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A Dangerous Crossing

Written by Rachel Rhys

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A Dangerous Crossing

Rachel Rhys



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4 September, 1939, Sydney, Australia

SANDWICHED BETWEEN two policemen, the woman descends the gangplank of the ship. Her wrists are shackled in front of her and the men grip fast to her arms, but her back is ramrod straight, as if being held in place by the flagpole at the ship's prow. She wears a forest-green velvet suit, the fashionably slim skirt skimming the top of her calves, and black stockings that end in green leather shoes with a delicate heel. Around her shoulders is a rust-coloured fox-fur stole, the head hanging down at the front as if it is watching how her shoes kick up the dust as she walks. The outfit is far too warm for the seventy-degree heat and the small crowd of onlookers feel grateful for their cool cotton clothes.

A matching green velvet hat sits on top of hair that has been pinned neatly back. The hat has a veil that falls over her face. They have at least allowed her this modesty.

She stares straight ahead, as if imagining herself somewhere quite different. She does not look around at the docks, where ships hulk out of the water, grey and pointed, like overgrown sharks. She does not gaze beyond them to where the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge fans out across the mouth of the estuary, connecting the south side

to the north, or back the way the ship has just come to where the sandy beaches are strung out along the coast.

She is seemingly unmoved by the smells and the heat and the lush green vegetation on the distant hills, all so different to where she's come from. The rasp of the seagulls overhead and the hum of the insects seem not to register, and when a fly lands briefly on the decorative brooch she wears just above her right breast, in the shape of a bird, its eye a tiny studded emerald, she appears not to notice.

There's a reporter shadowing the trio as they make their way across the quay, past the throng of family and friends who are waiting to greet the new arrivals and staring with undisguised curiosity at the policemen and their charge. The crowd have been standing for hours in the heat, and the unexpected drama provides a welcome distraction from the tedium.

The reporter is a young man with shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows. He seems uncertain how to behave. He usually covers the dock-beat, greeting the great liners that arrive from Liverpool or Southampton or Tilbury, quizzing the migrants on how they feel to have arrived at last on Australian soil. He likes his job. Since the government, with the help of the Church of England Migration Council, introduced the assisted-passage scheme to encourage more young women to travel to Australia from the UK, there are always groups of girls disembarking, eager to meet a genuine Aussie, their normal inhibitions melting in the uncustomary sunshine. They are usually only too glad to talk to him about where they've come from and their hopes for the future. Most of them will go straight into domestic service in one of the large homes in and around Sydney, many of them British-owned, where they'll work as parlour maids or cooks, for thirty-five shillings a week, with one day off, the shine of this brave new future wearing off rapidly in the dreary reality of domestic life.

He wonders if this woman is one of them, also destined for

domestic service. It's possible. In his experience, most of them choose their Sunday best for their arrival in this new world. He knows he should ask questions of her, of the policemen by her side. The rumours have been building since the ship docked. This is his opportunity to make something of himself, to grab the front pages rather than settling for just a few column inches on page fifteen. Yet there is something about the woman that stops him, the way her face, under the green veil, is raised defiantly to the horizon, even while her hands, in their thin white gloves, shake.

He overtakes them and then turns back, so they cannot help but notice him. 'Can you tell me your name?' he asks the woman. He has his notebook out and his fingers grip tightly around his pen, poised to write, but she shows no sign of hearing him.

He tries addressing a question to the policemen who flank her. 'Who is the victim?' he asks, walking backwards ahead of them. And then, 'Where is the body?'

The policemen look hot and agitated in their heavy uniforms. One is young. Younger even than the reporter, and his fingers on the green velvet of the woman's arm are long and delicate, like a girl's. He looks determinedly in the other direction so as to avoid the reporter's questions. The other policeman is middle-aged and overweight, his square face red and shiny in the heat. He glares at the reporter through the half-closed, bloodshot eyes of a heavy drinker.

'Let us through,' he says brusquely.

Now the reporter is becoming desperate, seeing his chance of a career-making exclusive slipping away.

'Have you any comment to make?' he asks the woman. 'Why were you on the ship? What brings you to Australia? How do you feel now that war has been announced?'

The woman falters, causing the young policeman to all but fall over his own feet in their outsized boots.

‘War?’ she whispers through her veil.

The reporter remembers now that she has been at sea for the more than five weeks, and that the last time she had fresh news would have been when the ship docked in Melbourne two days before.

‘Hitler has invaded Poland,’ he tells her, his voice betraying the eagerness of the giver of powerful news. ‘Britain is now officially at war – as are we.’

The woman appears to sway. But now the police are propelling her forward again. Her back straightens once more as the trio brush past him as if he weren’t there.

The reporter knows he should follow them, but he has lost the appetite for it. There is something about the woman that chills him. Something more than the rumours of what she is supposed to have done.

Afterwards, when he hears the truth about what really happened on that ship, when half the country’s media is camped outside the prison, desperate for news, he will kick himself for not persevering. But for now he stands still and watches as she is led across the quay-side and into the waiting car. The window is open, and his last glimpse of her as the car pulls away is her green veil fluttering against her face like a butterfly’s broken wing.

1

29 July 1939, Tilbury Docks, Essex

ALL HER LIFE, Lilian Shepherd will remember her first glimpse of the ship. She has seen photographs of the *Orontes* in leaflets, but nothing has prepared her for the scale of it, the sheer grey wall towering over the quayside, beside which the passengers and stewards scurry around like ants. All along the dock as far as the eye can see cranes stretch their long metal necks into the watery blue sky. She had expected the numbers of people, but the noise of it all comes as a shock – the harsh cries of the gulls circling overhead, the creaking of the heavy chains that hoist the containers from the docks and the jarring clang as they hit the deck, the shouts of the smudge-faced men who are supervising the loading and unloading. And underneath all that, the excited chatter of the families who've gathered to see loved ones off, dressed in their best clothes, their funeral and wedding outfits, to mark the momentous occasion.

There is so much industry here, so much activity, that in spite of her nerves she feels her spirits stirring in sympathy, excitement skipping through her veins.

'You won't be short on company, that's for sure,' remarks her mother, her eyes darting around from under her best linen hat. 'Won't have time to miss anyone.'

Lily loops her arm through her mother's and squeezes.

'Don't be daft,' she says.

Frank is gazing at a couple standing off to the right. The woman is leaning back against a wooden structure while the man looms over her with his hands resting either side of her head and his face angled down so that the lock of his hair that has come loose in the front brushes her forehead. They are staring fiercely at each other, noses just inches apart, as if nothing else exists and they can't hear the jangle of noises around them, nor smell the pungent mixture of sea and salt and grease and oil and sweat. Even from several feet away, it's clear the woman is very beautiful. Her scarlet dress fits her body as if someone has sewn it in place and her full lips are painted a matching colour, dazzling against the sleek black of her hair. He is tall, solid, with a moustache and a cigarette that burns, forgotten, between his fingers. Though the couple are oblivious, Lily feels awkward, as if it is they, her family, who are intruding.

'Fetch your eyes in off those stalks,' she tells her brother sharply, then smiles, to show she was joking.

Lily's family have visitor's passes so they can see her safely on board. Lily is worried about how her father will manage the steep gangplank, but he grips the rail and puts his weight on his good foot and ascends in this fashion. Only when he is safely at the top does Lily breathe again. They are getting older, she thinks, and I am leaving them behind. An acidic rush of guilt prompts her to blurt out, once they are all gathered on the ship's deck, 'It's only two years, remember? I'll be home before you know it.'

The ship extends far deeper than Lily has imagined. The upper decks are for first-class passengers, while tourist class is below and beneath that are the laundries and the third-class cabins. F Deck, where Lily's cabin is housed in tourist class, is a warren of narrow corridors, and she and her family have to ask directions from two

separate stewards before they find her cabin. Inside, there are two sets of bunk beds close enough together so that a person in one upper bunk could reach out a hand and touch the person in the other. Lily is pleased to see that her cabin trunk has already arrived, her name stamped on the end neatly in large capital letters, protruding from underneath one of the bunks.

There are two women already in the cabin, sitting on the bottom bunks. Lily guesses the first is two or three years younger than her, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three. She has a round, open face with pale blue eyes so wide and unfocused Lily suspects she ought to be wearing spectacles. The idea that she might perhaps be carrying a pair around in her bag but not wishing to wear them, in a small act of vanity, makes Lily warm to her on sight. Not so her companion, who looks to be at least a decade older, with a thin-lipped smile and a long, sharp chin.

The younger woman leaps to her feet, revealing herself to be above-average height, although she dips her head to the floor as if to make herself smaller. 'Are you Lilian? I knew you had to be, as there are only us three in this cabin. Oh, I'm so happy to meet you. I'm Audrey, and this here is Ida. And this must be your family. Australia! Can you believe it?'

The words gush out as if the girl has no control over them. Her voice pulses with excitement, causing the wisps of fair hair around her face to quiver in tandem.

Lily's parents are introduced, and her brother, Frank, whose eyes glide off Audrey's plain features as if they are coated in oil. Soon the ship will leave and I will stay on it with these two strange women, and my family will go home without me, Lily reminds herself, but it does not seem real.

Lily's mother is asking Audrey and Ida where they are from.

'We're chamber maids, working at Claridge's hotel,' says Audrey.

'Not any more,' Ida chips in curtly. She is wearing an old-fashioned,

black, high-necked dress, and when she leans forward a sour smell comes off her that catches in Lily's throat.

'When we saw the advertisement about the assisted-passage scheme, we thought, "Well, why not?"' says Audrey, 'but we never really dreamed . . . That is, I never really dreamed . . .' She glances at her older companion and the words dry up in her mouth.

'Are you looking forward to seeing all the sights on the voyage – Naples, Ceylon?' Lily's mother coughs out the foreign words as if they are small stones she's found on a lettuce leaf.

'Got to be better than staying here, doesn't it?' says Ida. 'If we go to war –'

Instantly, Lily and Frank glance towards their father, who has stood all this while in silence, leaning against the wall.

'We won't go to war,' Lily breaks in, anxious to head off the conversation. 'Mr Chamberlain said so, didn't he? "Peace in our time", he said.'

'Politicians say a lot of things,' says Ida.

A bell sounds out in the corridor. And again. The air in the cabin vibrates.

'I suppose that means it's time for us to go,' says Lily's mother. And her voice now carries a thin note of uncertainty that it lacked before. I will not see her again for two years, Lily tells herself, as if deliberately pressing the sharp blade of a knife against her skin. The answering jolt of pain takes her by surprise and she puts a hand to her chest to steady herself.

'I'll come with you on to the deck to wave goodbye,' Audrey tells her. 'My own folks saw me off at St Pancras, but I want to get one last look at Blighty. You coming, Ida?'

The older woman narrows her little black eyes. 'Nothing for me to see there,' she says. 'Who'd I be waving to? A tree? A crane?'

On the way up to the deck, Audrey whispers in Lily's ear. 'Don't mind Ida. She's just sore because she didn't get the full assisted

passage on account of her age. I hoped that might put her off coming, but no such luck.'

Lily smiles, but doesn't reply because of the pain which is flowering out across her chest like dye in water. She watches her parents' backs as they lead the way to the deck, noticing how her mother's head is bowed in its best black hat, how her father clings to the rail as he climbs the stairs, his knuckles white with effort.

'Is your dad always so quiet?' Audrey asks.

Lily nods.

'The last war,' she says.

'Ah.'

Now they are out in the open again and joining the line of visitors queuing to go down the gangplank. Lily imagines herself grabbing hold of her mother's arm. *I've changed my mind*, she'd say, *I'm coming home with you*.

'You look after yourself, mind,' her mother says, turning to face her. 'A pretty girl like you, there's some would take advantage.'

Lily feels her cheeks flame. Her mother has never told her she is pretty. Other people have, Robert's voice soft as butter – 'You're so lovely, Lily' – but not her mother. Too worried perhaps about giving her daughter a big head, the very worst of female vices in her view.

Mrs Collins appears beside them. She is a stout, pleasant-faced woman, appointed by the Church of England Migration Council to accompany Lily and the other seven young women travelling on the assisted-passage scheme to take up domestic-service employment in Australia. 'Accompany' is another way of saying 'chaperone', but Lily doesn't mind. They met her at St Pancras so had her company for the duration of the train journey. Lily could tell straight away that her mother liked her, and that that would be a comfort to her in the days to come.

'Don't you worry, Mrs Shepherd,' says Mrs Collins, and her wide, kindly face folds into a smile. 'I'll take good care of this one.'

Frank is the first to take his leave. ‘Don’t forget to write – if you have any time between fancy dinners and balls and love-struck admirers!’

Lily lands a soft pretend-punch on his arm, then pulls him into a tight embrace. ‘Look after Mam and Dad,’ she says in his ear. Her voice sounds lumpy and strange.

‘Course.’

Her dad gives her a long, wordless hug. When he pulls away, his eyes are glazed with tears and she looks away quickly, feeling like she has seen something she shouldn’t have.

‘We must get off,’ says her mother brusquely. She gives Lily a dry kiss on the cheek, but Lily can feel how rigidly she is holding herself, as if her body were a wall shoring up some otherwise unstoppable force.

‘I’ll write to you,’ Lily promises. ‘I’m keeping a diary so I’ll remember every detail.’ But already her parents are halfway down the gangplank, swept along by the tide of visitors coming behind them.

Audrey, who has been standing discreetly to one side, tucks her arm through Lily’s.

‘You’ll see them soon enough. Two years will go like that.’ She snaps her large fingers in front of her face. Her hands are coarse and pinkly raw. Lily is well aware how hard the lives of chambermaids can be.

Mrs Collins nods. ‘She’s right, you know. Now, hurry up, you two, if you want to get a space at the front.’

Passengers who have said their goodbyes are already arranging themselves along the length of the ship’s railing. Lily’s eye is caught by a flash of scarlet and she notices the woman they saw earlier on the dock. She is pressing herself against the railing with arms straight out on either side, steadying her. Lily is astonished to see she is wearing black-lensed sunglasses. Though she has seen them

in magazines, it's the first time she's seen someone actually wearing them, and to her they appear alien, like a fly's eyes. The woman is scouring the crowd gathered on the dock, as if searching for someone. The rugged, moustachioed man she was with earlier is nowhere to be seen.

'Over here.' Audrey pulls Lily towards a gap in the crowds.

Again Lily is reminded of the sheer scale of the ship as she peers down at the quayside where the families and friends of the departing passengers are gathered in their sombre-coloured Sunday best, their pale, anxious faces turned up towards the deck. Lily scans them now, looking for her mother's soft brown eyes. Oh, *there*. There is her family. The three of them, craning their necks, looking for her. Lily shakes off Audrey's arm and waves her hand to get their attention. Her heart constricts at how small they appear, no bigger than her fingernail.

When he sees her Frank puts a finger in each corner of his mouth and whistles. Lily watches her mother give him a mock-slap. The sweet familiarity of the gesture brings a lump to her throat and she has to look away. Her eyes fall on a man she has not seen before, a few feet away from her family. He is wearing a cream jacket, which makes him stand out in that sober crowd. Also, unlike most, he is bare-headed, and his blond hair catches the weak sun as if he has been gold-leafed. Even from the deck she can see the perfect proportions of him, the wide shoulders and narrow waist. He steps out from the crowd until he is at the very edge of the quayside, where the wooden boards fall sharply away. Now he is closer she can see that his skin is burnished like his hair, his cheekbones smooth and sculpted. He is shouting something, his hands cupped around his mouth, face tilted upwards. Lily leans forward, straining to catch it.

'Stay! Please, stay!'

He is staring at a point to her left, and she follows his gaze until she finds the woman in the red dress. Still alone, she stands at the

railing gazing down, impassive, at the golden young man, as if she cannot see his anguished expression nor hear his heartfelt entreaty. Then, abruptly, she whirls around and begins pushing through the crowd behind her. For a second, she catches Lily's eye and Lily is sure she sees one of the woman's perfectly arched dark brows lift a fraction above the dark glasses, but then she is gone, heading back towards the entrance to the cabins and the upper decks.

Lily turns back to her family. Her father stands still, his face lifted towards her. From this distance she can't tell if he's still crying, and she is grateful for this. She tries not to notice how shrunken her mother looks and instead drinks in the trio on the dock as if trying to commit them to memory. She fishes around in her handbag for her neatly folded handkerchief, but the tears she feels she ought to be shedding don't come. Instead there is a treacherous flare of excitement. She is going, she thinks. She is really going.

The gangplank has been taken up, and now there comes a sudden, startling noise like a thousand bagpipes blaring at once. And then the ship is moving, the figures on the quay frozen into position like a painting in a gallery from which she is slowly backing away. She hardly dares believe that she is actually leaving it behind – her family, of course, and her home, but also the things she doesn't like to think of: Mags, Robert, that room with its peeling wallpaper and the green, blood-stained carpet. 'Are you running away from anything, dear?' that lady at Australia House had asked. Lily had said no, but she wasn't fooling anyone.

But now all that is past. Today a new life begins. For the first time in eighteen months hope bursts like a firecracker inside Lily's narrow chest. Still, she carries on waving her arm until Tilbury Dock is just a black smudge in the distance.

2

PREPARING FOR DINNER that first evening, Lily feels as if she has somehow stumbled out of her own life and into someone else's. Where is her little room in the Hammersmith boarding house? Where are the stockings draped and drying over the open wardrobe door and the narrow bed in which she'd lie awake, listening to her neighbour coughing through the paper-thin wall? What has happened to the bus ride to Piccadilly Circus and the nine-hour shifts in the Lyons Corner House on the corner of Coventry Street and Rupert Street? How peculiar that a life can swing so completely around in only eight weeks.

She hadn't had any notion of escape when she picked up the newspaper that Sunday afternoon. It was just lying there on the padded train seat opposite, discarded by a previous passenger. Lily doesn't normally pick up things other people have left behind. She cannot bear the idea of being thought not able to afford her own. But the carriage was empty, apart from an elderly lady who had nodded off with her face almost buried in her vast bosom. Besides, Lily was restless. She'd made the journey from Reading to Paddington so many times she sometimes found herself lying awake, going through the stations like a litany: Reading, Maidenhead Bridge, Slough, West Drayton, Southall, Paddington. At night, their familiarity soothed her but during the day she felt as if she might burst with the sameness of it all.

The front pages of the paper were full of Herr Hitler's latest provocations in Europe but Lily resolutely refused to believe the worst. The country had got to the very brink last year and stepped away again. Nevertheless, she flicked through those pages quickly, as if lingering might tempt its own bad luck.

On page four, her attention was caught by a headline. NEW GOVERNMENT SCHEME FOR MIGRATION TO AUSTRALIA, it read. Lily felt something stir, a tendril of excitement unfurling. Australia. The very word brought to mind unimaginable worlds. Cobalt-blue skies and emerald leaves against which exotic flowers bloomed. Lily has never been further than the south coast of England but she has seen newsreels of Australia in the cinema, and her uncle, who was a sailor in his teens, used to tell her stories of beaches and sharks, and spiders bigger than a human hand.

She read on. The government was subsidizing a scheme for young men and women between the ages of eighteen and thirty-five to travel to Australia with an assisted passage. Young women with domestic skills were particularly welcome. The large houses around Sydney and Melbourne needed staff, and British employees carried a particular cachet.

Lily has sworn she will never go back to domestic service, not after what happened with Robert. But as a means to an end? Could she? Would she?

And now here she is. When Lily and Audrey made their way back to their cabin earlier, with Lily's thoughts still full of that last image of her family on the docks growing smaller and smaller until they were black specks of dust, they'd been introduced briefly to the other five young women travelling under the scheme: two sisters from Birmingham and three others whose names Lily immediately forgot. Afterwards Mrs Collins showed them around the boat with a proprietorial air. The corridors and narrow staircase of F Deck hummed with the excited chatter of other passengers engaged in the same pursuit.

First the bathrooms. Though the cabins have their own washing facilities, there are bathrooms and toilets just along the corridor. Mrs Collins advised them to tip the bathroom steward at the beginning of the trip, as well as halfway through. There could be queues at busy times of day, she told them, so it was useful to have someone looking out for you. They'd agreed, all except Ida, who muttered that she wouldn't be tipping anyone before knowing they were up to the job.

'I've been around a bit longer than the rest of you. I know more about how the world works. There's no point tipping at the start, you have to make people work for their rewards.'

Later, Audrey had whispered to Lily that Ida couldn't help being bitter. She had had a fiancé who died of influenza, Audrey said. But Lily thought that a poor excuse for a lifetime of being miserable and spraying misery into the air like scent. They are only twenty years out from the Great War. Everyone has lost someone.

Next, a trip to the Purser's Office to store their money and valuables. Lily was relieved to hand over the fourteen pounds she has saved. It had to last her the whole voyage, as well as start her out on her new life when she arrives in Australia. Awareness of all that money had been weighing her down and now the purser has taken possession of it, painstakingly recording the amount next to her name in a large ledger, she feels immeasurably lighter. The Purser's Office is up on the first-class deck, and Lily had enjoyed peering into the dining room, which looked more like something you'd find in a luxurious hotel, and the sumptuous lounge, with its potted palm trees and velvet curtains.

Back in tourist class, they passed the swimming pool – much smaller than the one on the upper-class deck, but no doubt they'd be grateful for it once the weather got hotter. Then they looked in on the dining room, which was dotted with round tables set for six and topped with starched white tablecloths. There were lists of

table settings, and Lily searched for her name anxiously, relieved to discover she would be at the same sitting as Audrey, if not the same table. Ida, to her own great annoyance, was on the earlier sitting.

Finally to the tourist-class lounge for tea, which was served with sandwiches and scones and cake. 'I shall be the size of an elephant by the time we dock,' Mrs Collins sighed, helping herself to another slice of cake. By then they had learned that she had been widowed some years before and that she had made this journey twice before, visiting her married daughter in Sydney. It was a way to have her passage paid, she told them. And she enjoyed the company.

The lounge was less formal than the dining room, with comfortable sofas in a dusky pink that reminded Lily of the curtains at home in her parents' parlour, where no one ever went. Neat desks were tucked into the alcoves, where passengers could write their letters home, and at one end a grand piano gleamed under the light reflecting off the crystal chandelier above. Windows ran the length of the room, through which the south coast of England was still just about visible, the dark obelisk of Eddystone Lighthouse receding into the distance. Lily thought then about her parents, and wondered if they'd got back to Reading already. She imagined them letting themselves into the little house on Hatherley Road and how quiet it would feel, the hallway stiff with undisturbed air, and the thought made her momentarily morose.

But now it's nearly dinnertime and Lily's spirits are once again on the rise as she hurries along the passage to the bathroom. Mindful of Mrs Collins' advice, she offers five shillings to the bathroom attendant, informing him that she will be taking her bath before dinner each day and asking him to reserve her a bathroom. He is a young man, younger even than Frank, she guesses, and he smiles at her shyly.

'Of course, miss.'

For the first time in her life Lily feels like a person of substance,

a person with choices. In her bath, she hums to herself, then stops when she remembers the attendant just outside the door. The water feels strange on her skin. Prickly. Mrs Collins has explained that they use treated sea water for the baths, and Lily is glad of the basin of heated fresh water that rests on a wooden board laid across the foot of the bath with which she is to rinse herself at the end. Once out of the bath, she looks down at her body, her pale limbs and the little swell of her belly. She thinks of Robert, and immediately covers herself up with her towel.

Back in the cabin a layer of anticipation and expectation coats the neatly made-up bunks and the few jars of cream and bottles of scent on the dressing table. It is tucked into the folds of the dresses on the hangers in the narrow wardrobe and the underthings in the modest chest of drawers. Audrey and Lily dress with care, Lily steering Audrey away from wearing her one evening gown. 'This is just dinner,' she advises. 'Save that one for when there's a ball.'

It feels good to be talking like this with another woman again. Since Mags, she has felt the lack of female intimacy keenly.

Lily decides on her midnight-blue silk with the white trim. It's an old dress which used to belong to the lady of the house, back in the days when she was a parlour maid. But it's very good quality, and Lily has altered it so that it fits her perfectly.

'Oh, that looks so nice on you,' Audrey tells her. 'It brings out the colour of your eyes. Such an unusual shade they are. What would you call it? Toffee? Amber? If I had eyes like that, I should spend the whole day gazing at myself in the mirror.'

'It's just the light in here,' says Ida. 'Making everything look different. I expect it has had the same effect on my own.'

But Ida's black eyes seem not to reflect any light at all.

Ida is not pleased at being in the first sitting for dinner. 'Why have you two been put together and not me? I shall go and have

words with the steward, see if I can swap with someone at one of your tables.’

Lily resolves to make allies of her fellow diners tonight and impress upon them that, if asked to give up their place, they must refuse at all costs.

Dinner is a four-course affair – soup, halibut, cold cuts of meat, strawberry mousse or fruit – but Lily is hardly able to concentrate on the choices on offer for curiosity about the others at her table. To her left sits a fragile-looking woman in her mid thirties who is travelling with her teenage daughter.

‘I’m Clara Mills, and this is Peggy.’ As she introduces herself, in a voice so small it’s as if the effort of speaking has in itself depleted her, Clara’s tiny hands flutter around her slender throat like paper caught in a rotating fan.

‘We are travelling quite alone. I haven’t slept in weeks for worrying. We’re on our way to Sydney to meet up with Peggy’s father, who has been setting himself up in business. We haven’t seen him for over two years.’

‘What kind of business?’

‘Oh. He’s a bookkeeper by trade.’

‘Well, everyone needs accountants, don’t they?’

‘Yes. Except that isn’t quite –’

‘Papa has opened a sweet shop.’

Peggy has that doughy, unformed look peculiar to certain teenagers, as if she hasn’t quite been finished off. She announces her father’s new business endeavour with an air of triumph that takes Lily by surprise.

A deep pink stain blooms on Clara’s chest.

‘Yes,’ she says faintly. ‘It is rather a departure.’

The couple to Lily’s right were down on the seating plan as Edward and Helena Fletcher. Engaged in conversation with the Mills, Lily got only a fleeting glimpse at them as they sat down, five

minutes after the eight o'clock sitting began, but now the man turns to bring her into the conversation.

'We were just arguing about what we're going to miss most about home . . . Miss Shepherd, isn't it?'

'Yes, but please call me Lily.'

'Helena here thinks frosty mornings – you know, when your feet crunch on the pavement as you walk and you leave satisfying foot-prints behind – but I'm rather leaning towards jam-sponge pudding with custard.'

As Edward Fletcher speaks, Lily studies him covertly. He looks to be slightly older than her, but certainly no more than thirty. Though his complexion is chalky white and his cheeks hollow, he has a pleasant face, with widely spaced green eyes and a full, well-defined mouth that seems, even in repose, to be turning up at the corners as if at some private joke. She can see that some effort has been made to grease back his dark curls, but they are already escaping, springing back into life around his ears. He has narrow shoulders, and his wrists, where they extend from his lounge jacket and starched shirt sleeve, are long and graceful, their little nubs of bone as white and smooth as pebbles.

'Really, Edward, you're such a child,' says the woman sitting on the far side of him.

Lily is surprised to find Helena Fletcher so much older than her husband. She can see that she might once have been a beauty but now her skin is grey-tinged and there are violet shadows under her eyes. Her straight brown hair has been carelessly pinned up, as if done without access to a mirror.

'How about you Lily?' Edward asks. 'What are you most sad to leave behind?'

'I shall miss my family, of course. And after that . . .' Lily's voice tails off. What will she miss? The cold mornings, where her breath clouded in the air above her bed, and the walls ran wet with

condensation? The bus journeys home after a late shift when her feet ached from standing up all day and there was always one man with a pint too many inside him who imagined that, because she was out so late on her own, she must be looking for company?

‘Well, mostly my family, I suppose,’ she concludes lamely.

‘Shall we have wine?’ Edward asks, turning to Helena but not waiting for her reply. ‘Yes, I think we should, to celebrate getting off all right. And leaving all tiresome things behind.’

He calls the waiter over and orders a bottle, making sure it is added to his bill. Lily is relieved they won’t be expected to share the extra cost.

‘What brings you on this voyage, Lily?’ asks Clara Mills in her small, breathy voice.

‘Yes, do tell us,’ says Edward. ‘Have you a pining sweetheart waiting for you at the other end?’

Lily searches his face for any signs that he is making fun of her, but his smile is open and gentle. For a moment she wonders about reinventing herself, making up a more interesting, more impressive story. But then she tilts her chin upwards. Domestic service was good enough for her mother and her grandmother. She ought not to feel ashamed. She explains about the assisted-passage scheme and the process that has led her here. The forms she sent off to the Church of England Advisory Council of Empire Settlement, the interview at Australia House on The Strand, with its grand entrance hall with the marble floor and pillars running the length of the walls. She leaves out the moment her interviewer, a kindly woman in her sixties, leaned towards her: ‘Forgive me, my dear, but is there something you are running away from?’ Instead she tells them about her yearning to travel and the uncle with his tales of adventure and giant spiders. She likes the version of herself she sees reflected back in their eyes. Spirited, independent.

‘And you?’ She addresses the question to Helena, anxious to

include her. The older woman hesitates, as if choosing her words from a densely stocked shelf.

‘Edward has not been well,’ she says. ‘Tuberculosis.’

‘Please don’t look so concerned,’ he interrupts, seeing Lily’s expression. ‘I am now quite cured.’

As if to demonstrate his newly robust constitution he pours four large glasses of wine from the bottle that has just arrived at the table and hands them out.

‘The doctors believe the climate in Australia will be better for his health,’ Helena continues.

Lily is struck by Helena’s detachment. She does not look at her husband at all as she speaks.

All this while there has been an empty chair at the table, but now a man appears, in a state of some agitation, his eyes downcast and his cheeks flushed purple.

‘I apologize for arriving so late,’ he says, and his voice carries a hint of annoyance. ‘I had to queue for the bathroom.’

The newcomer introduces himself to the table as George Price. He is going to New Zealand to help his uncle run his smallholding, he tells them. Like Edward Fletcher, he looks to be in his late twenties, but he is thickset, with square, meaty hands and a caved nose that looks to have been broken several times. When he is introduced to Lily, his small eyes dart to her face and then quickly away again.

Now George has joined them the conversation becomes stilted, lacking its earlier ease. He tries to engage them in talk of politics, of Germany, of war.

‘Instead of making an enemy of Herr Hitler, we ought to be learning from him,’ he tells them. ‘You should read his book. It makes a lot of sense.’

George is fuming mad, he tells them, that the purser has confiscated his wireless radio and locked it away ‘for safe keeping’. ‘He

asked me to imagine what would happen if war broke out during the voyage, with all the different nationalities there will be on board by the time we've passed through Europe – Ities, Germans, you name it. I said, "If war breaks out, I'd jolly well like to be prepared."

Helena reminds him of the noticeboard, where, twice a day, world-news headlines are posted. 'Yes, but they'll keep quiet if it comes to war,' he says. 'At least till we're off the ship. Half the passengers would be our enemies!'

Lily is relieved when dinner finishes and the Fletchers invite her to take coffee with them in the lounge. One of the passengers, an elderly woman all in pink, is playing the piano and there is an atmosphere of cheery first-night optimism. Lily scans the room quickly to see if the woman in the scarlet dress might be there, or the man she was with on the quayside, but she isn't surprised not to see them. That dress hadn't come from the kind of stores Lily frequents, and she is sure the couple will be settling down for dinner in the more luxurious dining room of the first-class deck.

'George is a bit intense, isn't he?' Edward murmurs as they sink down on to one of the comfortable sofas. 'Hope he won't be ranting at us all through the voyage.'

'Just ignore him and keep out of his way,' says Helena sharply. Then she puts a hand to her head.

'I'm sorry,' she says, turning her clear grey eyes to Lily. 'I'm not feeling terribly well. I think I'll go back to the cabin to lie down.'

To Lily's surprise, Edward doesn't get to his feet to accompany her. Instead he blows her a kiss from the sofa. 'Sleep well, my sweet,' he says.

Now Lily feels awkward, unsure what is proper in this situation.

'I hope your wife will feel better in the morning,' she says eventually, her voice stiff.

A Dangerous Crossing

Edward's pale, pinched face registers surprise, and then, bafflingly, amusement.

'Oh, you thought . . . How funny.'

Just as Lily is starting to feel affronted at being toyed with, he relents.

'Helena is not my wife,' he says. 'She's my sister.'