

Helen Paris

LOST PROPERTY

Description of article:

*'An enthralling read
full of characters
you can't help
but love'*

Found by:

Hazel Prior



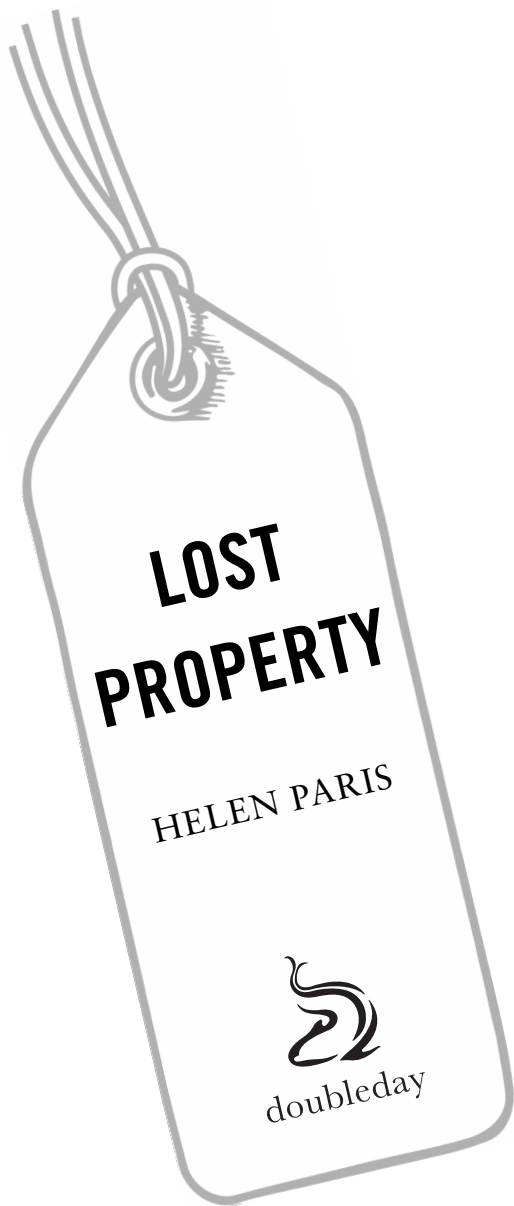
Everything that's lost belongs somewhere.
Dot Watson just needs to be found.

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LOST PROPERTY

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For darling Leslie, with all my love

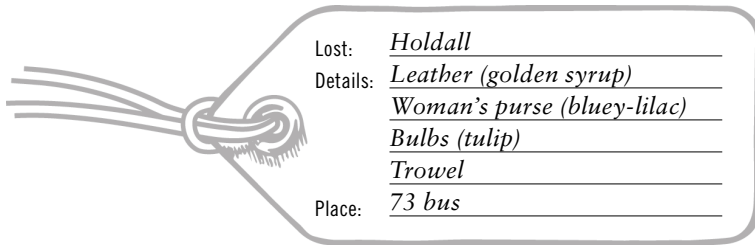
PROLOGUE

It's church-like down here, shadowy with unlikely congregations: wine bottles, prams, a funeral urn. As the overhead fluorescents hum into life, the colours glow like light through a stained-glass window – yellow, amber, taupe, turquoise, more fuchsia than you might imagine. It's the yellow that hits you first. Mustard yellow. Dijon, rather than Colman's powdered. You have to be precise in Lost Property. You have to find the exact right words and fit them on to the modestly sized Dijon-coloured labels tied to every single lost item stored here. If you write 'Woman's Handbag, dappled burgundy' rather than 'Woman's Handbag, red', it can make all the difference as to whether that bag is reunited with its owner or languishes in Lost Property for ever. Leather handle, you say? What kind? I ask. Looped? Stitched? Buckled? Chewed? Admittedly, it's a challenge to

make one black collapsible umbrella stand out from another, but I do my best. I pay attention to the details.

Amidst the aisles of the mislaid, forgotten and walked-away-from is me, Dot. You'll hear me before you see me, mind; I have my father's feet (flat) attached to my mother's ankles (slim). I'm generally down here, shelving and tagging, and sometimes, when the other staff have gone home, you'll find me rooted on my family-tree feet, staring at the rows and rows of loss.

1



It's seasonal, loss. Outside, autumn rain buckets down full force; inside, a deluge of brollies all need logging and labelling. We're jam-packed in Customer Service. A damp line of people queue the length of the counter, steam gently rising off woollen coats, seeking temporary sanctuary in Lost Property, in search of what they have lost, or delivering what they have found.

I'm sitting at the far end of the counter tagging the lost umbrellas while Anita deals with customers, though when I look over she's rootling through her bag as per.

'Bugger, where's my pen?' she says. *Staff possessions are strictly prohibited from the public area.* 'It's in here somewhere.' She digs deeper into the vast recesses of her handbag. A large flank of matted brown-and-white suede, it is permanently attached to her, clanking her bits and bobs around like Marley's ghost. Whenever I look at Anita she is

elbow-deep in that bag, as if birthing a cow, forever groping for one of her slimmer's bars or a squirt of perfume. I have considered suggesting she might be better off with something smaller – a buckled satchel, perhaps? I am always picking up after her – scarf left in the Ladies, hairbrush abandoned on the counter. 'Ta, Dots! Lose my head if it wasn't screwed on.'

Indeed.

I unclip my second-best Sheaffer from my jacket pocket and hand it to her.

'You're a doll,' she says, and returns to her customer.

I am no such thing and hold little hope of the Sheaffer returning to roost, which is disappointing as it's new, a present to myself for my birthday.

When she first started working at Lost Property, I asked Anita what had drawn her here – seeing as it's clearly a challenge to keep hold of her own things, let alone other people's. 'I told the job centre all my skills,' she confessed over a frothy coffee at the Italian next door, firing two white pellets into her mug from a small tube retrieved from her commodious bag. 'Showed them my cosmetics certificate and business plans and they sent me here! What about "Level 3 Diploma in Nail Services" makes them think I'd be good at dealing with people's crap every day?'

She's been here almost as long as I have now. Unlike the others who come and go, Anita stayed. Perhaps the nails never worked out. She didn't say and it's not my place to ask – we've all had our dreams. When I was young I longed to be a librarian. I often sought sanctuary in the quiet order of the public library, delighting in the assured way the librarian splayed my book open, the crinkle of the cellophane jacket. Most of all I loved the confident stamp of the date and the

soft slither of the pink ticket leaving the cardboard pocket, knowing the librarian would keep it safe in her file for me till I returned.

They've closed most of them now, the libraries, and Lost Property was the right place for me after all. We are the repository for all the items left on London's buses, black cabs, tubes and trains; we get hundreds of items a day. Loss never stops; it's reliable like that. And the hours are good. Occasionally we have to go on Transport for London 'Awaydays' to stare at flip charts and listen to Lynx-doused lads in their machine-washable suits say 'not a problem' ad infinitum. What do they know of the intricacies of Lost Property? Of loss and its myriad problems? With them, it's all staff development and recruitment. Mind you, we do rather well in recruitment. Recruitment is 'not a problem'. *Ha*. It's an endless procession of temps – students mostly – passing through, wanting a pay packet and a job in the city. Whatever the employment agency finds them will suffice.

I applied.

You see, I know about loss. I know its shape, its weak spots, its corners and sharp edges. I have felt its coordinates. I have sewn its name into the back of its collar.

When I've finished labelling the brollies, I start on a crate of items that came in yesterday from the depot at Victoria coach station. Beyond Customer Service is the back office, and as I sort I am lulled by the comforting thrum that drifts through the doorway as Gabrielle (French exchange student) and Sukanya (drama school) field telephone enquiries.

'Six long-stemmed glasses from John Lewis? Exactly as you described, madam. Your taxi driver brought them in yesterday.'

‘You changed from the Central Line to the Northern Line at Tottenham Court Road? . . . I know, those escalators have been out of order for ever, haven’t they – it’s terrible, too totally tragic.’

Truth be told, Sukanya could try to be a tad less dramatic and a tad more sotto voce – I understand she’s practising her acting skills, but there is such a thing as too much projection.

In my crate, there’s a woman’s cardy in an appealing periwinkle. Looks handmade – that row of pearl buttons sets it off splendidly. I’m guessing she’s elderly, an ice-cream whip of hair and an archipelago of liver spots. Mind you, could be a teenager experimenting with a retro look . . . but no, a quick sniff reveals a powdery lily of the valley. I was right first time, usually am. I complete the Dijon label and securely loop it around one of the pearl buttons, then move on to a grubby pond-green man’s anorak with half a packet of Polos in one pocket, a pencilled shopping list in the other. The odour this time is less definable – a mélange of mint and mildew with a dab of gravy. Much loved though, the jacket; he’ll be upset he left that behind. I fill out the Dijon, double knot it to the zip. What’s next? A handbag, rather a nice one to boot. She was asking for trouble, the owner, with that broken clasp. It’s only a matter of time before something falls out and gets lost. You have to respect someone, though, who doesn’t throw a handbag away at the first sign of wear and tear. Most people don’t have that sort of loyalty any more.

Not much inside – Anita, take note – hanky, lipstick, till receipts. Any money or credit cards have already been removed and locked up in Valuables. Mind you, what, I always ask, is the true value of an object? The bag is fine leather, worn but cherished. I can spot quality. I’m not

boasting. When you spend all day handling other people's property, you get to know these things.

Mostly it's a parade of phones, plastic travel-card wallets and dog-eared thrillers, so when something special turns up, you take notice, bask for a moment in the glow of its patina. The hanky is a treat – linen and one of Liberty's original prints, I'd argue their best. But the lipstick is a surprise. I don't wear make-up – never really got the hang of it – but Red-Hot Poker? It just doesn't go with the handbag or the hanky. I remove the lid and roll up a few jarring crimson centimetres. Hmm, no pristine diamond tip – it's rounded and smudged with use. Oh, that mismatched lipstick is going to bother me for the rest of the day, like a poppy seed in my teeth.

'I see your admirer was in again, Nita.' Ed nods at a customer tottering out with a walking stick. Despite his actual place of employment being Baker Street station next door, Ed spends a vast amount of his working day propping up our counter, swapping double entendres with Anita and drinking alarmingly milky tea from a chipped red-and-white Arsenal mug.

'Give over, he's not my admirer,' Anita says, unearthing a tub of strawberry lip gloss from her bag. *Staff possessions are strictly prohibited from the . . .* I'm fighting a losing battle. Ed watches transfixed, like a figure in Botticelli's *Adoration of the Magi*, as Anita coats her mouth with slow back-and-forth swoops of shimmering gloss.

'A repeat offender then,' Ed says, breathing unattractively through his nose.

'Takes one to know one.' Anita pouts her lips into a kiss shape at him. 'Quick smoke?'

‘Don’t mind if I do—’

‘Hiya.’ Sheila, our latest from SmartChoice Temping Agency, clops in from the back office on heels designed to induce altitude sickness.

Ed’s head whips in her direction.

‘What are you chatting about?’ Sheila SmartChoice shimmies her tiny bottom up on to the counter, liquorice-twisting her stockinged legs.

Ed stares.

Anita pelts the tub of gloss into her bag.

‘Nothing, just an old chap who comes in every couple of months, reporting the “loss” of his walking stick.’ Anita pauses to punctuate the word with her index fingers, one distressingly sticky.

‘He must be ever so forgetful,’ says SmartChoice, giving Ed a wink that causes him to slop his tea on the counter.

I staunch Ed’s milky ablution with the hanky I keep safety-pinned inside my jacket pocket. The customer in question can give you a precise catalogue of the test scores since the England and Wales Cricket Board took over from Marylebone Cricket Club in 1997. He can also tell you the best time to plant asparagus and broad beans, and knows the complete taxonomy of *Turdidae*. He is not one jot forgetful. He is, I fear, lonely.

‘So, what do you do when the man comes in for his stick?’ pursues SmartChoice.

‘I go get him an unclaimed one from downstairs,’ Anita says.

‘Oooh, is that allowed?’ asks SmartChoice, rabbit-eyed.

‘Why not!’ says Anita. ‘We’re buried in sticks, crutches, canes – you name it. Got a fair number of false limbs too,

not to mention false teeth and false eyes. How, I ask you, is someone able to get up and walk off the train *without their prosthetic leg*? Miracle cures on the Metropolitan Line? No wonder TfL charge so much for the bloody tickets.’ She gives a husky chuckle that has Ed back in her thrall.

I glance at the door; there’s a lull right now, but a customer could come in at any moment searching for a lost item and find us dilly-dallying the day away. Clearly, I am the only one concerned.

‘Bet the Broolly Dollies were in today, eh, Nita?’ Ed says.

‘Too right,’ Anita says. She flashes Ed a conspiratorial smile, bends forward and says in a querulous voice, “Excuse me, dear, I seem to have lost my umbrella.”

Ed laughs and, encouraged, Anita continues: “Could you describe your umbrella?”

“Oh, yes,” they say. “It’s black, and has a handle.”

“Black with a handle?” I say. “I believe one matching your exact description was handed in this morning. I’ll get it for you.”

‘That’s amazing you knew we had it,’ says SmartChoice. The girl is as vacuous as an open window.

‘Coming for that smoke, Ed?’ Anita says.

‘I better shift and get myself back to work,’ says Ed, showing no sign of shifting. Anita stands for a moment, bites her glossy lip, then hoists the beast of a bag on to her shoulder.

‘Dot, cover me, will you? I’ll only be a quick five.’

Knowing it’s going to be more like a long fifteen, I leave my crate of lost items and take her place at the counter as she struts off to join the soggy smokers on the fire escape.

I turn to SmartChoice.

‘Unless you want to be filed under miscellaneous, may I suggest you return to work?’

‘Later.’ SmartChoice untwizzles her legs and teeters back to the office. Ed gazes after her, sighs and slinks out of the door.

I neaten a pile of Lost Item forms and straighten my jacket in readiness for the next customer. I do not condone Anita’s laissez-faire attitude with the walking sticks and umbrellas, handing them out willy-nilly, but she has been facing some trials of late. After years of putting up with her porcine husband’s dalliances and semi-permanent state of intoxication, she has finally given him his marching orders. He recently showed up inebriated and covered in Elizabeth Arden’s Provocative Woman, and she threw him out on the spot, followed by a tray of crispy pork balls. ‘I spent the weekend on the sofa getting intimate with Gordon and his best mate Tonic,’ Anita said when she regaled me with the news, panda-eyed. It transpired she had also made the acquaintance of Harveys Bristol Cream and faced the silent watches of the night with Napoleon Brandy. I pass no judgement. On occasion, I have entertained myself similarly. I brewed her a cup of Lapsang Souchong and popped *Exploring the Greek Islands* (a truly first-rate travel guide) into her bag.

The door opens and an elderly gentleman in a soft, putty-coloured raincoat and tweed cap slowly approaches the counter.

‘How may I help you, sir?’ I say.

‘I come more in hope than expectation.’ Rainwater traces the wrinkles in his face, beads his thick, grey eyebrows. ‘Quite my own fault,’ he continues. ‘The holdall.’

I lick my finger and thumb, peel a Lost Item form from my stack, unclip my silver Sheaffer from my jacket pocket.

‘A holdall?’

‘Yes. Leather. Sort of a golden-syrup colour. Old, but in pretty good shape, better than me.’ He gives a dry chuckle that turns into a cough.

Three small darns in his cap; whoever did them matched the thread exactly.

‘Excuse me.’ He unfurls a crumpled handkerchief. Rain-drops from his coat splatter across the counter. One lands on my jacket sleeve.

‘Last Friday I was on the bus,’ the old man continues.

‘Which one?’

‘Stoke Newington to Oxford Street.’

I nod, write ‘73’ on my form.

‘What was in the holdall?’

‘Let me see . . . the purse, tulip bulbs, a trowel . . .’

‘Can you describe the purse?’

‘It’s blue.’

‘What shade? Sky? Sea? Squid-ink?’

‘Sort of bluey-lilac, with a little gold snap closure.’

‘A woman’s purse?’

‘Yes, Joan’s. My wife.’

‘And how much would you say was in it?’

‘How much?’ His forehead puckers.

‘Money.’ My hand hovers over the form.

‘Oh, quite empty. Her favourite, you see, so it’s nice to have it close.’

‘I see.’

I do.

‘You mentioned tulip bulbs? A trowel?’

‘I often visit Abney Park Cemetery. I take *The Times* and do the crossword. I prefer the concise but Joanie was a devil for the cryptic. Always spot on with the, er . . . whatsits . . .’

‘Anagrams?’

‘Yes!’ Such a kind smile he has. ‘Anagrams. A real dab hand. Fifty-four years and she never made a mistake . . .’ His Adam’s apple bobs. ‘So, if I’m wrestling with a tricky puzzle, I hop on the bus to Abney and we do it together.’

I look down; the word ‘holdall’ blurs on the page before me.

‘It’s really just Joanie’s purse I’d like back. It’s small, like this . . .’ He cups his hands gently, as if holding a tiny bird – opens and closes them. They shake a little but I can clearly see the shape of the purse, hear the bright chirrup of the snap closure.

Sellotape. Superglue. Safety Pin. My special words. I repeat them in my head while I concentrate on breathing. Substantial, aniseed balls of words, dependable, safe.

‘I’ll do my best, sir. Let me take your contact details. Your name?’

‘Appleby, John Appleby.’

After Mr Appleby leaves, I manage to deal with the next two customers but am glad when the loud clanking of an overfilled handbag behind me heralds the return of Anita.

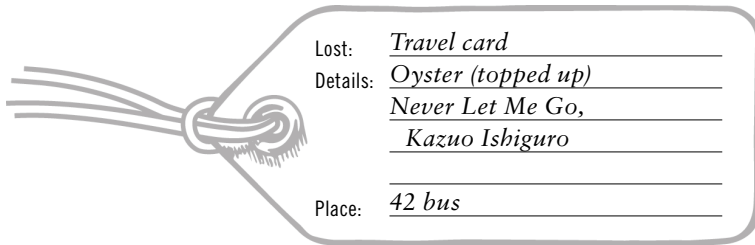
‘You’re a star, Dots.’

‘Must get these things shelved,’ I say, grabbing the crate of brollies, desperate for the sanctuary of the stacks.

I search the shelves for the holdall, even though I know we don’t have it. I look because I know what it is to need something the way Mr Appleby needs that chirruping purse.

I still have Dad's pipe. Dunhill. Tortoiseshell body, ebony-black stem, and when I dip my nose into the bowl, that tug of cherry tobacco . . . I ration myself to one small sniff a day. Once, I followed a man from Baker Street to Marble Arch because of that smell. Occasionally, I slip the stem of the pipe between my lips – we have the same slight overbite, Dad and I. My teeth settle into the ridge made by his and, anchored, I inhale. I try to breathe him back.

2



My commute consists of one train, two buses and a brisk clip up Baker Street. On my way to work I'm always on the lookout. I can't help myself, it goes with the job. I can tell when something is about to go, about to be lost. There's a kind of silence. A pause. I catch myself waiting for it. The woman in the coriander-green coat four seats in front of me on the bus might very well be holding on to her bag but she is paying no attention whatsoever to her silk scarf, which slips from her shoulders and flops over the rail of the seat behind her. Thankfully her neighbour, a girl sporting impressively large headphones, notices and returns it. Then there's that young chap with his brand-new briefcase, the square of his lunchbox pressing its shape into the soft leather. He'll abandon the lunchbox after a few weeks, realizing that to fit in with the boys you have to go to the pub at lunch-time and buy the first round, not sit by yourself eating your

sandwiches. But right now, he's new, hopeful. Gripping that briefcase too tightly though, that's often when things get lost.

As usual, I'm first to arrive at work. I let myself in and make a cup of Lapsang in what passes as the staff kitchen – it's just a nook at the far end of the back office with a kettle and communal box of tea-bags (I bring my own leaves), but our boss Brian is generous, if pedestrian, with the biscuits. I wonder if that nice Mr Appleby's holdall has come in? I slip behind the counter in Customer Service and log on to the computer. If an item is left on a London bus and found by the driver, it is held at the Arriva bus depot for three days before it comes to us. I have a quick scan through the online files. I confess it's a tad above and beyond – if I did this for every lost item, where would we be? Drowning in a sea of unstacked brollies, that's where. It's just that . . . well . . . it would be rather splendid if I could call him with good news. I search under 'Appleby', then 'holdall', and then for good measure 'bag' ('kit-' 'shoulder-' and 'carrier-') then 'tote', 'leather' and 'luggage'. My travails reveal a leather belt with a buckle in the shape of Texas, and a lady's beaded evening bag. Nothing for Mr Appleby. I log out, deflated. It is possible the holdall was found by another passenger on the bus; if so, it might come in this week. If something's going to come to us it usually comes quickly. Purloin or proffer is the modus operandi of the general public, for better or worse. Mind you, I can't say a bad word about the people who return lost property. Last year over 13,000 keys were handed in, though only a fraction were claimed – this discrepancy speaks to: 1) a heartwarming desire to help, and 2) an absolute lack of hope.

It's barely 8.30 a.m. and the doors don't open to customers for half an hour, so no other staff are in yet. I take the

service lift down to the stacks and spend a very relaxing twenty minutes shelving yesterday's logged items. I find it quite meditative, shelving. The lady's periwinkle cardy goes to stack five – 'Women's Clothing: Jumpers and Woollens' – offering cheery company to a faded yellow ribbed sweater. At stack seven – 'Assorted Bags, Briefcases and Trollies' – I slip the handbag with the broken clasp alongside a rather outré cork shoulder bag with the words 'Made in Portugal' stamped on the strap, thus collating a shabby chic/cosmopolitan/bohemian fusion which I think rather works.

It takes me a moment to find just the right spot for the anorak with the half-packet of Polo mints in the 'Coats and Outdoor Wear' stack. Quite wrong to put it next to that heavy-duty army camouflage flak jacket. No, no, no. You see, there's an art to organizing loss; it is a world not without its heroes. My *héroïne véritable* is Phyllis Pearsall, who, on becoming lost in London with only a sub-par map to hand, conceived the *London A-Z*. What a pioneer! A true pathfinder. She made such a worthwhile contribution to ameliorate loss, to help us find our way around this metropolis. Of course, then people started to lose their copies of the *A-Z*. We used to have two whole shelf stacks of them: hardbacks, paperbacks and – less attractive but admittedly handy – spiral-bounds. They rarely come in any more though, because nowadays people prefer to navigate the city in head-bowed deference to a moving blob on their phones, which, in turn, now line the shelves of the Valuables lock-up. Like I say, loss never ends. But when I think of Phyllis walking 3,000 miles in order to ascertain and note individual house numbers on main roads in her quest to stop us getting lost, I am eternally grateful for her care and attention. I snuggle the anorak between a

cherry-red cagoule and a shiny azure belted raincoat, and stand back to admire the triptych. I hope, in my own way, I make a small difference to the lost charges in my care.

‘How are we this morning?’ From the bumptious use of the plural it can only be Neil Burrows.

I turn and sure enough it is he, lurking behind me.

‘You’re in early,’ I say, searching for an escape route. The aisle between stacks six and seven is looking good, save for a tartan shopping trolley adrift.

‘I’m off to a rather important meeting with Bri,’ he says. ‘Some pretty interesting stuff going on with TfL at the moment.’

Puffed up and on patrol, jiggling the six-key set hanging from his trouser belt and acting as if the whole of Lost Property is under his purview rather than just one moderately sized Valuables cage, Neil Burrows puts me in mind of Miss Hyde’s Derbyshire Redcap cockerel, Chauncleer.

For a few discordant years, I was sent to Miss Hyde for piano lessons. In the garden of her 1950s semi, Chauncleer shuffled despondently, scratching bleakly between the cracks of the pink-stoned patio. Alopecia had taken most of his neck feathers, revealing long tracks of yellow, scarred flesh. I’d often stare out of Miss Hyde’s French windows as she berated me over a wrong note or incorrect answer (‘B sharp? I wish you would *be sharp*, young lady!’) and watch Chauncleer bothering one of his scabs, consoling myself that his lot was worse than mine.

One day, steeled for an agonizing hour of ‘Clair de Lune’, I found Miss Hyde transfixed, looking out at her garden.

‘Dot! Come and take a look at my girls!’ Sensing a reprieve from Debussy, I rushed to join her at the window. Her patio

was pulsing with the fluffy brown, white and orange bodies of half a dozen newly acquired chickens.

‘Named ’em after the suffragettes,’ she said, a noble arch to her brow. ‘Thought it might give them something to aspire to, you know.’ I eagerly followed my piano teacher’s dewy gaze out on to Emmeline, Christabel, Sylvia and Adela Pankhurst, Lady Constance Lytton and General Flora Drummond. Miss Hyde’s girls were a sprightly bunch who gave her a frisson of excitement I had not previously noticed. Her transformation, however, was nothing compared to that of Chaunticleer. I barely recognized him. His sullen stoop was gone, replaced by what one could only call a shimmy as he squawked and sashayed around *his* girls, bright-eyed, expectant and erect.

Yes, Neil Burrows was a dead ringer for Chaunticleer.

‘Me and Bri are like this,’ Neil Burrows says, wrapping his middle finger tightly over his index. He steps closer and says on a stream of hot halitosis, ‘I could put in a good word for you if you like?’

‘Thanks, but no need.’ Yes, nipping past that tartan trolley is definitely going to be my fastest route, then down to the end of the stacks, up in the lift back to Customer Service.

‘Well, think about it. I can see you in a more managerial role. Perhaps a drink one evening to discuss strategies?’ His hands jangle his Valuables keys and he steps forward.

At exactly the same moment, as if we are in a meticulously timed square-dance, I sashay to the side and past him.

‘Must get back upstairs,’ I say, and make my escape.

‘All right, Dots?’ Anita clanks in and takes her seat behind the counter seconds before the doors open to the public. The

woman certainly lives on the edge. ‘Do anything exciting last night?’ she asks, already well into her bag obstetrics.

‘Just a quiet night in.’

‘Any plans for tonight?’

‘Nothing special.’ I admire Anita’s fortitude. She makes these exact enquiries of me every day despite always receiving the same response.

‘You don’t fancy coming to a dance class with me, do you? There’s one in Camden in a few weeks’ time that looks fab. Thought I might try it out.’

I’m about to nip this startling variant in the bud when I notice that Anita is no longer ensconced in her bag but looking at me, a redness to her eyes, an extra layer of gloss on her lips. That added upholstery to get through the day.

I used to love to dance, old-fashioned numbers – the foxtrot, the Viennese waltz, the cha-cha. My feet balanced on Dad’s slippers. Once he danced all the loose change out of his pockets; a spill of silver spraying behind us as he twirled me around the room. I haven’t danced in a long time.

‘Please, Dots,’ Anita says.

I nod, hoping when it comes to the time she will have forgotten.

After lunch I give SmartChoice an induction into the procedures of Customer Service. Having spent her first day in the back office doing online data entry, today she becomes privy to the intricacies of labelling and logging. I’m keen to teach and she seems equally keen to learn – she is certainly rather taken with my uniform.

‘So, you actually wear that *by choice*?’ she says.

The Lost Property office has not officially had a uniform since 1947. However, my chosen livery consists of a pleated skirt and matching jacket. Felt. Felt knows its own shape, doesn't languish and loop like all those cheap synthetic fabrics. Felt stands up for itself. The thing that would make my uniform perfect is a belt. Something solid. A cummerbund? Next to Anita, glamorous in her Lycra trousers and billowing see-through blouses, and SmartChoice, who today sports a postage stamp of a skirt with skyscraper heels, I suppose I am somewhat the outlier. But still.

'Yes, Sheila, because a uniform shows respect: for yourself, for your job and for other people's possessions. This way, please, let's get on with your orientation.'

I lead her behind the counter and pick up a pile of the Dijons.

'Found items are handed in by black-cab drivers, by Overground and Underground train staff, and come to us from the London bus depots. Members of the public also hand items in. Whenever you receive an item, whoever you get it from, the first thing you must do, *every single time*, is fill out this tag.' I hand her a Dijon. It feels like quite a moment, almost akin to the bestowing of a bequest, handing over the mantle. She holds the tag at arm's length, dangles it from its string and wrinkles her nose.

'Why don't we just do it all online? Or a phone app?'

I whip back the tag, take a breath.

'Found items are manually tagged before they are shelved. Tagging is *extremely* important. You write the date the item was found here' – I point to the appropriate place on the Dijon – 'the location where it was found here, and then

you write a very precise description of the item in the space remaining here. When you have completed the tag, you tie it to the item. I strongly recommend a double knot – like so. Once you have labelled the item, you do the data entry so it can be easily looked up on the computer, and then you take it down to the stacks and shelve it in the appropriate place. Follow me.’

SmartChoice clip-clops behind me through Customer Service to the back office, past the kitchen nook and the staff cloakrooms.

I lead her to the service lift at the far end of the room and press the button down to the stacks. As we step out I flick on the overheads. She gasps and stands open-mouthed. I admit I’m surprised yet delighted by her reaction.

‘I know’ – I nod – ‘takes your breath away.’

‘Gucci!’ she squeals, pointing to a shelf of bags. ‘Who’d leave that behind? Real too, not one of those fakes!’

‘The stacks are ordered and organized in specific categories.’ I swiftly stride down the aisles of shelved items, pointing out the different sections: ‘Men’s Clothing’, ‘Walking Sticks and Crutches’, ‘Prams and Strollers’, all the way to ‘Miscellaneous’ at the far end of the room. ‘As you can see, it is the size of a small aircraft hangar down here, so the sooner you can become familiar with the layout, with what goes where, the better. Can’t have staff getting lost!’ I turn to see if she appreciates my little joke. She is several aisles behind, staring every which way, agog.

‘OMG. I literally can’t believe there’s so much stuff down here. I mean, I never even knew this place existed till the agency got me the job.’

‘Lost Property has been here in this exact spot dealing with loss since 1933,’ I say, standing a little taller in my uniform.

‘It’s sort of like a TK Maxx, isn’t it? Just with some really mingling stuff mixed in,’ SmartChoice says, pointing to the pond-green anorak.

Phyllis Pearsall, where are you?

‘Sheila, your responsibility is to diligently log and shelve every object. I strongly recommend spending some time down here, getting to know the layout so you can do your job to the very best of your ability.’

‘Totes. Ooh, what’s this?’ She trots over to the ‘Children’s Toys’ stack and picks up a plastic bag from the shelf, reads out the Dijon tag. “Slime kit, coloured-in colouring book.” Who’s going to come looking for that?’

I go to her, retrieve the bag and return it to its place, quite firmly.

‘If someone has gone to the trouble of bringing an item in, be it a single glove, a mediocre English essay or indeed slime, we label it, we log it and we shelve it. Once here it is under our care, our protection. Once here it is Lost Property.’

Although I had been rather looking forward to it, I admit it’s a relief when SmartChoice’s orientation is over and I finally get back to Customer Service. I don’t think her heart is really in the work. She does not, I fear, have the makings of a Phyllis.

The afternoon passes in a comforting blur of forgotten phones, brollies and scarves. My last customer of the day is a schoolboy who sports a pair of distressingly smudged spectacles. All bones and angles, he jiggles nervously at the counter.

‘Hello there,’ I say.

He stares at me through the foggy lattice of his fingerprints. I resist an urge to proffer my hanky.

‘I . . . I . . . left my travel card on the bus.’

‘What was it in? A wallet? A holder?’

‘Never let me go.’ My Sheaffer hovers. ‘Our set text,’ he adds. Clarity is no nearer my grasp. ‘Our book for GCSE English? Kazuo Ishiguro?’ he says, ending on that upward questioning tone the young are so prone to, as if everything is obvious and utterly confusing at the same time.

‘Ah.’ I add this vital information to my form.

‘I put it in my book,’ he says, ‘sort of like a bookmark.’ Across the counter his hands mime placing a small flat object inside a book shape and then closing the book shape by pressing his palms together – just in case I don’t know what putting a bookmark in a book might look like. I take no offence. I find these small choreographies of loss rather moving, the gestures that carve an object out, retrace its presence to the moment just before it is lost. The boy’s hands are large, rangy; he has yet to grow into them.

‘I put it there to keep it safe,’ he adds glumly, hefting his glasses up the mountain of his nose.

‘To clarify, you have lost both your travel card and a novel?’ I ask.

‘The book doesn’t matter – English is pants – but Mum’ll kill me if I lose my Oyster. She just topped up the balance.’

I grip my sturdy Sheaffer.

‘Books are your friends,’ I say. He shrugs, bites a piece of skin from his thumb and swallows. ‘Without books where would we be?’ I persist. ‘They take us to all sorts of places.’

‘I dunno . . . but without my Oyster I’ll be . . . nowhere.’

Before he leaves, I slide a slim column of card across the counter.

‘Safer than your Oyster. It’s from World Book Day.’ He peels the bookmark up from the varnished wood with his gnawed fingernails.

‘To keep?’

‘Yes, to keep. Now you won’t lose your place.’

‘Thanks.’

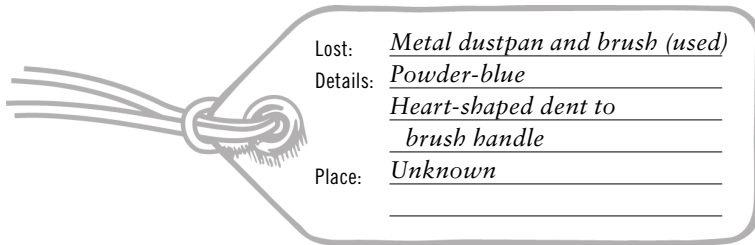
I see myself at his age, half unfurled, in my hand-me-down clothes from my sister, Philippa, nothing quite fitting, especially me. Never getting it right, not like the other girls with their bright white knee socks and sharp triangles of sandwiches, their flashy bags of crisps and glinting pierced ears. I’d sit solo in the playground with the domino sandwiches Dad made me – half white-bread, half brown-bread rectangles – wrapped in greaseproof paper, tied with green garden twine.

I glance down at my uniform, my sturdy brogues, and wonder for a moment how much has actually changed.

I still make Dad’s domino sandwiches, bring them in for my packed lunch. Before we moved Mum into The Pines, I’d make up a parcel for her as well and leave them in the fridge. This morning, I wasn’t thinking and made two.

Well, no need to worry about tonight’s supper.

3



Thursday after work: Philippa has summoned me to ‘discuss’ arrangements for Mum. I glimpse her first, through the bobbled diamond pane of glass in her front door – a discombobulation of silver, pink and blue particles. Like that, she seems possible. Approachable. Then the door opens and my sister comes sharply into focus. She wears ice-pink lipstick and matching nail polish; silvery half-moons dome her eyelids. The overall ensemble approximates chilled prawn cocktail.

‘Not today, thank you!’ She taps the ceramic sign on the front of the door and squawks with laughter.

NO COLD CALLERS –
NO SALESMEN –
NO RELIGIOUS GROUPS

Apparently, according to my sister, my uniform makes me look as if I'm from the Salvation Army. Thankfully it turns out that Philippa is on the phone, so I am saved more of her bon mots. She waves me into the sitting room.

'Make yourself comfortable.' A challenge rather than an invitation, as her house is all hard lines and angles – not unlike her. She continues with her call.

'Only Dot.' She's got her phone voice on – total Home Counties RP. It's as if she's a wartime RAF radio operator. *Hello Tonbridge, Tango, Oscar, November, Bravo . . .*

I head towards the only vaguely comfortable-looking armchair, arrayed with two pursed leather cushions.

'Don't sit there – I've just plumped,' she shrieks from the hallway before resuming her phone call.

I perch on the end of a long, liver-hued sofa, its sides chrome-armoured. Eventually, with a graze of powder and sharp nip of L'Air du Temps, Philippa knocks her cheek to mine.

'How's life?' she says, in a tone that suggests she's not entirely sure I have one.

'Tippety-top.'

Her fingers twitch. She's always moving, my sister. A jangling bracelet, a jigging foot. Eager to be up and off, on to the next thing. Or maybe that's just when she's with me.

'And the "job"?' I see the inverted commas shining like two well-polished knobs. Philippa is ever ready to point out that my chosen career is renowned neither for its remuneration nor its prestige. I've worked at Lost Property for well over a decade, yet my sister is still on the lookout for a 'proper job' for me. She has sent me advertisements for a tranche of unsuitable roles for which I have neither interest nor skill:

bank clerk, nutritionist, radiologist. *You should try it, Dot – it's just taking a photo with a really large camera. And it means you can tell people you work in medicine!*

I know that Philippa lies to her friends about what I do. At one of her drinks evenings, I spent a very long gin and tonic talking with a stockbroker friend of her husband Gerald. My sister had been on a quest to align me romantically with Gerald's pal Stafford for some time – my single status being even more embarrassing to her than my career. Stafford ticked all the boxes: big salary, big house, big ego.

He wedged me up against a glass-and-chrome display cabinet in Philippa's sitting room and enthused about how exciting my job must be. Though vexed by his proximity, I admit I was somewhat pleased to have such an interest taken in my work – a rare occurrence in my sister's house.

'What with Crossrail and the new links all the way out to Reading, you must be going from strength to strength,' he said.

'Well, we certainly keep busy.'

It was only when he said, 'Tell me, is it true what they're saying about Catford being the new Hackney? Is this a good time to invest?' that I realized we were talking at cross-purposes.

'I didn't lie!' Philippa protested when confronted. 'I just said you worked in "property management" – same thing, give or take. Honestly, you can be so pedantic.'

Needless to say, I have not attended one of her drinks parties since.

'The job is fine,' I say.

Philippa's laser gaze patrols the coffee table for dust motes then swivels to my right hand, honing in on where

the oval pads of my fingers make contact with the buffed chrome of her sofa. I take a firmer, smudgier grip and see her wince.

‘And how are you?’ I concede.

Then she’s away: next-door’s extension (too big), Gerald’s promotion (not big enough), Melanie’s A-level choices (maths, double maths, computer science).

‘And Sam?’ I ask.

That gets the arms going. She has this thing that she does with her arms. In the middle of a conversation she’ll start waving them about. She’s doing Spray and Wipe. Can’t help herself. She’s never happier than with a tin of cleaning spray and a duster, removing evidence, clearing up a mess. So, whenever she gets caught in a challenging or emotional situation – a Labour candidate at the door, or having coffee with me – off go the arms. It’s quite balletic if you don’t know its origins. If you do, it’s an assault.

‘The boy is impossible.’

‘Still doing his drama?’

‘Oh, the humanities!’ she decries, defining my nephew’s love of theatre as a disaster of equal magnitude to the Hindenburg. The arms rev at double speed. ‘Where on earth will *they* get him?’

‘He’s only twelve.’

‘You always take his side, Dot. You’re such a softy. You’re just like—’

The arms freeze mid-spray. The word hangs between us. Dad.

That’s how we are, Philippa and I, always bumping each other’s edges, bruising each other’s corners.

‘Coffee?’

Before I have time to respond she escapes to the kitchen, finding balm in a barrage of matching china. When she returns, the conversation is on an even keel for a while as I steer it through the trusty waters of Melanie's Oxbridge potential, and Philippa and Gerald's recent cruise.

'Our state room had the biggest balcony *by far* and we were invited to the captain's table every night. So embarrassing! And the staff! Nothing too much trouble. All Polish or Romanian, but still ever so nice. Big pours with the vino.'

It isn't long, though, before we are wind over tide. I confess, I start it.

'I meant to ask, do you have Mum's dustpan and brush set?'

Initially reluctant to be dragged away from the heady delights of the captain's table, she flaps the question away with a light Spray and Wipe, but I stand fast.

'Her old powder-blue metal dustpan set – have you seen it?'

'Why on earth would I?'

'When we packed up her things to take to The Pines last month?'

'Why would we have taken that? One of the reasons we chose The Pines was its excellent hygiene rating. You did tell Mum she's not expected to clean her own room, didn't you? Honestly!'

'I think it's more to do with the object itself. She kept asking for it all that day we were moving her in, remember? I want to bring it when I visit.'

'The one she used to keep in the spidery cupboard under the stairs?'

I nod.

'Ugh.' Philippa shivers. 'No, I don't bloody have it. Why can't you just take her something normal? Something she