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THE HOPE CHEST

The long wooden box was on the upstairs landing of the two-up, two-down terrace house in suburban London, and Sadie reserved it for 'special' items such as hand-crocheted doilies or lace tablecloths. And mementos. It was different from the everyday airing cupboard over the hot water tank in Rosa's room, where bedding, knickers and liberty bodices were rotationally dried almost to scorching point. Americans used the term 'glory box' or 'hope chest'; in Britain, women referred more prosaically to their 'bottom drawer'. It was a young woman's treasure box, and the place where she collected items in anticipation of her eventual marriage. Sadie's box didn't have a name. It sat there by the banisters in all its mystery, secretive in a way with its scent a mix of lavender, furniture polish and cedar. Rosa never wondered at its provenance, at least not until she herself was over eighty.



'Hold the lid open for me, will you,' said Sadie as she knelt before the box rearranging the contents, and Rosa, bored as only a fourteen-year-old could be, did as she was asked.

'What's in that little packet?' she enquired, although she really wasn't much interested.

'My wedding shoes,' replied Sadie, and held out a tiny pair of white satin t-bars, size four.

'And what's in the envelope?'

'My school certificates,' said her mother, half shyly, half proudly.

'And the album, whose pictures are those?'

'Mine,' replied Sadie.

The gulf between the two was unbridgeable. Rosa would never attempt to understand her mother until very late in life when she realised, with surprise, that far from being just *Solly's girl*, the daughter of Solly Fox, which was the way she always wanted to be known, Rosa really owes much of her personality and temperament to Sadie.

It was wartime, 1944, and life was difficult enough: the Germans were now sending rockets, soldiers were still dying in Europe, food shortages hadn't eased and everyone was looking threadbare in clothes that had been 'turned' several times to hide the worn bits. Sadie didn't need a 'difficult' daughter, an incomprehensible young woman, so different from other girls in the community.

'Why don't you join the club for young people at the *shul*? They're having a social this weekend, you'll meet people, make friends.'

'Boring, and anyway I'm going to the Old Vic with a friend from school. Laurence Olivier's doing *Oedipus*.'

Sadie refrained from saying 'Oedipus, shmedipus'. She was too polite, but she did purse her lips in exasperation.

'You never go to *anything* Jewish, you've no feeling for *yidishkayt*. You are an *apikoros*, an unbeliever!'

'Oh, come on, Mum, it's enough I went to Hebrew classes. You know I don't like all that stuff, I just don't fit in.'

She'll never marry, thought Sadie, *I'll never be a grandmother*. But Rosa was to prove her wrong.



Al's 'Tilbury speech' on the SS *Stratheden* was heartfelt. He wanted peace and harmony between his new wife and her parents, particularly her mother, and that's how it turned out over the years, harmonious but rather bland and, inevitably, because of distance, lacking intimacy. However, there were eventually three Australian grandsons whose exploits – camping, fishing, surfing – entranced their lonely grandparents in far away London. Blue airmail letters told of out-of-date events, and the phone conversations, fuzzy and indistinct, were stilted:

'How are you both?' Rosa asked her father.

'Oh, we're alright. Went to the doctor last week because Mum got

a cold, the weather here is really chilly, she's much better now.'

'That's good. So what else is news?'

'Nothing much. We see the aunties every week for *Shabbes* lunch. I can still find my way along the North Circular Road but the new overpasses and underpasses sometimes confuse me.' Solly paused, needing to control the longing. 'And so, how are the boys?'

'Oh, you know, school. We had sports day and they all ran races. Soon be summer holidays here, we might take the caravan away for a trip, so we'll send you photos.'

'Sounds nice.' Solly's tone was wistful. 'Mum and I might go on a coach tour to Portugal.'

Not once in Australia, even in childbirth, did Rosa call out for Sadie. When times were hard, the children sick and money short, she never longed for her mother to miraculously appear with chicken soup and comfort, as in the punchline of some American-Jewish joke; the ability to comfort each other was something beyond the capabilities of either of them. One would have to conclude, sadly, that it was an unsuccessful Jewish mother-daughter relationship.



But Rosa is older now and has chosen to believe that somehow she will be able to put things right. She's a great 'fixer', is Rosa, and will never accept that 'nothing can be changed'. *The past, like the future, is indefinite and exists only as a spectrum of possibilities.* Rosa has no idea what Stephen Hawking meant but is optimistically convinced that undreamed of 'possibilities' lie ahead for her somewhere at some unspecified time ... maybe redemption.

In the meantime, she unpicks Sadie's life, thread by thread; just a handful of phrases, snatches of conversations that she remembers from long ago. Rosa wants to be sensitive while unpacking and delicately – lovingly – teasing out the strands of Sadie's history.

She was born in December 1893, but her mother Eva registered the birth in January 1894. It's a big stretch, Melbourne 2017, back more than a century, and Rosa feels forensic when analysing the wisps of memory, the fleeting glimpses of London life in the slums

of the late nineteenth century. Victoria was still on the throne. It was not that long since Jack the Ripper was terrorising the East End, and Nathan Chwall, aka Nukhim Zevelev Khvul, aka Nukim Seidelowitz Kwul aged twenty-eight, AWOL from the army of Tsar Alexander III, arrived at London docks in 1890: no money, no English language skills and just a piece of paper with an address. Three years later Nathan was married to Eva Green, his landlord's daughter. They lived in a tenement building thoughtfully provided by philanthropists for the 'deserving poor'. Soon Sadie, the eldest child, was born, the first of nine.



For ten years the Chwalls live a precarious life in Rothschild's Buildings, a tenement in Flower and Dean Street, on the second floor. Sadie used to talk about how they played in the courtyard and her mother would send down a basket on a rope with food. They didn't have much furniture, mostly orange boxes. Sadie went to the Jews' Free School. On *Rosh Hashanah* the boys all got new boots and the girls a new frock.

During this time Nathan abandoned them temporarily to try his luck in Philadelphia, where he had heard the streets were 'paved with gold'. The family were desperate. Sadie was sent to beg for food from the Jewish soup kitchen and burned with the shame of it.

Eventually Nathan returned, despondent, and resumed work in sweat shops making men's caps. There were three more children, two boys and a girl.

'You two hold hands and look out for horse manure when we cross the street,' Sadie told Will and Gus, 'and keep close to the pram.' She was nine years old, and in her good dress and pinafore she was taking the two boys and baby Rosie to the great London Hospital to get an opinion about their persistent coughs. Eva, her mother, was pregnant – again – and was poorly. Nathan, her father, still couldn't speak English. There was only Sadie; that's how it would always be until she escaped with Solly.

'Who's in charge here?' asked the doctor. He came from the

Cotswolds, and yearned for the rolling green hills and fresh air of Oxfordshire. The job at 'the London' would be a great learning experience, but it was breaking his heart.

The migrants were a shock to this young man with blue eyes and a thatch of yellow hair. He could hardly believe there were so many desperate Jewish tailors fleeing Eastern Europe. They arrived penniless and the sweatshops worked them to exhaustion; he saw them when they had accidents with the hot mangles and flat irons, mostly burns and scalds from the steam, and they smelled of pickled herring. He treated wharf labourers from the Isle of Dogs and the East India Dock who suffered terrible damage to their backs; they were so poor and in such pain, they begged him for opium so that they could keep working to put bread on the table. The little match-girls from the Bryant and May factory, who became ill and disfigured with 'Phossy Jaw' from the phosphorus, had upset him the most, until the company stopped using it; he'd wanted to scoop them all up and take them to the country, away from the poisonous fumes.

He wondered how much longer he could bear the grime, the poverty and the growing unrest. He was not much for politics, but trade unions made sense to him, suffragettes made sense too; he even thought of going along to Hoxton Church to the Congress of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party to hear what those Russians, Lenin and Trotsky, had to say.

'Who's in charge of these children?'

'I am,' replied nine-year-old Sadie.

'Tell your parents to get them out of London or they will die from the pollution – take them to the country.'

And so Nathan, Eva and the children moved to Cardiff around 1903 and Sadie acquired a soft Welsh speaking voice – 'ladylike' was how people described her. The Chwalls become the Samuel, or sometimes Samuels, family, depending on who was registering a birth, death or marriage, and how good their English was. By the time she was thirty-nine, Eva had nine children and there were probably several miscarriages.

Married beneath her, Sadie had once muttered to Rosa, who now

looks with overwhelming pity at a photograph of her grandmother's worn face. She can't – in truth, doesn't – believe that Eva loved Nathan. She'll never know for sure, and the gravestone in the old Cardiff cemetery with its stilted language keeps secrets:

*Here lies Yocheved daughter of Reb Dovid
In loving memory of Eva Samuel
Who passed from earthly life
26th June 1934
Mourned by her husband NATHAN,
daughters, sons, brother and relatives
A woman of worth. May her work praise her.*



I made caps in the workshop and took them to the market. Father couldn't speak English. I put brown paper inside my shoes to keep my feet warm.

Mother went blind so I had to help. My youngest sister was half my age and I had to take her with me whenever I wanted to go out with my friends. My brothers weren't expected to help.

Father gave me a basket of eggs to take to London for Aunt Annie. I stayed with her and she prepared me for my wedding.

'You're twelve now so you don't need to go to school any longer,' said Nathan – in Yiddish.

'But I'm good at school, I want to stay, I want to learn!' cried Sadie – in English.

'Your mother can't see well any more, she needs you. And I want you to help in the workroom and to come with me to the market and sell the caps,' said Nathan.

'There's a new law that says I can stay until I'm fourteen. Please, Father, let me!'

'That's enough! You're my daughter and I can do whatever I like.'

But he couldn't. A letter from the 'authorities' demanded that Nathan send his daughter back to school for a further two years, and Sadie almost fainted with joy as she re-entered the playground at Wood Street School across the River Taff in Temperance Town.



Kneeling at the ‘hope chest’, Sadie wanted to show her daughter something very special and, with great care, took out some certificates from a brown envelope: Needlework I and II, English and Home Nursing, earned at Wood Street Girls Evening School, all dated March 1909. It was part of a new Technical Education Scheme providing Preparatory Technical (Evening) Schools, so that the work force would be better equipped for the new century. There were some who doubted the wisdom of educating the masses who might then read radical literature and revolt.

Did anyone encourage her mother in her quest for education? Doubtful. Just thinking about it now fills Rosa with sadness and pride. It must have taken so much courage for the fifteen-year-old to enrol for evening classes. It’s hard to ‘get into’ Sadie’s mind. A year earlier, Nathan had finally got his way and withdrawn her from school. Was she angry? Miserable? Determined? She would have packed up the market stall, completed her chores at home and then walked back along Tudor Road and across the bridge to Wood Street. It was the smallest of entrances to the world of learning, and Sadie must have always known she’d been cheated.



Fourteen-year-old Rosa didn’t understand all the implications. Sadie contemplated her daughter who was taller by a head, and in many ways intimidating. The links that might have bound them during Rosa’s childhood were fast snapping. It wouldn’t be long before she would enter the Sixth Form, that wonderful dream world of English schoolgirls, studying Latin, playing hockey and rounders, where ‘crushes’ and deep meaningful friendships dominated adolescent life. It’s where Rosa would finally toss out *cheder* and Hebrew classes and adopt ‘British’ as a badge of identity. Experimentally.

‘It isn’t necessary for a girl to have so much education,’ Sadie once said sharply when Rosa asked to stay at school for another year. *She didn’t mean it*, thinks Rosa in 2017. ‘Let her have a chance,’ said Solly.

Between the pair of them, they gifted their daughter the courage to try.



‘Let’s look at the old photographs,’ said Rosa, and Sadie took the little album from the cedar box. There was a faint scent of lavender, eau de Cologne and Kodak chemicals, and the tiny pictures taken on a Box Brownie were all neatly arranged on cardboard pages with small adhesive triangular ‘corners’ to hold them in place. Sadie sighed with nostalgia, and Rosa missed a golden opportunity, as she so often did, to ask questions. (Now, seventy years later, she’s reduced to guessing.)

The girls were all lined up across the centre of Plantagenet Street, Cardiff, in their flapper-style coats with the fur collars, dropped waistlines and their t-bar shoes: Rosie Posner, the Glassberg sisters, the Gordons, and Sadie and Rosie Samuel. Probably 1924. Everyone was in high spirits. Sadie, the shortest of the row, wore a jaunty beret with a brooch on one side and she was smiling happily. They were all having a great time.

In the following year, in 1925, Sadie would meet Solly. Four years on and, after refusing him repeatedly, they would marry on 1 January 1928. She would be thirty-four and he would be twenty-five.

There were also two studio portraits in the album. At eighteen, Rosa’s mother had been beautiful with her ringlets and ribbon; at twenty or so with a fashionable bob she was quite stunning. After she died and Solly came alone to visit Rosa and her family in Melbourne, he slept with the portraits in silver frames under his pillow, together with the little red woollen mittens she wore because her arthritis was so painful.

Here, posing with her girlfriends in Plantagenet Street, she was about thirty years old, pretty and vivacious and, as Solly was to comment in his own memoir, *As I Remember* (a labour of great love written in 1968 for his far-away grandsons in Australia), *very attractive*. She must have been the eldest of the group. But the median age for a woman to marry during the 1920s was about twenty-one, so there’s a mystery about her single status.

As her mother Eva gradually became blind, Sadie's sense of duty must have dominated her thinking. Rosa has no doubt that the other Samuel children were only too happy with the status quo; if Sadie remained, they could leave. There were the three boys and they weren't expected to do anything other than find good jobs and 'work their way up in the world'; her brother Jimmy was already married and lived around the corner; her sister Rosie was seven years younger than Sadie, enjoyed dancing and socialising and already had a beau; Dora shyly hoped for marriage; Dinah and Rachel looked forward to careers; Hetty, the disabled child of Eva's middle age who was cared for in a 'home', completed the family.

Sadie was caught fast. Solly wrote that Nathan was *a gentle man* who kept chickens in his backyard and allowed the baby chicks to play on the sewing machine tables in his workshop. It's a charming tableau, but Rosa in 2017 is not impressed. Nathan had very nearly ruined Sadie's life, denying her the education she craved, exploiting her domestically and stressing duty over personal fulfilment. *So, times were hard, he had no choice, he needed her to support the family, who else was there?* But Rosa cannot forgive.



There's no doubting the truth of the romance. Sadie and Solly met at the theatre; the show was *Rose Marie* at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. Booked seats were expensive, so Solly and his East End friends arrived early, and for threepence were able to reserve little wooden stools in a queue on the pavement. The Great Western Railway (GWR) obliged its provincial passengers with 'excursion' services enabling customers to travel cheaply to London on a morning train, visit the theatre to see a show in the evening and return home on the milk train, leaving London about midnight.

Sadie and her friends also had places in the queue nearby. The seats were for the gallery 'up in the gods' and as the hours until show time passed, the community on the pavement became very friendly.

When the doors opened and the crowd surged in for the best seats, Solly held everyone back so that Sadie was not crushed, and

when they were seated they were placed together.

There's no record of what she wore, maybe the coat with the little fox fur collar. His outfit was spectacular, *a grey pinhead suit with double-breasted waistcoat, a silver topped cane and a bowler hat*. The musical is set in the Canadian Rockies and concerns Rose-Marie, a French Canadian girl who loves a miner.

Edith Day sang the excruciating 'Indian Love Call':

Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo, Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo

When I'm calling you Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo, Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo

Will you answer too? Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo, Oo-Oo-Oo-Oo

Rosa clearly remembers her parents getting dewy-eyed and emotional whenever in later years Nelson Eddy and Jeannette MacDonald were on radio singing the same song.

Rose Marie was followed by *The Student Prince*, *The Vagabond King* and *The Desert Song*, all wildly popular operettas with lush romantic scores by European composers. Sadie would come up on the excursion train, and she and Solly walked and talked along the Thames riverbank, saw the show, visited Johnny Isaacs' fish and chip shop in Mile End and sometimes, rather daringly, drank coffee at a Kardomah café, before he took her to Paddington to catch the train home.

The Thames Embankment always had a special significance for Sadie, and Rosa can now understand why. It was dreamtime: a time when she and Solly might forget duty and family obligations, when they would be something other than just the children of poor migrants, when they could imagine a life beyond the East End, maybe on a new estate among 'the English'. But it was always going to be hard to get away – as hard as it would be for Rosa in 1957.

Sadie and Solly were a sentimental couple and in later years would go for an 'outing' to Paddington Station – not to buy a ticket and embark on one of the new diesel trains, but to sit on a bench and remember the times when he would wait there for his 'Welsh lass' arriving on the steam-driven excursion train. Sentimental and romantic. Solly wrote a poem about it all:

I carried a cane then with a silver knob,
 we thought it was smart, it was just the job.
 She carries a cane now on which to lean,
 she's not quite so agile as at seventeen.
 The seat that we sat on marked 'GWR'
 has now been removed, so has the bar,
 And the lounge where we met and agreed what to do.
 I wonder how many of those dreams came true.

'I'm the eldest, Mother's almost blind and the family all depend on me,' Sadie told him.

'My father died last year and my mother and five sisters all depend on me,' replied Solly.

'Would you like to come to Cardiff and meet my family?' asked Sadie.

It was only four hours on the train but it might as well have been a trip to Paris, so different was travel in the 1920s.



Sadie always referred to Nathan and Eva as 'Father' and 'Mother' and the house in Plantagenet Street as 'home'. Solly wrote that he was *cordially welcomed*, but eighty years on Rosa wonders about the family dynamics and what her father might have diplomatically omitted.

'My brother Will isn't here, he's "on the road", a commercial traveller,' said Sadie, making the introductions. 'Next year he's getting married to the sister of a rabbi in London and he's going into business on his own. These are my other brothers: Jimmy who's married helps Father in the workshop but he's more interested in selling insurance. And this tall young man is my "little" brother Gus.

'My sister Rosie has a boyfriend in London and we think they'll get married, as she's very popular; she's gone out tonight but you'll meet her when she gets home. This is Dora who does all the cooking since Mother can't see well any more and she's very good at it. And these two are my youngest sisters: Dinah's just got a clerical job and Rachel's still at school. Father said she could have an extra year because she's so clever and pretty.'

Was there a tinge of envy? Rachel was Nathan's favourite; he paid for ballet shoes and he sent her for lessons at the local church hall. Was Sadie thinking of the brown paper she put in *her* shoes to keep her feet warm when she worked at the market stall?

The Samuel parents eyed twenty-two-year-old Solly cautiously and weighed up the odds. Their daughter was nine years older than this young man, and to her siblings it seemed an unlikely pairing; they'd always assumed that Sadie would never get married. It was strange to think of her not being there sitting at her machine in the workshop, or looking after the market stall. And who would wash and mend their clothes, polish the brass samovar and see to all the household chores? With Will and Jimmy leading independent lives, and Rosie already determined to get away too, the family would be struggling. Gus would probably want to leave soon. Dora, who was shy, might stay for longer; Dinah and Rachel, young and rebellious, were saving hard to move out.

Every passing year made her age more of an argument that could be used against her:

You're already thirty-one, it's embarrassing for all of us if you marry someone nine years younger, cradle-snatching.

If you really want to get married why don't you find yourself a nice widower who needs someone to mind his children?

You can't expect the rest of us to look after Mother and Father as they get old, it's your job.

Solly's situation was not much better. Regina, his widowed mother, also laid it on the line:

You must take your father's place now.

You must help run the workshop and take care of your poor orphaned sisters.

We will starve if you desert us.



Loyal and devoted, Sadie's friends urged her to accept Solly.

'It's so *romantic!*' said Leah Gordon.

‘It doesn’t matter a bit about the ages – he *adores* you!’ said Rosie Posner.

‘His sisters will give you *hell* but he’ll stick up for you,’ said Doris Glassberg.

It took three years for Solly to persuade Sadie. If she refused again, he threatened to throw the tiny engagement ring into the river Thames, and as she abhorred waste, she gave in.

‘We won’t be able to go to the wedding,’ said Leah. ‘Too expensive and there’s no place for us to stay in London. But we must get a present.’

It was a Sunday and the girls were all sitting in the sunshine on the bank of the Taff, looking across the bridge to Temperance Town.

‘If we all put our money together, we could buy something really special,’ said Doris. ‘Sadie’s never had a “hope chest”,’ said Rosie. ‘Why don’t we get Dafydd Thomas in the market to make her one? We could put some nice things inside, tablecloths and towels maybe?’

The cedar box was in the luggage van of the train that brought Sadie to London for her wedding. She was all by herself, sitting on a wooden seat in a third-class carriage. On her lap she carefully carried a basket of eggs as a gift for Aunt Annie, her mother’s sister-in-law, who would prepare her for married life.

This is what escape looks like, thinks Rosa.