

Sticks and Stones May Break My Bones - Names Can *Ever* Harm Me

by Lou Beckerman

SHHH! Did you hear something?

Silence.

Leah, frozen in time and space listening fearfully with every nervous fibre of her being to the motionless hush, shush of infinite silence.

Did I tell my name to anyone last night, or didn't I tell my name . . . She had played the assimilation game effectively for so many years now – but one mistake – just one stupid, careless, unguarded error of judgement and she knew her life could turn on a silver coin. Turn from a somewhat wary sense of safety to unstoppable unease.

'Leah Marcowitz.' Could she have been SO off-kilter as to actually give voice to her birth name? Lilly Marks – 'Lill' - was as near as she'd ever dared. Blonde, greyish/blue-eyed. Spoke The King's English. Hardly anybody's commonly ill-informed image of anything remotely 'foreign' (how they adored that word!). Let alone Semitic.

Ah – so easy for the Bard to quip *What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other* etc etc. Yes, yes, but everything is in the name and it doesn't *smell as sweet* to the masses. Leah knew.

There had always been an undercurrent. The separation in school. Girls like Leah to the little room for morning prayers while the rest of the school went to their usual assembly. She remembered the longing to just belong and to be a part of. But it was never going to happen. Not when friends who came to 'tea' were greeted with a bowl – a *shisl* - of Mummy's borscht. Dark blood-red sweetly sour steaming borscht. Not the neat, thin cut, fish paste and cucumber sandwiches she'd get at theirs. Minus crusts.

Undercurrents are deadly. You don't see them but you feel them. They can sweep you away into oblivion – pull you under more efficiently than the approaching wave coming to shroud you. This particular undercurrent was unleashed - given Official Approval to become also a wave - that ill-fated day in June, 2016. But that was decades ago.

Now the island – this 'bejewelled and sceptered isle' (sounds good doesn't it...) had become alarmingly insular; inward-looking to unctuous uniformity. Inflammatory too. A blight of bigotry and blame. BAME was born.

Perilous vessels used to come across the water, full of despair and hope rolled into one anguished human cargo - looking for a life. *Why here?* she used to wonder... Palpable un-welcome. Nowadays hazardous craft *leave* with agitation and uncertain futures aboard.

Once she'd been out with a not-very-serious boyfriend – more of a friend than anything - French teacher by profession. He'd known her family. The day a colleague of his boorishly asking 'Elle est Juif?' – Really! As if she wasn't present. And as if she couldn't possibly understand. And that John – his name was – the boyfriend - actually limply replying 'Oui'!! Not even in a tone which implied 'and so...?' And the young shy Leah stupidly, mutely, saying nothing! She regrets now her silently screaming dumb denial.

There had been other times too.

Later a proper boyfriend (he happened to be Catholic) was given The Borsht Treatment. A second bowl was quickly proffered after he'd hastily downed the first in his aversion to it, as you would a strange sharp-tasting medicinal concoction. Leah had embraced the Church for a while with him - but that - like their poles-apart relationship - ended stickily. In her unknowingness she even got to taste a communion wafer (no taste actually). Sang for a time in a gospel band too.

Wait... Shhh...

Be quiet she whispers.

Everyday sounds she knew so well suddenly become alien and menacingly distorted. The featureless cleansing vigilantes could sometimes be as muffled and noiseless as a deft ballerina...

One time in a group of 'friends', *rather cleverly* one of them thought - asking *Have you ever seen a thin Jew?...* 'Err – hello – excuse me – I'm standing right here' – is what she didn't say. Cowardly. Lily-livered she reflected. *Lilly Livered* – that's the name she should have adopted.

Fifty-two to forty-eight percent. How was it that 'Leave' had marched on with its oh-so-treacherously thin slither of a majority? But that's history now. It's how it was done back then. She clearly remembered that morning-after-the-result in-her-bones ancestral-knowing of what was to follow.

She'd always kept one thing cautiously and carefully hidden. Her great-grandmother's Aliens Order Certificate of Registration. Number 589107. Issued in 1953.

Severe penalties for failing to produce it 'if required to do so by any Police Officer, Immigration Officer, or member of Her Majesty's forces acting in the course of his duty'.

Had she, Leah, been a turncoat? Betraying her forebears' hard, hard journeys to this land? And all due to the threat and dread of outsidership... Ironic really – that society had now become everything she wouldn't even wish to be a part of.

What does regret taste like? Like borscht? Like a communion wafer? Leah Marcowitz could tell you in the fast blink of a fearful eye.

Now did I tell my name to anyone last night, or didn't I tell my name . . .