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Opening Extract from...

The Keeper of Lost Things

Written by Ruth Hogan

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To Bill, my faithful wingman,
and Princess Tilly Bean

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But he, that dares not grasp the thorn
Should never crave the rose.

Anne Brontë

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1



Charles Bramwell Brockley was travelling alone and without a ticket on the 14.42 from London Bridge to Brighton. The Huntley & Palmers biscuit tin in which he was travelling teetered precariously on the edge of the seat as the train juddered to a halt at Haywards Heath. But just as it toppled forward towards the carriage floor it was gathered up by a safe pair of hands.

He was glad to be home. Padua was a solid redbrick Victorian villa with honeysuckle and clematis framing the steeply pitched porch. The cool, rose-scented, echoing space of the entrance hall welcomed the man inside from the relentless glare of the afternoon sun. He put down his bag, replaced his keys in the drawer of the hall table and hung his panama on the hat stand. He was weary to the bone, but the quiet house soothed him. Quiet, but not silent. There was the steady tick of a long-case clock and the distant hum of an ancient refrigerator, and somewhere in the garden a blackbird sang. But the house was untainted by the tinnitus of technology. There was no computer, no television, no DVD or CD player. The only connections to the outside world were an old Bakelite telephone in the hall and a radio. In the kitchen, he let the tap run until the water

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was icy cold and then filled a tumbler. It was too early for gin and lime, and too hot for tea. Laura had gone home for the day, but she had left a note and a ham salad in the refrigerator for his supper. Dear girl. He gulped the water down.

Back in the hall, he took a single key from his trouser pocket and unlocked a heavy oak door. He retrieved his bag from the floor and entered the room, closing the door softly behind him. Shelves and drawers, shelves and drawers, shelves and drawers. Three walls were completely obscured and every shelf was laden and every drawer was full with a sad salmagundi of forty years gathered in, labelled and given a home. Lace panels dressed the French windows and diffused the brash light from the afternoon sun. A single shaft from the space between them pierced the gloom, glittering with specks of dust. The man took the Huntley & Palmers biscuit tin from his bag and placed it carefully on a large mahogany table, the only clear surface in the room. Lifting the lid, he inspected the contents, a pale grey substance the texture of coarse-grained sand. He had scattered the like many years ago in the rose garden at the back of the house. But surely these could not be human remains? Not left on a train in a biscuit tin? He replaced the lid. He had tried to hand them in at the station, but the ticket collector, cocksure that it was just litter, suggested that he put it in the nearest bin.

'You'd be amazed at the rubbish people leave on trains,' he said, dismissing Anthony with a shrug.

Nothing surprised Anthony any more, but loss always moved him, however great or small. From a drawer he took a brown paper luggage label and a gold-nibbed

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fountain pen. He wrote carefully in black ink; the date and time, and the place – very specific:

Huntley & Palmers biscuit tin containing cremation remains?
Found, sixth carriage from the front, 14.42 train from London Bridge to Brighton.
Deceased unknown. God bless and rest in peace.

He stroked the lid of the tin tenderly before finding a space on one of the shelves and gently sliding the tin into position.

The chime of the clock in the hall said time for gin and lime. He took ice cubes and lime juice from the refrigerator and carried them through to the garden room on a silver drinks tray with a green cocktail glass and a small dish of olives. He wasn't hungry but he hoped they might awaken his appetite. He didn't want to disappoint Laura by leaving her carefully prepared salad. He set the tray down and opened the window into the garden at the back of the house.

The gramophone player was a handsome wooden affair with a sweeping golden horn. He lifted the needle and placed it gently onto the liquorice-coloured disc. The voice of Al Bowlly floated up through the air and out into the garden to compete with the blackbird.

The very thought of you.

It had been their song. He released his long, loose limbs into the comfort of a leather wing-backed chair. In his prime, his bulk had matched his height, and he had been an impressive figure, but old age had diminished the flesh, and now skin lay much closer to bones.

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His glass in one hand, he toasted the woman whose silver-framed photograph he held in the other.

'Chin-chin, my darling girl!'

He took a sip from his drink and lovingly, longingly kissed the cold glass of the photograph before replacing it on the side table next to his chair. She was not a classic beauty; a young woman with wavy hair and large dark eyes that shone, even in an old black and white photograph. But she was wonderfully striking, with a presence that still reached out from all those years ago and captivated him. She had been dead for forty years, but she was still his life, and her death had given him his purpose. It had made Anthony Peardew the Keeper of Lost Things.

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2



Laura had been lost; hopelessly adrift. Kept afloat, but barely, by an unhappy combination of Prozac, Pinot Grigio and pretending things weren't happening. Things like Vince's affair. Anthony Peardew and his house had saved her.

As she pulled up and parked outside the house, she calculated how long she had worked there – five, no almost six years. She had been sitting in her doctor's waiting room anxiously flicking through the magazines when an advertisement in the *Lady* had caught her attention:

Housekeeper/Personal Assistant
required for gentleman writer.
Please apply in writing to Anthony
Peardew – PO Box 27312

She had entered the waiting room intending to plead for more drugs to make her unhappy existence more bearable, and left it determined to apply for a position that would, it turned out, transform her life.

As she turned her key in the lock and stepped through the front door, the peace of the house embraced her as it always did. She went through to the kitchen, filled

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the kettle and set it on the hob. Anthony would be out on his morning walk. She hadn't seen him at all yesterday. He had been to London to see his solicitor. Waiting for the kettle to boil, she leafed through the neat pile of paperwork he had left for her to deal with: a few bills to pay, some letters to answer on his behalf and a request to make an appointment with his doctor. She felt a prickle of anxiety. She had tried not to see him fading over the past months, like a fine portrait left too long in harsh sunlight, losing clarity and colour. When he had interviewed her all those years ago, he had been a tall, muscular man with a full head of dark hair, tanzanite eyes and a voice like James Mason. She had thought him much younger than his sixty-eight years.

Laura had fallen in love with both Mr Peardew and the house moments after stepping through the door. The love she felt for him was not the romantic kind, but more the love of a child for a favourite uncle. His gentle strength, tranquil manner and immaculate urbanity were all qualities that she had learned, albeit a little late, to appreciate in a man. His presence always lifted her spirits and made her value her life in a way that she hadn't for a very long time. He was a comforting constant, like Radio 4, Big Ben and 'Land of Hope and Glory'. But always very slightly distant. There was a part of himself which he never revealed; a secret always kept. Laura was glad. Intimacy, both physical and emotional, had always been a disappointment to her. Mr Peardew was the perfect employer who had become Anthony, a dear friend. But one who never came too close.

As for Padua, it was the tray cloth that made Laura

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fall in love with the house. Anthony had made her tea at her interview. He had brought it into the garden room; teapot with cosy, milk jug, sugar bowl and tongs, cups and saucers, silver teaspoons, tea strainer and stand. All set out on a tray with a tray cloth. Pure white, lace-edged linen. The tray cloth was definitive. Padua was clearly a house where all these things, including the tray cloth, were part of everyday life; and Mr Peardew was a man whose everyday life was exactly the kind that Laura longed for. When they were first married, Vince had teased her about her attempts to introduce such things into their own home. If he was ever forced to make his own tea, he abandoned the used teabag on the draining board, no matter how many times Laura asked him to put it in the bin. He drank milk and fruit juice straight from the carton, ate with his elbows on the table, held his knife like a pen and spoke with his mouth full. Each on its own was a small thing, like the many other small things he did and said that Laura tried to ignore, but nonetheless chafed her soul. Over the years, their accumulation in both number and frequency hardened Laura's heart and stymied her gentle aspirations for even modest fragments of the life she had once sampled in the homes of her school friends. When Vince's teasing eventually curdled into mocking, a tray cloth to him became an object worthy only of derision. And so did Laura.

The interview had taken place on the day of her thirty-fifth birthday and had been surprisingly brief. Mr Peardew had asked her how she took her tea and then poured it. There had been precious few other questions

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from either party before he had offered Laura the job and she had accepted. It had been the perfect present, and the beginning of hope for Laura.

The whistle of the kettle pierced her reminiscence. Laura took her tea, along with a duster and some polish, through to the garden room. She hated cleaning at home, especially when she had shared a home with Vince. But here it was an act of love. When she had first arrived, the house and its contents were gently neglected. Not dirty or shabby, just vaguely overlooked. Many of the rooms were unused. Anthony spent most of his time in the garden room or his study, and never had any guests to stay in the extra bedrooms. Softly, gently, room by room, Laura had loved the house back into life. Except the study. She had never been in the study. Anthony had told her at the start that nobody went into the study except him, and when he wasn't in there it was kept locked. She had never questioned it. But all the other rooms were kept clean and bright and ready for anyone to enjoy, even if no one ever came.

In the garden room, Laura picked up the silver-framed photograph and buffed the glass and silver until it shone. Anthony had told her that the woman's name was Therese, and Laura knew that he must have loved her very much because hers was one of only three photographs on display throughout the whole house. The others were copies of a picture of Anthony and Therese together, one of which he kept on a small table next to his bed, and the other on the dressing table in the big bedroom at the back of the house. In all the years she had known him she had never seen him look as happy in life as he did in that photograph.

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When Laura left Vince, the last thing she had done was to chuck the large framed photograph of their wedding into the bin. But not before she had stamped on it, grinding the smashed glass into his smirking face with her heel. Selina from 'Servicing' was welcome to him. He was a complete and utter arsehole. It was the first time she had really admitted it, even to herself. It didn't make her feel any better. It just made her sad that she had wasted so many years with him. But with an unfinished education, no real work experience and no other means of supporting herself, there had been little choice.

When she had finished in the garden room, Laura went through to the hallway and started up the stairs, stroking a golden gleam from the curved wooden banister with her duster as she went. She had often wondered about the study; of course she had. But she respected Anthony's privacy as he respected hers. Upstairs, the largest bedroom was also the handsomest and had a bay window that overlooked the back garden. It was the room Anthony had once shared with Therese, but now he slept in the smaller room next door. Laura opened the window to let in some air. The roses in the garden below were in full bloom; undulating ruffles of scarlet, pink and creamy petals, and the surrounding borders frothed with fluttering peonies punctuated with sapphire lances of larkspur. The scent of the roses floated upwards on the warm air and Laura breathed deeply, taking in the heady perfume. But this room always smelled of roses. Even in mid-winter when the garden was frozen and asleep, and the windows sealed with frost. Laura straightened and stroked the already

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perfect bedcovers and plumped the cushions on the ottoman. The green glass dressing-table set sparkled in the sunlight, but was lovingly dusted nonetheless. But not everything in the room was perfect. The little blue enamelled clock had stopped again. 11.55 and no ticking. Every day it stopped at the same time. Laura checked her watch and reset the hands on the clock. She carefully wound the small key until the soft ticking resumed, and then returned it to its place on the dressing table.

The sound of the front door closing signalled Anthony's return from his walk. It was followed by the unlocking, opening and closing of the study door. It was a sequence of sounds with which Laura was very familiar. In the kitchen she made a pot of coffee that she set out on a tray with a cup and saucer, a silver jug of cream and a plate of digestive biscuits. She took it through to the hall and knocked gently on the study door and when it was opened passed the tray to Anthony. He looked tired; etiolated rather than invigorated by his walk.

'Thank you, my dear.'

She noticed unhappily that his hands shook slightly as he took the tray from hers.

'Is there anything in particular that you'd like for lunch?' she asked coaxingly.

'No, no. I'm sure whatever you decide will be delicious.'

The door closed. Back in the kitchen, Laura washed up the dirty mug that had appeared in the sink – left, no doubt, by Freddy, the gardener. He had started working at Padua a couple of years ago but their paths

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rarely crossed, which was disappointing for Laura, as she had the feeling that she might like to get to know him better. He was tall and dark, but not so handsome as to be a cliché. He had a faint scar which ran vertically between his nose and top lip, and puckered his mouth a little on one side, but somehow its effect was to add rather than detract, giving his smile a particular lopsided charm. He was affable enough when they did bump into one another, but no more so than politeness demanded, giving Laura little encouragement to pursue his friendship.

Laura started on the pile of paperwork. She would take the letters home with her and type them on her laptop. When she had first worked for Anthony, she used to proofread his manuscripts and type them on an old electric typewriter, but he had stopped writing several years ago now and she missed it. When she was younger, she had thought about writing as a career; novels, or maybe journalism. She had had all sorts of plans. She was a clever girl with a scholarship to the local girls' school followed by a place at university. She could have – should have – made a proper life for herself. But instead she met Vince. At seventeen she was still vulnerable, unformed; unsure of her own worth. She was happy at school, but the scholarship meant that she was always slightly displaced. Her factory worker father and shop assistant mother were so proud of their clever daughter. Money was found – scraped together – to buy every item of her expensive school uniform; unheard-of unnecessaries like indoor and outdoor shoes. Everything had to be new. Nothing second-hand for their girl, and she was grateful, truly

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she was. She knew only too well the sacrifices that her parents had made. But it wasn't enough. Being bright and beautifully presented was never quite enough for her to slip seamlessly into the society of those who formed the rank and file of the school's assembly. Girls for whom holidays abroad, trips to the theatre, supper parties and sailing weekends were commonplace. Of course she made friends, girls who were kind and generous, and she accepted their invitations to stay at grand houses with their kind and generous parents. Grand houses where tea was served in pots, toast in racks, butter in dishes, milk in jugs and jam with a silver spoon. Houses with names instead of numbers that had terraces, tennis courts and topiary. And tray cloths. She saw a different kind of life and was enchanted. Her hopes were raised. At home, the milk in a bottle, the marge in a tub, the sugar in a bag and the tea in a mug were all stones in her pockets, weighing her down. At seventeen she had fallen into the space between the two worlds and there was nowhere left she truly belonged. And then she met Vince.

He was older; handsome, cocksure and ambitious. She was flattered by his attentions and impressed by his certainty. Vince was certain about everything. He even had a nickname for himself: Vince the Invincible. He was a car dealer and drove a red Jaguar E-Type; a cliché on wheels. Laura's parents were quietly distraught. They had hoped that her education would be the key to a better life for her; better than theirs. A life with more living and less struggling. They may not have understood about tray cloths, but they knew that the kind of life they wished for Laura was about more than just

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money. For Laura, it was never about the money. For Vince the Invincible, it was only ever about money and status. Laura's father soon had his own private nickname for Vince Darby: VD.

Unhappy years later, Laura often wondered what it was that Vince had seen in her. She was a pretty girl, but not beautiful, and certainly not the teeth, tits and arse combination he usually favoured. The kind of girls Vince normally dated dropped their knickers as naturally as they dropped their aitches. Perhaps he had seen her as a challenge. Or a novelty. Whatever it was, it was enough for him to think that she would make him a good wife. Eventually, she came to suspect that his marriage proposal was driven as much by his desire for status as it was by physical desire. Vince had plenty of money, but alone it wasn't enough to get him into the Freemasons or elected chair of the golf club. With her beautiful manners and private school education, Laura was intended to bring a sheen of social sophistication to his brass. He was to be bitterly disappointed. But not as much as Laura.

When she first found out about Vince's affair, it had been easy to blame him for everything; to cast him as some Austen-esque cad about town with Laura as the virtuous heroine left at home to knit spare toilet-roll covers or sew ribbons on her bonnet. But somewhere deep down Laura knew that that was really fiction. Desperate for refuge from an unsatisfactory reality she had asked her doctor for antidepressants, but he had insisted that she see a counsellor before handing over the drugs. For Laura it was a means to an end. She fully expected to run rings round a mousey, middle-aged,

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polyester Pamela to procure her prescription. What she got was a sassy, sharp-suited blonde called Rudi who forced her to face some rather unpalatable facts. She told Laura to listen to the voice inside her head; the one that pointed out inconvenient truths and raised uncomfortable arguments. Rudi called it 'engaging with her internal linguistics' and said that it would be 'a very gratifying experience' for Laura. Laura called it consorting with the Truth Fairy and found it as gratifying as listening to her favourite record with a deep scratch in it. The Truth Fairy had a very suspicious nature. She accused Laura of buckling under the weight of parental expectations, of marrying Vince in part to avoid going to university. In her opinion, Laura was afraid of going to university in case she failed; afraid to stand on her own two feet in case she fell flat on her face. She also raised the unhappy memory of Laura's miscarriage and subsequent, almost obsessive and ultimately unsuccessful quest for a baby. In truth, the Truth Fairy unsettled Laura. But when she got her Prozac she had stopped listening.

The clock in the hallway struck one and Laura began gathering ingredients for lunch. She beat eggs and cheese together with fresh herbs from the garden, tipped the mixture into a hot pan on the stove and watched it froth and bubble and then settle into a fluffy, golden omelette. The tray was set with a crisp, white linen napkin, a silver knife and fork and a glass of elderflower cordial. At the door of the study, she swapped it with Anthony for the remains of his morning coffee. The biscuits had not been touched.

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