Lillian Ouaknine had always had a soft spot in her heart for immigrants, especially Jewish immigrants who were hounded and harassed in countries like the USSR, Austria, Poland, and Lithuania, to name a few. Her mother, Ruth, was Canadian, and her father, Jacques, came from Morocco. The two of them had much adapting to do to thrive in America. Her mother told her stories of the courtship with her father and how she met him at a dance for immigrants sponsored by the Breed Street Shul in East Los Angeles. It was Rabbi Dolgin’s idea to hold a monthly dance of this sort to invite potential new members to his congregation, one of the largest serving immigrants from Europe. Lillian’s mother was a northern beauty, with ash blond hair and hazel-green eyes. Lillian had often heard that she resembled her mother, and that pleased her. Her father had an olive, Mediterranean complexion, with dark, wavy hair and classic features. He had often told Lillian that he attracted the glances of many women, but only had eyes for Ruth.

These physical opposites noticed each other within minutes of entering the social hall. Most attendees went straight to the refreshment tables to check out the beverages, hoping for some wine, but usually finding punch and deli favorites like lox or shmear, rye and pumpernickel breads, bagels, herring, and kosher dills. Ruth had very little appetite, and when Jacques laid his eyes on Ruth, he was interested in nothing else and couldn’t wait to meet her. Ruth tried not to keep meeting his eyes, but Jacques couldn’t stop looking at her. She saw him walking over and didn’t know if she should walk away or stand her ground. Just before he reached her, another young man cut in front of him and asked Ruth to dance. Without thinking, she accepted, and he whisked her onto the dance floor. This young man, Danny, was impressed by Ruth’s jitterbug moves, and Ruth could see he was no dancing slouch either. Dance after dance, he monopolized her attention, and she soon found herself exhausted and begged to sit out the next few dances. While sitting, her eyes scanned the room looking for the handsome stranger who had almost made his way to her. He was no longer on the radar. He had been a mere blip who disappeared. Would she ever see him again? Perhaps she shouldn’t have accepted the dance invitation from Danny. Was the handsome stranger an immigrant? A local?

For weeks, Ruth couldn’t get the unknown young man out of her head. A new, unusual sensation. She hoped he would frequent the shul’s dances again as she wondered what his name was and what his voice sounded like.

One evening, the phone rang in Ruth’s home. She answered it to hear someone ask for her with what sounded like a French accent. As soon as she replied with “speaking,” the caller hung up. What should she make of this? Was this a party line mix-up?
When next month’s dance came around, Ruth already had the perfect dress picked out to wear. This flowery knit had bright floral patterns of daisies and forget-me-nots. Her red low-heeled pumps accented the highlights of her dress. Only one thing was on her mind. She arrived early to the social hall because waiting around at home increased her nervousness. She could only take so much clock-watching.

The music was already playing, but only a few people were mingling around the refreshment table, trying to look busy or engrossed in deep conversation. They nodded, smiled, and gestured, using their hands for punctuation and emphasis. Should she join them or wait alone, ready in case the stranger appeared?

Soon more congregants dribbled in, including a few friends Ruth had made volunteering at charity events. Much nicer to have someone to talk to, to pass the time.

Suddenly she felt a tap on her shoulder and turned around to find the jitterbug ace, Danny, asking her to dance. “In a little while,” she said, hoping for a reprieve from last month’s marathon. Danny nodded and quickly moved away.

These get-togethers usually lasted for about an hour and a half, and after having turned down a few requests to dance, Ruth noticed only a half an hour remained. She was almost sorry she had come. Danny ventured over and asked if she was ready to dance yet. She felt embarrassed for having put him off earlier and accepted the slow dance invitation.

Half way through the dance, she heard a strangely familiar accent, French-sounding. She turned her head to see her handsome stranger conversing with a young lady in the corner of the room near the refreshment table. A wave of resentment washed over her immediately, followed by a call to common sense. After all, wasn’t she dancing with Danny? When the song ended, she thanked Danny and walked over to the seats. She dared not look up or around as she tried to ground herself and not appear upset. Apparently it worked because in a few minutes she felt another tap on her shoulder. This time it was her handsome stranger who put out his hand indicating he was inviting her to dance. An involuntary smile served as her answer as she rose and put her hand in his. What she was not expecting was for him to be so light on his feet. He took charge of the choreography and twirled her as masterfully as a precocious child with a top. Her reactions complemented his steps, and many moved aside to watch them perform. All this before even one word was uttered between them. As the song was ending, he dipped her, brought her back up, and led her off to the side.

“How beautifully you dance, my dear,” he said in that now so familiar accent.

“Why, thank you. You’re quite the dancer yourself. What’s your name?”
“Jacques, Jacques Ouaknine. And you are Ruth, yes?”

“How do you know my name? Were you the one who called me the other night?”

“Indeed, that was I. After I saw you last month, I had to learn your name, and so I asked around and was given what I hoped was your number. I had to dial it to confirm it was really yours. But my accent gave me away, didn’t it?”

“Why did you hang up?”

“Because I wasn’t sure you would speak to me.”

“Why?”

“You seemed to be having a lovely time with your boyfriend.”

“I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Anyway,” he continued a bit relieved, “I was hoping you would be here tonight so we could meet.”

“Are you from France?”

“No, actually I’m from Morocco, from Marrakesh. I came here as a child, but too old to lose my accent.”

“Well, I think it’s charming.”

At the following month’s dance, Jacques wouldn’t allow anyone else to dance with Ruth. This time, Ruth didn’t object to his monopolizing her time. As the dance was ending, he led her outside, cradled her face in his hands, and gently kissed her. She leaned in and responded in kind.

These unplanned meetings were the start of an assumed monthly date where Ruth and Jacques got to know one another and grew closer. Ruth was fascinated with Jacques’ language abilities, as he spoke not only English, but French and Arabic as well. Ruth was motivated to study French so the two of them could communicate without being understood by too many others, like her parents when they spoke Yiddish so she couldn’t understand. Jacques was impressed at how quickly Ruth was learning French. She was working with a bilingual teacher who spoke to her only in French. Jacques was able to provide the conversation practice and even introduced her to a few Arabic words. She was pleased with her progress and constantly was adding new words to her ever-growing vocabulary.
Before Ruth finished her degree to begin a teaching career in sociology, she worked as an administrative assistant for the owner of a small real estate firm on Melrose Avenue. She was an invaluable asset to his staff and had a way of putting the clients at ease. Mr. Dawson, her boss, relied heavily on her on many fronts. No documents left his office without her edits; her typing skills were extraordinary; and her translation abilities attracted a large clientele whose native language was not English. Mr. Dawson even gave her the responsibility of helping stage the houses before a sale. Her tastes were popular with many in the decorating trade. Clients grew close enough to her to tease her about her Canadian accent when certain words came up. Sometimes she would over-enunciated them in Canadian English to get a rise out of them, like when she started with \textit{out} and \textit{about} and went on to \textit{process} and \textit{mauve}. She enjoyed how open they could be with her. Jacques had teased her as well, and she took it all good-naturedly. After all, Jacques had his own unique accent. When Jacques would come around to visit her at work, the office staff welcomed him warmly and wanted to make sure he was treating her well. He assured them he was.

Things were not quite the same when Ruth visited Jacques at the office of tax preparation where he worked. He was a certified public accountant who shared a small office with other CPAs. They appeared very serious, uninterested in others, and humorless. She was never acknowledged when she entered. The first time she came in to see Jacques, she asked for him, and without uttering a word, someone behind a desk pointed to him in the rear of the office. How odd, she thought. Jacques assured her it was nothing personal. Accountants seemed to be like that.

Ruth and Jacques’ relationship was deepening and becoming serious. They were both aware of how each felt about the other, but each was uncomfortable with asking the other if it was time to take it to another level, until one of them took the decisive step.

Jacques had shared with Ruth that a client of his new to the area had asked him about a good, trusted realtor who might help him view a few homes. He gave him Mr. Dawson’s name and asked if Ruth could meet him as well. If Ruth agreed, he would send Emile over to speak with Ruth and Mr. Dawson. All fell into place, and Ruth and Mr. Dawson did meet with Emile who was interested in a three-bedroom home with a yard on flat land. He wanted a stucco exterior and a lawn in front with a little taste of the Mexican architecture that dotted the neighborhood. Jacques wanted to see the homes selected to show Emile and asked Ruth if that would be okay for him to attend the showings as well. The first showing was going to take place on April 16, the day after the tax filing deadline, when Jacques would be a little freer. He told Ruth that if he didn’t get there by 2:00 p.m., the showing time, she, Mr. Dawson, and Emile should go inside, and he would meet them soon thereafter.
Mr. Dawson was driving Emile and Ruth in his two-toned, two-door purple and white Pontiac convertible to Dunsmuir Avenue where the house was located. Mr. Dawson asked permission to stop at the drugstore to buy some aspirin for his pounding headache. How could anyone refuse him? He took longer than they expected, and they were beginning to worry as he returned and explained that not only was the line long, but finding a cup and water wasn’t easy either.

As they approached the house, Ruth remarked that she had never seen so many cars in this suburban area. Finding parking would have been a problem if they hadn’t been able to park in the driveway. Mr. Dawson came around and opened the door for Ruth and let Emile out of the back seat. It was 2:05, and Jacques was nowhere to be seen. As per his instructions, they were going to enter without him.

As they walked toward the house, Mr. Dawson with the realtor’s key in hand, Ruth was reassuring Emile that this modest home had everything on his list. The manicured green lawn with floral bushes on either side of the walkway and near the front wall of the house framed it nicely and symmetrically. Ruth was sure to point that out to Emile. She told him he would love the back yard with a brick patio, and she made sure he noticed the terracotta red roof tiles, giving the home a Mexican accent. Mr. Dawson could have been saying all this, but Ruth could communicate it so much better and not make it seem forced or like a sales pitch. Emile looked enthused and ready to enter. Mr. Dawson put the key in the lock and turned it. There seemed to be a faint sound coming from inside. Before they could determine what it was, Mr. Dawson opened the door and led them inside. Ruth had helped stage the living room earlier that day and was proud of her work. Emile took it all in and smiled as Mr. Dawson led them on into the kitchen. He waved him arm to allow Ruth to enter the kitchen ahead of him, as had been planned. The sudden screams and yells emanating from the kitchen frightened Ruth as she reeled backward and almost fell. Soon she was able to make out that these screams were coming from her friends and office mates at the realty company, and there was Jacques, conducting them. What was going on? It wasn’t her birthday, and the house had not yet been sold. Balloons were attached to the windows and under the archways, but no other clues were visible. What was being celebrated? Why was she the object of everyone’s attention?

When Jacques stepped forward, the noise died down. His first words were to Mr. Dawson and Emile, thanking them for helping to arrange this. They smiled at each other and then at him, giving him a nod of approval. His next set of words Ruth could almost guess as he led her into the living room and had her sit in the armchair. He got down on one knee while the guests inhaled and waited silently.

“Ruth, you are my life and my love, so I must ask you to marry me.”
“Jacques, I never would have expected this of you!”

“What? My proposal or the way I tricked you into coming?”

“Well, actually both. Well, no, the proposal doesn’t surprise me. I was sensing something, but how you fooled me – I just can’t believe it. It’s just not like you.”

The crowd starting stirring, waiting for a response. When it wasn’t forthcoming, they started to chant: Answer him, answer him!

When Ruth heard that, she responded, “I didn’t hear a question.” She was right. He technically hadn’t asked her. He soon remedied that with, “Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

“Well, that’s a question I have an answer to. Of course I’ll marry you.”

The applause was so loud and long, Jacques had to step up again after he kissed his fiancée and calm the group down. How could they have been so sure I was going to accept, Ruth asked herself. Maybe they know me better than I know myself.

The table in the kitchen had been covered so as not to show the appetizers and desserts arranged artistically in differently layered heights. Chicken liver pate on challah rounds, deviled eggs, rugelach filled with cinnamon, raisins, and cocoa, old-fashioned yeast cheesecake, and champagne that had been provided by Mr. Dawson. It was now pulled back, and everyone was heading to sample the wares. To top everything off, Emile wound up buying the house. With so much good luck he witnessed, how could he not?

Years later, when Jacques and Ruth had been married for a few years, Lillian was born and showed immediately how adept she was at picking up French from her father, perfect English from her mother, and Hebrew in Sunday School. She inherited her father’s olive complexion and her mother’s green eyes and semi-blond hair. Her parents enjoyed showing her off to relatives and friends.

Lillian turned out to be an only child, and her parents lavished affection on her that they didn’t have to divide among siblings. The three of them would travel together, celebrate together, and connect on levels far above Lillian’s age. Lillian saw herself as others did: as a social empath. She felt deeply when others were hurt or suffering and would do what she could to alleviate their pain. In elementary school, she was immediately at the side of any child who got hurt, helping him up, washing his cut, applying a bandage, offering him the services her teacher knew she was good at and allowed to do. This trait her parents had modeled for her as they took her to charity events, volunteered in soup kitchens, and made donations to the needy.
As Lillian was growing up, Jacques would once in a while take a trip to Marrakesh to visit what was left of his family there, ailing grandparents and a few cousins. He chose not to bring Ruth or Lillian with him, perhaps fearing for their safety. Morocco had been friendly to his people who had settle there, but it had its limits. He also didn’t want to pull Lillian out of school and Ruth from her teaching position. Once, while attending Fairfax High School as a freshman, Lillian had asked to accompany him on his next trip home, but he still refused, now having only a few relatives left to visit. Once they passed on, he never returned to Morocco again. Lillian, to make up for never having been able to visit Morocco, made it a point to spend time with her paternal grandparents to learn about their life in Marrakesh.

Jacques was working as an accountant at a large firm, and Ruth, with her degree, now taught sociology at Los Angeles City College, and both were thrilled when Lillian applied to UCLA, which offered an impressive array of world languages. In fact, this was the only university Lillian applied to. Her mind was made up. It would also allow her to follow her passion and stay near her parents. She enrolled in Spanish, a continuation of her high school classes, Italian, German, and if they had offered Yiddish, she would have taken it as well to be able to converse with her grandmother in her native tongue. Through UCLA’s Junior-Year-Abroad Program, she was able to spend a year in Spain and return with a perfect Castilian accent. While in Spain, she met a University of California Berkeley student also studying abroad in his junior year. After his senior year, he planned to visit L.A., where his extended family lived. He promised to contact her whenever he came south. Lillian was looking forward to it.

During one of his breaks from school, Jack, Lillian’s friend from Spain, took her out for lunch at Cantor’s Deli Café on Fairfax Avenue. They enjoyed the lox, herring, knishes, and latkes they craved in Spain but couldn’t find. Over this meal, Jack shared with her that his father’s brother was coming to American from Poland. This was an uncle he had never met, and it was all so mysterious. He was traveling under an assumed name, Jonathan Waxman, something they couldn’t share with anyone. Lillian felt honored he shared this with her. She was fascinated with his story and peppered him with questions which he confessed only his father could answer.

“I hope I get to meet your father and uncle one day. I want to ask them so many questions about their history.”

“Well, come up to Berkeley sometime. My parents live in Benicia, and that’s where my uncle will be staying for a while.”

“You know I will. Was your father born in this country?”
“No. He and his brother are both from Lodz, Poland. My father is the older of the two, and I think they’re each other’s only family, except for me.”

How sad, thought Lillian, to have to emigrate under pressure and be forced to change your name.

Joseph

In time, Lillian did meet Joseph Schneiderman, Jack’s father. He too was a polyglot, fluent in German, Russian, Polish, and even Yiddish, not to mention English. It was an honor and pleasure to meet him, and Joseph knew immediately he was looking at his future daughter-in-law.

It wasn’t easy for Lillian’s L.A. tastes to accept the San Francisco Bay Area culture and architecture during her visits to UC Berkeley to see Jack. She had never seen Victorians stacked one against the other. They made her feel boxed in and fearful of fires. There were so many more bicycles in the city and streets so steep you might fall over walking down them. Neither had she seen brown-shingled homes like those in Berkeley. The architectural modernity she grew up with was lacking here. People dressed much more formally in San Francisco than in the relaxed suburbs of L.A. Jack reassured her he had gone through something similar when he first arrived. He promised her tastes would change and adapt, and she would wind up liking the area and missing it when she was away from it.

When they returned to Jack’s father’s house for the evening, Joseph let Lillian know her mother had called and wanted a call back from her. Lillian felt a knot forming in her stomach as she walked to the phone.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Lillian.”

“Hi, Lillian. Are you okay?”

“Yes, Mom. What’s going on?”

“You need to come home right away.”

“What’s going on?”

“Lillian, dear, your father had a heart attack and isn’t doing well.”

Lillian was on the next plane home and accompanied her mother to Mt. Sinai Hospital where they found her father in intensive care. They sat in the waiting room, not speaking. Two hours later, Dr. Rosenberg, the cardiologist, came out to tell them that Jacques’ prognosis was not
good. He could come home in a few days, but his heart was much debilitated. He could rest at home, but they did not expect a full recovery.

Lillian stopped her visits up north to see Jack so she could spend time with her father and support her mother. She would see Jack only when he came south. They spoke often, but not often enough.

Jonathan and Greta

During their senior years at their respective universities, Jack and Lillian saw little of each other, but Lillian made it a point to come up north to attend Jack’s graduation ceremony. After his degree, he was planning to return to Cal to enroll in the School of Jurisprudence to study Immigration Law and focus on International Relations. His family threw him a lovely reception at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley which both his parents and newly arrived uncle attended, along with his extended family from L.A. Lillian met Greta, Jack’s mom, who had been away on business during her earlier visits. Uncle Jonathan was a lively character, outspoken, with ideas about governing that came across as radical at times. She enjoyed listening to him in his heavy Polish accent and congratulated him on becoming so fluent in English so fast. He was not inclined to talk about his life in Poland, saying that there was nothing left to talk about. What about family? None to speak of. His business? Not much of anything. Lillian’s hopes for a deep conversation to answer all her questions never materialized.

When Lillian spoke in private later with Jack, she shared how surprised she was at not learning much about Jonathan. Jack volunteered that he and his father found the same response, but were loath to pry. Perhaps there was good reason to keep things quiet.
Pdf Entry Information

Exhibitor Name:  Evie Groch

WEN:  39D064

Division:  FA - 356 - Heroes Arise Heroic Dee

Class:  01 Heroes Arise Heroic Deed Novel

Title:  Across the Pond

Description:  The widow of man trying to get his last family member out of Poland takes on the challenge

Notes: