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The Legacy

Written by Kirsten Tranter

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The Legacy



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Quercus

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In memory of departed friends Josh and Kirstin

Well! And what if she should die some afternoon,
Afternoon grey and smoky, evening yellow and rose;
Should die and leave me sitting pen in hand
With the smoke coming down above the housetops;
Doubtful, for a while
Not knowing what to feel or if I understand
Or whether wise or foolish, tardy or too soon . . .
Would she not have the advantage, after all?
The music is successful with a 'dying fall'
Now that we talk of dying—
And should I have the right to smile?

T. S. ELIOT, 'PORTRAIT OF A LADY'

PROLOGUE

Fleur knocked on my door, and I must have been asleep because it seemed to wake me. I guessed that she had heard something of the argument the night before. It hadn't sounded very loud at the time, but that morning it occurred to me that the whole world was dimmed and muffled. The light was very faint, just leaving night behind.

I let her in. We looked at each other.

'I'll be back,' she said, and returned a few minutes later with tea in a cup on a saucer. The delicacy of the china was somehow wonderful, transparent even in the dull light. Strength, fragility, all at once.

She sat down in the chair at my desk – I was sitting on the chaise longue – and lit a cigarette. 'Sorry,' she said, 'I know you don't like it, but too bad.' She smoked it half down. 'I'll go with you. To the hospital.'

I sat there, quite still. 'No,' I said.

'Have you looked in the mirror?' she asked.

I smiled at her, or started to. It hurt.

She finished the cigarette and stubbed it out in a dented metal saucer she had brought in with her. 'OK,' she said. 'I'll call Carl.'

I didn't complain.

She went downstairs and shut her door. The sound of her voice came very faintly through to my room, only because I knew to listen for it.

My dress from the night before lay on the floor in a pool of

silk. It was pale oyster grey, with a split up the side that had shown the bruise on my upper leg like an ugly pressed flower. Gil had stayed by my side all night to shield the view. His fury when we walked in the apartment door had been fast and strong, a striking snake.

I'm being dramatic again.

Fleur came back up carrying the newspaper and handed it to me. She had a magazine as well, and she sat down with it. She picked up the little amphora on my desk and held it in her hands, turning it over, then set it down again.

'I don't like him coming here. I wish you would go to the hospital this time.' She sighed, a short sigh, a sort of huff. 'He's coming anyway, and he'll stitch you up.'

I must have flinched at that.

She narrowed her eyes at me, then picked up her magazine and put her feet on the desk and started to read. She was wearing striped socks, three colours repeated. I spent a while studying the contrast they made against the white surface.

'I'll wait here,' she said, without looking at me. She turned a page. 'Dad's gone to the gallery already. His bag is gone so I think he'll stay upstate.' The statement caused her visible effort.

I hadn't heard him leave.

There are no mirrors in my room, so I didn't need to look. Carl was Gil's cousin, a plastic surgeon with a practice a few blocks away. He faxed through prescriptions for Gil, antibiotics or whatever, and I suspected that he faxed a few for Fleur, too.

The morning suddenly had some structure: I was waiting for Carl to arrive. Then I would wait for him to finish. Then he would leave. That was about all I could think through.

He seemed to take a while. I'd read through the whole style section but couldn't remember a word of it, I found when I

came to the last page, except a vague sense that black and white together were in vogue. I closed and folded it when the buzzer rang and Fleur went to answer it.

I heard them talking. There was the sound of water running in the kitchen sink. Carl came into the room carrying a brown leather case, an old-fashioned-looking doctor's bag, and Fleur stood behind him, holding a basin. Steam rose from it. Carl was wearing a white shirt and the trousers of a grey suit. His teeth were very white when he smiled at me.

'Ingrid, Ingrid,' he said, chiding me.

I started to smile. It hurt, but I kept it up as well as I could. I tried to arrange myself with confidence. My limbs moved stiffly. He dragged the desk chair over to the chaise and sat himself down. Fleur put the basin on the desk. It sat right where her feet had been before. I looked down at them. She had put on soft black ballet slippers that were scuffed around the toes.

Carl smiled his white smile at me and shook his head ever so slightly. 'Those stairs!' he said, turning his head an inch and giving me a sideways look. 'A real nuisance.' His voice shook a tiny bit and I glanced at him quickly.

'Oh, yes,' I said, keeping it vague.

The muffling that had been there earlier was gone, and I didn't like the new sharpness in the sounds I was hearing. I frowned. He gave me a tiny medicine cup full of bright red liquid and I drank it. It felt warm.

'Now,' he said, drawing out the word, and got to work.

It was only three stitches in the end, tiny little strips of sticky tape that held my face together in a line just above my eyebrow. I knew that because I did look up at the mirror later that afternoon in the bathroom, brushing my teeth. I looked away quickly but I saw them.

Carl kissed my hand gently when he was finished. Once his bag was closed he stood up and became very chatty, telling me how much he was looking forward to having us all round to dinner next week.

I nodded. 'Thanks, Carl,' I said, 'thanks for coming over.' It sounded wrong. 'For coming by.'

'You've got everything you need?' he asked. 'Can I send Fleur out to get anything?'

Fleur raised her eyebrows sarcastically. She was back, leaning in the doorway with folded arms. 'We're fine,' she said. I nodded again.

'Rest,' he said. 'You must have one hell of a headache.' His sideways smile again. He left, taking the stairs quickly, in a rhythm, da-dum, da-dum.

A small bottle of the red liquid sat on my desk, its medicine cup showing the trace of what I'd drunk earlier. A little Alice in Wonderland drink, I thought, and reached for it. Drink me.

Fleur poured herself one too after I'd finished. 'Cheers,' she said, and drained it down.

I lay on the chaise and closed my eyes. It didn't hurt. I heard Fleur laughing at something she was reading in her magazine, and I smiled.

'Aren't you supposed to be at school?' I asked her.

She laughed at me, the same laugh. I opened my eyes. 'Aren't you supposed to be at school?' she echoed, mocking me.

'Well, yes,' I said. 'No. I don't have to go today.'

'I'm not going today either,' she said, and flicked a page. 'Mondays are a waste.'

A minute passed. 'I'm going to the studio later, though,' she told me. 'Not for long. I'll be back for dinner. We can order Thai.'

★

We ate that night sitting at the island in the kitchen, only because she refused to bring the food upstairs to me and once I was down there in the kitchen I wanted to stay with her.

'You're looking after me,' I said to her, only realizing it was true as I was saying it. She chewed and swallowed and didn't say a thing. 'It's supposed to be the other way around,' I said.

'Sometimes it is,' she replied.

I'm not sure what she meant, whether I sometimes looked after her, or that stepmothers in general sometimes looked after their stepdaughters. At the time it sounded comforting. The muffling came down again as I went to sleep on the chaise in my room, but one of my thoughts was sharp through it for a moment. I knew both that she was too young to be looking after me and old enough that she would not be prepared to do it for much longer. I wondered how far she would go to protect me. I wondered how much I had looked after her, and what kind of loyalty that had bought me.

Our shared cup sat on the desk, line of red against the plastic. Not at all like blood or rubies, although it suggested those. Like liquid plastic, unmistakably artificial cherry red. The amphora on my desk was back exactly as it had been before she picked it up, at the same angle, the same spot. She was clever. I knew that already.

I knew that trusting her laid burdens on her that were unfair, but I let myself be unfair. The sounds of the traffic outside and far below floated up softly, cars coming and going and sirens wailing in a fading cry. I lay there with my Alice bottle and thought about the story I could tell, the curse that I could lay, the scrolls that I could fill. I could engrave it all on plates of steel, as tall as my body, stacked up against the walls.

Those mirrored, shining doors dissolved and I fell into a dream that was all about escaping on a boat across a river. The island

city dropped away behind me. I felt a joyful sense of freedom until I saw the man at the stern of the ferry, his hand held out for payment. Then I knew that the river we were crossing was the one no one ever crossed back from and I grasped his outstretched hand in supplication. He smiled at me, a cruel smile I knew well, and coins fell down around me, welling up around my knees, golden in the shadows.

PART ONE

1

There were three letters addressed to me on the kitchen counter when I arrived home that Thursday afternoon in August, white and cream envelopes bright against the blue tile. One stood out as I looked through them: a long envelope, thick with paper contents.

The notepaper inside was a heavy stock, its creaminess matching the envelope. It bore embossed initials: RH.

A message was there in Ralph's scrawling hand, challenging any reader to make out a word. I took out the envelope's other object, a plane ticket. One way, business class, Sydney–New York. I laid them both out on the counter.

Julia –

There's a return waiting for you here. I hope you'll listen to an idea I have.

Please do come. Saturday? I hope you're well.

My love,

R.

It was an overly theatrical kind of gesture, even from Ralph. The address was printed on the back of the envelope but I knew it well. Garden Court. Kirribilli. I ran my fingers over the inked-on letters, their imprint on the paper's surface.

The house was quiet and empty. The kettle began to screech and the sound turned into a song note. I turned off the gas but as my hand moved to do it I fought an impulse, quick and lively

as fire, to pick up the paper and touch the corner to the flame. It would have burned nicely. The note drew out all the old, warring feelings. To burn it or to cherish it, keep it safe in a drawer for ever. I left it there on the counter for the moment and gave in to blaming myself for being so instantly unsettled.

Outside the window the lawn sloped down to the shade of trees at the end bordering the fence. Its vivid green defied the drought; Jenny, my aunt, swore that it was the toughness of the breed of grass, but I suspected her of extreme overwatering. Beyond the trees the hill began to drop down to the sea. I went out onto the veranda. The grass seemed to hold the twilight like a pair of hands, the light seeping through them and away like water. Or sand. The fine, white grains of the beach. The letter from Ralph was making me think in overdrawn metaphors.

Down at the bottom of the lawn where the trees marked the border there was a stone Diana, half life-size. At least, I had always thought of her as Diana. As she faded away into the twilight I supposed that she could be any classical woman figure, a girl or a goddess, appropriately robed for the purposes of garden art. She might have been part of a fountain once. Beyond the trees the line of the horizon showed, the sea standing up like a wall of water, beginning to lose its distinction from the sky as night came on. I had come from the city across the water and the smog was still there on my clothes, a fine grit on my skin.

My aunt, who owned the house, was sitting a little way over on the lawn in a wooden folding chair. In a second chair was Keith, the owner of the gallery that showed her paintings. The lawn glowed green. They both held cups of tea, and they were talking quietly. Jenny, grey-haired, sat tall in her chair. Keith leaned forward, elbows on his knees. He raised his hand in a questioning motion, gesturing into the distance. My aunt

nodded. Words drifted up faintly, muted by the grass and space. I went back inside.

The walls of the house were filled with paintings, Jenny's work as well as others, most of them gifts exchanged over the years. They made an odd mosaic, small frames hung next to and underneath large canvases. My aunt's work stood out with its signal blue, abstract and devoted to line. The house had been a precious refuge when I had been smaller, and still felt like one at times. Some people have family homes that their parents have lived in for ever, that they can always go back to. My parents weren't around – father long dead, mother far away – and had moved frequently anyway, but this house was one of the true constants in my life.

Jenny came into the kitchen from the veranda. The sound of Keith putting the chairs back in place against the wall clattered in, and then he stood in the doorway and said hello.

'We've been discussing the next show,' he told me, one hand clasped over his other arm, tall body bent against the doorframe, slightly hesitant as usual. He had a warm, open face that smiled easily, intelligent eyes. 'Your aunt here seems to think she needs a whole six months to prepare.' His tone was friendly, not seriously impatient.

'I don't paint as fast as I used to,' she said.

We all laughed at that: Jenny had always worked very slowly, in contrast to the finished effects of her paintings with their swift flashes of colour.

My aunt rubbed her hands a little at the joint of her thumb as she said goodbye to Keith. The quip about her speed of painting had some truth to it. The beginnings of arthritis had started to slow her down.

'So you have the time you wanted?' I asked her after Keith had left.

She sighed quickly and pulled the screen door so that it was really shut. 'Oh, yes. More or less.' She didn't sound satisfied. Her hair was cut straight and blunt just above her shoulders, and she ran her hand through it, as if planning to tie it back, and stopped.

I held the note in one hand. 'It's from Ralph,' I explained to Jenny. 'He's asked me to go see him, on Saturday. So I think I'll go.'

Even as I said it I knew that the invitation was not like water to a thirsty soul, the way it felt, but more like a slug of whisky to a recovering alcoholic. Was there a difference, after all? That's how it went, my self-rationalization.

'OK, good. It's been so long, hasn't it?' Her voice was carefully casual.

'He's sent me a ticket to New York. I don't know what he's thinking.' I had some idea, of course, but didn't want to put it into words.

She put her hand out and rested it on my forearm. I covered it with my own for a brief second. 'New York?' A troubled look crossed her face. 'Let me know how it goes.'

She finished her gesture with a brief pat to my arm, picked up the mug of tea I had poured, and wandered slowly back down the hall to her studio. The biggest room of the house, during the day it was always lit with sun through its many windows and a skylight in the ceiling. The door was panelled in glass patterned to blur the view of what was inside, as though someone had pressed their fingers all over it while it was still drying. She closed it behind her. The glass panels showed smudged pieces of colour and light. It looked like the Bonnard painting of his wife in the bath, one of the only reproductions my aunt had in the house. In the painting, each tile of the bathroom wall glowed with wet, iridescent colour, the rainbow of an oil slick.

I looked back down at the note, resolving to put it on the dresser in my room, determined that it would not go into one of the drawers where I would treasure it even if I pretended otherwise. Instead it would probably sit there for months, gathering dust. That looked more like not caring. The difference was not much at all but, I told myself, I had my pride.

It seemed like a long drive to Kirribilli, even though it was only a few miles. I managed to take a couple of wrong turns on the way. I'd driven there many times, but always from another direction, never from my aunt's house. It was around eleven on Saturday when my car pulled into the driveway. The house looked paler, peach walls more bleached by the sun. The frangipani trees around the front were bare and ugly. I knocked. A beautiful boy of about eighteen opened the door. A fuzz of golden hair was cropped close to his head. His feet were bare, and he was wearing a black sleeveless shirt and a sarong in bright batik colours. He had the calm smile of a Buddha.

'I'm looking for Ralph—'

Before I could finish saying his name, the boy cut me off. 'Julia, yes, of course, come in.' The way he spoke over Ralph's name made it sound as though he thought I was looking for myself.

'Ralph,' I repeated, and went inside.

It was warm in the house. The familiar hallway stretched away dimly, staircase sweeping grandly up to one side. Light from the stained-glass panels on the door made patterns on the floor. The boy had disappeared. I waited. He emerged from a door off the far end of the hallway, and held it open for me. 'In here,' he said. There was a brightness showing through the door, and I caught the sound of running water.

We walked through into a large space of greenery, a glass-roofed conservatory. When I had been to the house before, the

family had never used this room, although Ralph's father had liked gardening. Plants were everywhere in shades of dark green, lightened in some places by paler ferns, delicate against the larger, stronger leaves of what looked like huge aspidistras. The sun shone through the glass but was caught and dappled by the plants, some of them growing tall towards the roof. The light seemed to have had the warmth bleached from it, while a thick, humid heat came from some other source. The sound of water came from a fountain over towards the far corner, half obscured by plants, a large stone urn decorated with garlands of stone flowers. My skin softened with the dampness in the air.

Two cane armchairs sat in front of a black lacquered table. Ralph was seated in one of the chairs, his legs crossed. All the contours of his body, the angles of arms and legs, were dear and familiar and brought about a dull ache in my chest. I'd seen him sit like that a thousand times, in this house, at mine, on a dining table next to a spilled glass of wine late at night in some forgotten kitchen, in the seat next to me in class, across from me at the campus bar. I had missed him and it consumed me now like a sudden thirst. At that first sight of him it seemed impossible that I'd gone without seeing him for so long. It had always been like that when I saw him after a long break, I reminded myself warily.

The boy walked to a cart near the chairs and put ice from a silver bucket into two glasses with a clink.

'Ralph,' I said.

He lifted his arms and said my name in reply, the rest of his body still and cross-legged in the chair. I kissed his cheek, his high cheekbone against the skin.

'It's good to see you,' he said. 'Sit down. I'm so glad you could make it.'

I sat.

'Won't you have a drink? Wine? Or do you want some whisky?' He gestured towards the boy and smiled. 'This is Aaron.'

Aaron fixed a gleaming smile on me and brought me a glass. It smelled like brandy. I was already feeling light-headed from the heat. The glass was very cold in my hand.

I asked him how he was. It couldn't be a casual question any more. He had always been thin, never quite filling his clothes. His clothes now were as expensive and well cut as ever, and they hung from him loosely. A beautiful, coffee-coloured shirt. He gave me a smile with one side of his mouth, lips closed. His eyes had the same brightness, brown filled with light.

'The new drugs have done wonders for me, although you may not be able to see it. A couple of months ago I was a lot worse.'

He had inherited this thing with his heart, a kind of arrhythmia that made it sometimes beat too slow or too fast, out of its proper pattern.

'And you're still working?' he asked, as though it were a peculiar hobby.

'Yes, in the bookshop. It's going well.'

'And you're still living over in Mosman with your aunt?'

'Still living there.'

'And Mark?'

'He's still around.' I waited. 'I am thinking about moving,' I said, not sure how many details I wanted to offer. The topic of moving in had been raised again recently with Mark, without much real intention.

'Oh. I'm sorry.' He looked thoughtful. 'Moving,' he repeated, with a faint disgust. 'It's always so . . . unsettling.'

I waited. 'It's hot in here,' I said. My dress was sticking to the seat, and my legs sweated inside tights. I remembered reading his note in the kitchen and my urge to burn it and felt the

satisfying heat of the flame against my hand as surely as if I had done it after all.

'I've asked you here to talk about Ingrid,' he said after a minute, as I had known he would. 'I want you to go to New York. I can't, you know.'

And he explained his idea to me.

'I'd just like to know some basic things. What was she working on? What's the place like where she was living? What did she like to do there? Maybe you can meet some of her friends. You can give my, you know, regards to Maeve and Gil. I'd appreciate that. It's just been very hard . . .' He paused, and started again. 'I have a lot of regrets, you know, about not being part of her life for the last few years. I just thought that if I could know a bit more about it, it might be easier to let go.'

I looked at him.

'Does that make sense to you at all?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said, and it did. I'd thought similar things myself over the past eleven months. It was coming up for a year since her death.

'So you want a kind of report on Ingrid's life?' I asked.

'Anything you can tell me,' he said. 'I don't expect a whole dossier. I know it's sort of voyeuristic. But I don't mean it to be like that.'

Aaron moved around the green room behind us, watering plants from a watering can and spraying the leaves with a fine mist from a bottle.

Ralph looked away. 'Gil won't tell me anything. No one's been any help.'

'What about Eve?' I asked, meaning his mother. 'Isn't she going there for some reason or other anyway?'

'No,' he said. 'She's not travelling so much any more. She spends more time in Sydney.'

I asked if she was there, at home, at the house. He said she wasn't.

'We've swapped in a way. It's funny. About six months ago. She was sick of the house. I was sick of the flat. She's always loved it – she had owned it for years before I took it. So she moved in there and I moved back here. It's just me and Aaron now.'

Aaron looked over briefly at the sound of his name, turned back to the plants.

I'd brought the ticket with me with the idea that I might have wanted to give it back. It was in my hands now.

'It's not refundable,' he said. 'I knew you would hate to waste it by not going.'

I laughed.

'I can't put you up at the Plaza,' he said apologetically. 'But I have a place for you to stay.'

It was an apartment that his uncle, Robert, owned in the West Village and stayed in every now and again – he lived most of the time in London, where he ran a couple of restaurants. I had spent some time in New York years earlier, in a year I had spent travelling after finishing high school. It was one of the usual extended round-the-world trips that Australian eighteen-year-olds did: the States, Europe, London, home. In England they had called it my 'gap year', as though it were an empty space. More recently I had visited New York with Ralph for a couple of weeks, not long after Ingrid had met Gil Grey, when we were all still friends.

I thought about the city: the subways, the park, the long, straight avenues and little streets downtown. It took some courage. I thought about the hole in the ground down there at the end of the island.

'I know you're not back at law school,' he said. I didn't ask

how he knew that. 'I'm sure they can do without you at the store for a little while. Just go for a couple of weeks if you like. Take a walk around the Columbia campus. Take a camera. Tell me what's new in the Prada shop. Or wherever she shopped at. J. Crew. Who knows. Do what you like.' He shrugged, but he kept his eyes on me.

'Aren't you curious about Fleur?' he asked. 'We never did meet her. I'd love to know what she's like. Did you know she's taking photographs now, no painting?'

He was persuasive. It might not have worked if a range of factors hadn't been in place. I was tired of the pattern my life had fallen into: not tired of Jenny and her house, which I couldn't really imagine leaving for Mark's flat. I was tired of Mark. I'd taken on more hours at the bookshop after deciding to take the semester off with the dim idea of doing some writing, a script, an outline, something – it was a love story, a mystery, it changed every month – in reality knowing I couldn't face the mountain of reading and assignments for each week's class. It was quiet at the shop and Martin often let me go home early. Not much writing had happened. It was another kind of gap year, not like the deliberate coming-of-age overseas journey I'd taken at eighteen, but a kind of hiatus that might never come to a close, a drifting sense of purposelessness.

It wasn't much to do with Ingrid, my decision to go. She had been shut away into some cupboard of memory by then and the thought of opening that door wasn't all that interesting. It was just the idea of leaving that was appealing.

But all that might have been irrelevant. On the drive home I tried to remember just one other time that I'd said no to something Ralph had asked me to do. None came to mind. My flight left in three weeks' time.

★

Just a few days earlier Mark had noticed the thing that made me realize that I really was tired of the way things were going. He was wearing a towel round his waist, and rubbing at his hair with another towel to dry it.

'It's been weeks since you've taken anything, Julia,' he said. He threw the towel in his hand over his shoulder. 'I'll start to think you don't care any more.'

He walked into the kitchen in his bare feet. Cups and plates clinked together. The hallway he came from was in shadow, fighting the sunlight at the only time of day when any light would get remotely close. The morning sun shone brightly through the windows behind me. I stayed sitting in the big old leather chair, the possession of his I coveted most wholly.

He was right, and I hadn't even noticed. It had been weeks since I'd taken anything.

Mark and I had literally run into each other two years earlier in a bar in Potts Point not far from the bookshop where I worked. He had managed to spill half his beer down the front of my dress, bumping into me by accident; he bought me another drink and hung around while I sat there looking like a wet T-shirt competitor, which he seemed to like, and I didn't mind. When he turned his head a certain way after the second round the light had caught his dark brown hair and made it look just like Ralph's. My heart had skipped, guilty and alert.

The first time he stayed I'd taken a big thing – keys – without thinking about it, and realized later that I'd meant for him to come back for them. I had been happy to see him at the door the next day, standing there framed against the evening. He had stayed again, taking his keys with him this time when he left. And leaving behind, unintentionally, a pen I had removed from

the pocket of his jacket. It was a small thing. I'm not sure if he ever did notice that it was gone.

It started early with me, not like most girls who begin shoplifting when they turn thirteen and get shamed out of it when their parents have to collect them from the store security office or, worse, the police station. It began with playing with the objects on my mother's dresser, the fascinating arrangement of perfume bottles, boxes, powders, the silver-backed hairbrush and mirror. That was back in the days when she still wore French perfume and brands you could buy at the chemist, before she switched to jasmine oil and clary sage. I stood there when she was out and examined them all in detail, and made sure I always put them back in precisely the same position. It was a kind of puzzle. One day she came home unexpectedly before everything was back in place. The front door opened and shut. A bracelet of blue beads was in my hand. My fingers closed over it. Everything else was as it had been. I thought about hiding under the bed – why was I so afraid of discovery, I wonder now – but instead slipped out and joined her in the kitchen, where she was taking off her coat and opening the fridge.

'Darling!' she said when she saw me, as though she were surprised to find me home. She hugged me briefly and the beads pressed against me through the fabric of my dress where they sat in my pocket. They were open pockets, two of them sewn onto the outside of the dress, with a rounded shape and a large button on each. I was afraid the bracelet would fall out. It didn't.

She didn't say anything about the lost bracelet. I thought about putting it back but I didn't want to, and I was afraid of being caught in the act of replacing it. It had come from a box containing many bracelets, and it wasn't one she often wore.

It was months before she mentioned it.

'Have you seen that bracelet of mine with the blue beads?'

she asked my father one morning. She had just finished dressing, and she was putting her earrings in as she spoke. She pulled the second one through her ear. 'Do you know the one I mean?'

My father hadn't looked up from the paper. He made a noise that might have signalled a negative answer.

Peter, my brother, looked at me accusingly from the floor where he was lying stretched out with a book in front of him. My mother stalked back to her room and came out again with nothing on her wrists. She didn't mention the blue beaded bracelet again, and I enjoyed the victorious feeling of having got away with something.

It turned out that I was good at taking things in a way that people didn't notice, and good at not giving myself away on the occasions when they did. It became a rare event as I grew older.

Mostly I took books from Mark's house, just occasionally – that wasn't so pathological – and always left them in a pile in the corner of my bedroom where he'd pick them out and take them home again when he was ready.

Ralph gave me things so often that it didn't feel necessary to take anything. Whatever it was I wanted from him was so big and so impossible that taking an object would have only made the desire more mortifying.

I took only small things from Ingrid – a pencil from the pocket of her bag, a hairclip – but my heart was never in it and these tokens exuded no power. I put them back. The happiness she got from finding the hairclip I had replaced in her bag made me feel like a benevolent angel. That was new. Ingrid had snapped the clasp in and out when she found it, a piece of metal fixed against the plastic imitation tortoiseshell. It was shaped like a leaf, an autumn leaf. She fixed it into place, and the shine of the plastic showed against her gold hair. I regretted returning it then. The beauty of the object emerged when it was on her, once it

was joined to her, something I had missed when I had taken it and viewed it alone.

Some part of me was waiting for something of hers to present itself that would be worth taking. It wasn't something that would be found by looking. After a while I forgot about it and the desire passed.

Mark handed me the paper when we said goodbye that morning, making sure I was taking something. It was still folded up in its place outside the door to the flat, freshly delivered. I hesitated before taking it. Mark wasn't good at giving things. He was writing a thesis, a doctorate in philosophy that was all about revising late-twentieth-century theories of gift and exchange. Doing all that reading had screwed with his own ability to give anybody anything without being overwhelmed by anxiety about what kind of moral and ethical structures he was condoning or violating. So even the newspaper was weirdly extravagant. At birthdays the issue with gifts became irritating, but most of the time it was OK with me; it encouraged a very minimal sense of emotional obligation, which is what I suppose he intended in a way. Our involvement was like that – always tentative, both afraid of risk in our individual ways. From the most cynical angle I was continuing on with it to prove something to myself or the world: that I was over Ralph and capable of sustaining an adult relationship. Or a semblance of one.

He kissed me goodbye, still wearing the towel. I put the paper on the backseat of my car and didn't look back at it.