Humphrey Bogart role, navigates between a job in Tel Aviv he is not prepared to lose, and you. Who would think that the American superhero could be reincarnated as a diffident, middle-aged, bearded Jew with a yarmulke, who covers his mouth when he laughs?

Once your guard fell briefly and you told me. On that morning you went after your Morning Prayer to do some washing at the local coin-laundry. In the lift, carrying the heavy basket with my brothers' trousers and your dresses, you met the lovely old lady from the third floor. Every time she sees you, the shaky hooks of her fingers touch your plump cheeks: *God bless the Jews*. You bless her too. She, like most of the Crown Heights' black residents, belongs to that Christian cast which maintains Jews are the chosen. Their skin colour matches the religious attire of their Chassidic Jewish neighbours, and so is shared their juicy body language.

At the laundry you wait near the machine reading something about the kabbalah. You don't know how to enjoy idleness – this is something you passed on to me through your milk. The place is empty but for a few women you don't know. The smells of fresh soap and stale clothes mix into an odd cocktail in the airless room. Britney Spears sings some blond fantasy on a radio at full volume.

A girl, maybe twelve, maybe a bit older, sticks her crimson tongue out at you when her mother isn't watching. You think it's a mistake, but she does it again. Her raven-coloured curly hair is braided into two neat plaits. Her lips are peaches. Her denim mini-skirt reveals strong legs. She gives you a finger. You stick your head into the book, trying to drive away memories you wouldn't allow on the surface.

Her mother yawns, then walks out to light a cigarette, to get some fresh air. It is you and the girl. She comes closer in feline movements, too

adult for her age, you think.

She whispers (sweet voice, proper American accent), "Bloody Jew, piss off, bloody Jew...". She nudges you just a little bit with her arm in such a way that no one notices.

Words stretch from New York to Melbourne.

"So what did you do?" I ask, my heart boom-boom, boom-boom. The distance makes me helpless.

"I whispered too," says my mother. "I was afraid of getting into trouble. But I thought, if I stood up to the KGB when I was younger, why should I retreat now?"

"So what did you say to her?"

"I whispered, but very firmly: You little bitch, if you don't stop now – I'll call the police."

"Did you?!"

"And you wouldn't believe it, but she ran off. Quickly."

But most things are unsaid on this line.

The Author

Lee Kofman is a fiction writer and a freelance journalist, who immigrated from Israel and now lives in Melbourne, Australia.

Her third novel (in Hebrew) *I will love Christina* has just been released in Israel (October 2003), published by one of Israel's largest houses; Maariv Guild.

In Australia, she is busy selling her English articles to various magazines, translating her fiction into English, rediscovering her Russian roots and understanding what the hell "Aussie" means.

<http://www.innersense.com.au/salonim/projects/2003/lee.html>