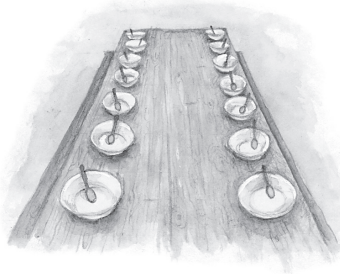


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A Sudden Departure



DAISY staggered backwards in shock and accidentally banged her head against the timber-panelled wall of the Superintendent's office.

What did Miss McCracken mean? How could these strangers be her new parents?

'Oh, my dear girl, are you all right?' The woman sitting in front of Mr Geoffery's huge mahogany desk stood up and stepped toward Daisy, her peach silk dress swishing softly. 'I'm Mrs Bailey,' she said, and stroked Daisy's cheek with one gloved hand. 'Are you all

right, dear? You look white as a ghost!’

She has such blue eyes, Daisy thought, like the cornflowers we had on the farm.

‘I’m afraid we’ve shocked you, dear,’ the woman said, and gave Daisy a warm smile.

‘It’s just, well, I . . .’ Daisy mumbled, too confused to think.

‘Oh, she’s all right,’ Miss McCracken said. ‘She’s got a hard head, that one.’

Daisy rubbed the back of her head and felt the lump that was swelling under her hair. No one can adopt me! she thought. I have a family. There must be some mistake. She carefully touched her fingertips to her head again.

Mrs Bailey gave Daisy a pat on the hand, then sat down beside a man in a dark blue suit. ‘This is my husband, dear,’ she said, ‘Mr Bailey.’

The man smiled at her and Daisy nodded back in a daze. Longs days and nights of chores in the orphanage had left her dizzy

with tiredness, and now the added confusion of being called into Mr Geoffery's office was making her head spin.

All Daisy could see of the Superintendent was his pink shining head, with greasy strands of black hair slicked across it, bobbing back and forth as he scratched away at some forms.

This is ridiculous, Daisy thought to herself. She opened her mouth to say so when Mr Geoffery finally stopped writing and looked up.

'Right then,' he said, and looked at the couple with his pale, watery eyes. 'Everything is in order. The girl is, as you see,' he waved vaguely in Daisy's direction, 'as fit and healthy as they come. I'm sure she'll serve your purposes nicely.'

Daisy's mouth dropped open. She tried to speak but no sound came out. She blinked hard several times and shook her head, but still her voice wouldn't work.

‘For goodness sake, child, shut your mouth and stop staring like a demented codfish,’ Miss McCracken snapped. ‘Or these nice people will choose another girl in a second.’

‘Thank you, Miss McCracken,’ Mr Geoffery said and wiped his palm slowly across his shiny head. ‘You can go now.’

Miss McCracken pursed her lips, but said nothing as she left the room.

‘You can’t adopt me!’ Daisy finally blurted out.

‘Is that so?’ Mr Geoffery said. He laced his long, white fingers in front of him. ‘And why is that?’

‘Because I have a family,’ Daisy cried. ‘I have Dad, and my sister, Flora.’

‘Many children here have families.’ Mr Geoffery cracked his knuckles loudly. ‘But when those families no longer want them, they leave them here.’

‘Oh, I’m sure your family still want you,

dear,' Mrs Bailey said. 'They may not have been able to afford to keep you, what with so many people out of work and times so terribly hard now.' She gave the Superintendent a disappointed look. 'But we can take care of you now.'

'I beg your pardon,' Mr Geoffery simpered, 'I didn't wish to upset you. Of course we're only too happy to do what we can for the Bailey family . . .'

'Yes, thank you, Mr Geoffery,' Mr Bailey cut in. He rose to shake the Superintendent's hand. Daisy saw that he was very tall and lean. His suit had fine pinstripes running down it and he wore shiny black shoes.

'Of course, I'm sure you'd like to get the girl settled,' Mr Geoffery said.

'Come now, Daisy,' Mr Bailey said. 'We can talk about this family business more at the house.' He smiled. Daisy liked how his eyes crinkled up at the edges. He looks kind,

she thought. Not that it matters, she quickly added. I have a wonderful father and I do *not* need a new one.

‘Well, the paperwork’s signed,’ Mr Geoffery was saying as he ushered the group out. ‘She’s officially your daughter now.’

‘One moment,’ Mrs Bailey said. ‘Couldn’t we take Daisy on a trial basis first in case her family shows up?’

Daisy’s heart leapt with hope and she gave Mrs Bailey a grateful look.

‘Err . . . well, it is highly irregular,’ Mr Geoffery began, but then he looked at Mrs Bailey’s face and saw her sad expression. ‘However, I’m sure we could make an exception,’ he added and picked up his pen again.

‘Excellent,’ Mr Bailey said. ‘So it’s settled. Daisy will come with us now, and if all goes well you can file the adoption papers in a month.’ He gave Daisy another smile. ‘But if

your family turn up, we won't stand in your way.' He rubbed his hands in satisfaction.

Thank goodness, Daisy thought with relief.

In the hall, Miss McCracken joined Mr Geoffery in bustling them all out the door.

'Do let us know if there's anything else we can ever help you with,' Mr Geoffery said. 'It's always a pleasure to deal with such quality people.'

Daisy's thoughts whirled like autumn leaves caught in the wind. What if Dad comes while I'm gone? No one will know where I am, and then what? What if Flora thinks I've abandoned her?

And then another awful thought struck her. She struggled against Miss McCracken's solid frame to see back into the hall. 'Wait!' she cried. 'I have to say goodbye to Edith!'

'I'll give her a message,' Miss McCracken sneered.

Within seconds, Daisy was on the front

doorstep. It was all happening so quickly.

Mr Bailey took his wife's arm and steered her toward a sleek black car. 'Here we are, Daisy,' he called.

A driver in a cap and jacket held the door open for the Baileys. 'Good afternoon, Miss,' he said, and tipped his hat to Daisy.

'Hello,' Daisy replied. She took a last look at the orphanage and reluctantly climbed into the car to sit facing Mrs Bailey.

'You ladies comfortable?' Mr Bailey asked, and twisted around to give them a smile.

Daisy's stomach lurched with nerves as the car engine started and they drove slowly away. She leaned her cheek against the window and tried to collect her muddled thoughts as she watched the orphanage disappear. Don't worry, Edith, I'll be back soon, she thought. I'll find a way.