I wear a uniform, blue overall and white cap with the school logo on it. Part-time catering staff, that's me, £3.89 per hour. I dish out tea and buns to the teachers twice a day, and I shovel chips on to the kids' trays at dinner-time. It's not a bad job. I like the kids.

The teachers pay for their tea and buns. It's one of those schemes teachers are good at. So much into a kitty, and that entitles them to cups of tea and buns for the rest of the term. Visitors pay, too, or it wouldn't be fair. Very keen on fairness, we are, here.

It was ten forty-five when the Head got up to speak. He sees his staff together for ten minutes once a week, and as usual he had a pile of papers in front of him. I never listen to any of it as a rule, but as I was tipping up the teapot to drain I heard him mention Poland.

I am half Polish. They don't know that here. My name's not Polish or anything. It was my mother, she came here after the war. I spoke Polish till I was six, Baby Polish full of rhymes Mum taught me. Then my father put a stop to it. "You'll get her all mixed up, now she's going to school. What use is Polish ever going to be to her?" I can't speak it now. I've got a tape, a tape of me speaking Polish with Mum. I listen, and I think I'm going to understand what we're saying, and then I don't.

`... long-term aim is to arrange a teacher exchange - several Polish teachers are looking for penfriends in English schools, to improve their written English ... so if you're interested, the information's all here ...'

He smiled, wagging the papers, and raised his eyebrows. I wrung out a cloth and wiped my surfaces. I was thinking fast. Thirteen minutes before I was due downstairs.

The meeting broke up and the Head vanished in a knot of teachers wanting to talk to him. I lifted the counter-flap, tucked my hair under the cap, and walked across. Teachers are used to getting out of the way of catering staff without really seeing them.

`Excuse me,' I said, pushing forward, `excuse me,' and they did. Then I was in front of the Head. `Excuse me,' I said again, and he broke off what he was saying. I saw him thinking, trouble. The kids chucking chips again. He stitched a nice smile on his face and said, `Oh, er - Mrs, er - Carter. Is there a problem?'

`No,' I said, `I was just wondering, could I have that address?'

`Address?"
‘The Polish one. You said there was a Polish teacher who wanted an English penfriend.’

‘Oh. Ah, yes. Of course.’ He paused, looking at me as if it might be a trick question. ‘Is it for yourself?’

‘I’d like to write to a Polish teacher.’

‘Oh,’ he said. ‘Yes. Of course, Mrs Carter.’

I took the address and smiled at him.

When Steve's first letter came I saw he'd taken it for granted I was a teacher. The person he had in his head when he was writing to me was an English teacher, a real professional. This person earned more money than him and had travelled and seen places and done things he'd never been able to do. He was really called Stefan, but he said he was going to call himself Steve when he wrote to me.

Jade saw the letter. ‘What's that, Mum?’

‘Just a letter. You can have the stamp if you want.’

In the second letter Steve told me that he wrote poetry.

‘I have started a small literary magazine in our department. If you want, I am happy to send you some of our work.’

I told him about Jade. I told him about the songs my mother taught me in Polish, the ones I used to know but I’d forgotten. I didn't write anything about my job. Let him think what he wanted to think. I wasn't lying.

The first poem he sent me was about a bird in a coal mine. He sent me the English translation. This bird flew down the main shaft and got lost in the tunnels underground, then it sang and sang until it died. Everyone heard it singing, but no one could find it. I liked that poem. It made me think maybe I’d been missing something, because I hadn't read any poetry since I left school. I wrote back, ‘Send me the Polish, just so I can see it.’ When the Polish came I tried it over in my head. It sounded a bit like the rhymes my mother used to sing.

At first we wrote every week, then it was twice. I used to write a bit every day then make myself wait until the middle of the week to send it. I wrote after Jade was in bed. Things would suddenly come to me. I’d write, ‘Oh, Steve, I've just remembered ...’; or ‘... Do you see what I mean, Steve, or does it sound funny?” It made it seem more like talking to him when I used his name.
He wrote me another poem. It was about being half-Polish and half-English, and the things I’d told him about speaking Polish until I was six and then forgetting it all:

‘Mother, I’ve lost the words you gave me. Call the police, tell them there’s a reward ... I’ll do anything ...’

He was going to put it in the literary magazine, ‘if you have no objection, Carla’. That was the way he wrote, always very polite. I said it was fine by me.

One day the Head stopped me and said, ‘Did you ever write to that chap? The Polish teacher?’

‘Yes,’ I said. Nothing more. Let him think I’d written once then not bothered. Luckily, Mrs Callendar came up to talk about OFSTED.

‘Ah, yes, OFSTED. Speaking of visitors,’ said the Head, raising his voice the way he does so that one minute he’s talking to you and the next it’s a public announcement, ‘I have news of progress on the Polish teachers’ exchange. A teacher will be coming over from Katowice next month. His name is Stefan Jeziorny, and he will be staying with Mrs Kenward. We’re most grateful to you for your hospitality, Valerie.’

Mrs Kenward flushed. The Head beamed at nobody. Stefan Jeziomy, I thought. I had clicked, even though I was so used to thinking of him as Steve. Why hadn’t he said he was coming?

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I dropped Jade off to tea with her friend. There was a letter waiting when I got home. I tore it open and read it with my coat still on. There was a bit about my last letter, and poetry, and then the news.

‘You will know from your school, Carla, that I will come to England. I am hoping to make many contacts for the future, for other teachers who will also come to English schools. I hope, Carla, that you will introduce me to your colleagues. I will stay with an English Family who offer accommodation.’

I felt terrible. He sounded different, not like Steve. Not just polite any more, but all stiff, and a bit hurt. He must have thought I’d known about his visit from the other teachers, and I hadn’t wanted to invite him to stay with me. But what was worse was that he was going to expect to meet me. Or not me, exactly, but the person he’d been writing to, who didn’t really exist. ‘I have been corresponding with a colleague of yours, Carla Carter,’ he’d say to the other teachers. Then he’d wait for someone to say, ‘Yes, of course, Carla’s here, she’s expecting you.’

Colleagues don’t wear blue overalls and white caps and work for £3.89 an hour. Somebody’d remember me asking the Head for his address, and there’d be a
whisper running all round, followed by a horrible silence. They'd all look round at the serving-hatch and there I'd be, the big teapot in my hand and a plate of buns in front of me. And Steve'd look too. He'd still be smiling, because that's what you do in a foreign place when you don't know what's going on.

He'd think I was trying to make a fool of him, making him believe I was a teacher. Me, Carla Carter, part-time catering assistant, writing to him about poetry.

I could be off sick. I could swap with Jeannie. She could do the teachers' breaks. Or I could say Jade was ill.

No. That wouldn't work. Steve had my name, and my address. I sat down and spread out his letter again, then I went to the drawer and got all his other letters. I'd never had letters like that before and I was never going to again, not after Steve knew who I really was.

I didn't write, and Steve didn't write again either. I couldn't decide if it was because he was hurt, or because he knew he'd be seeing me soon anyway. The fuss Valerie Kenward made about having him to stay, you'd think the Pope was coming for a fortnight. I never liked her. Always holding up the queue saying she's on a diet, and then taking the biggest bun.

`If you're that bothered,' I said, `he can come and stay in my flat, with me and Jade.' But I said it to myself, in my head. I knew he'd want to be with the other teachers.

I couldn't stop looking for letters. And then there was the poetry book I'd bought. It seemed a shame to bin it. It might come in for Jade, I thought.

A week went by, eight days, ten. Each morning I woke up and I knew something was wrong before I could remember what it was. It got worse every day until I thought, *Sod it, I'm not going to worry any more.*

The next morning-break the buns were stale. Valerie Kenward poked them, one after another. `We ought to get our money back,' she said. But she still took one, and waited while I filled the teapot from the urn.

`How's it going?' Susie Douglas asked her.

`*Hard work!*' stage-whispered Valerie, rolling her eyes.

`He's not got much conversation, then?'

`Are you joking? All he wants to talk about is poetry. It's hell for the kids, he doesn't mean to be funny but they can't keep a straight face. It's the way he talks. Philippa had to leave the room at supper-time, and I can't say I blame her.'
You wouldn't, I thought. If ever anyone brought up their kids to be pleased with themselves, it's Valerie Kenward.

`And even when it's quite a well-known writer like Shakespeare or Shelley, you can't make out what he's on about. It's the accent.'

`He is Polish. I mean, how many Polish poets could you pronounce?' asked Susie.

`And his ties!' went on Valerie. `You've never seen anything like them.'

I looked past both of them. I'd have noticed him before, if I hadn't been so busy. He was sitting stiffly upright, smiling in the way people smile when they don't quite understand what's going on. The Head was wagging a sheaf of papers in front of him, and talking very loudly, as if he was deaf. Steve. Stefan Jeziorney. He was wearing a brown suit with padded shoulders. It looked too big for him. His tie was wider than normal ties, and it was red with bold green squiggles on it. It was a terribly hopeful tie. His shoes had a fantastic shine on them. His face looked much too open, much too alive, as if a child Jade's age had got into an adult's body.

`Isn't that tea made yet?' asked Valerie.

I looked at her. `No,' I said. `It's not. Excuse me,' and I lifted the counter-flap and ducked past her while her mouth was still open. I walked up to where Steve was sitting. He looked round at me the way a child does when he doesn't know anyone at a party, hoping for rescue.

`Hello,' I said. He jumped up, held out his hand. `How do you do?' he asked, as if he really wanted to know. I took his hand. It was sweaty, as I'd known it would be. He was tense as a guitar string.

`I'm Carla,' I said.

`Carla?' He couldn't hide anything. I saw it all swim in his eyes. Surprise. Uncertainty. What was he going to do? And then I saw it. Pleasure. A smile lit in his eyes and ran to his mouth.

`Carla! You are Carla Carter. My penfriend.'

`Yes.'

Then he did something I still can't quite believe. He stood there holding on to my hand right in the middle of the staffroom, his big bright tie blazing, and he sang a song I knew. It went through me like a knife through butter. A Polish song. I knew it, I knew it. I knew the words and the tune. It was one of the songs my mother used to sing to me. I felt my lips move. There were words in my mouth, words I didn't understand. And then I was singing, stumbling after him all the way to the end of the verse.
‘Good heavens. How very remarkable. I didn't realize you were Polish, Mrs ... er ...‘ said the Head as he bumbled round us flapping his papers.

‘Nor did I,' I said. But I wasn't going to waste time on the Head. I wanted to talk about poetry. I smiled at Steve. His red tie with its bold green squiggles was much too wide and much too bright. It was a flag from another country, a better country than the ones either of us lived in. ‘I like your tie,' I said.