

# *Lifted*

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# My Blog

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This is a blog about shoplifting. And as it is my very first blog, the only thing I've ever written in the whole of the blogosphere, I'm going to come straight to the point. Yesterday, I stole something.

I was in one of those chain stores that sells everything, from underwear to cheap clothes to lamp shades, and the sort of knickknacks people buy for presents when they can't think of anything else: notebooks and picture frames and smelly bath oils. It's not a shop I'd usually go in, but I'd seen in a magazine that they were doing some vest tops in bright jewel colours for five quid a pair, and they were selling out fast, mainly because everyone who read that magazine (and who normally wouldn't be caught dead in that shop either) wanted them, which, of course, had made them even more popular. I know, I'm a sheep. Baa.

I took three of the vests into the changing room in my usual size: a red one, a green one and a purple one. The red one, which I tried first, was far too big, so I popped my head through the curtains to see if I could find an assistant to help me. There was no one about. Irritated, I got

dressed again and went back out on to the shop floor to find a smaller size. There were none on the rails, or in the pile on the shelves on top, except in a horrid salmon pink colour. Again, I looked around for someone to ask. Two female assistants were standing chatting by the Please Pay Here sign, totally oblivious to what was going on in the store. I put on my best pleading face, trying to catch their eyes but, if they noticed me, which I don't think they did, they chose to ignore me. Eventually, tutting loudly, I walked over to them and said, 'Excuse me, but have you got any more of those vests in an extra small?'

The taller assistant glowered at me, as if I'd rudely interrupted her private conversation. 'Dunno,' she said.

The shorter assistant, who had really bad skin, shrugged her shoulders. 'If there aren't any out, then we don't have any.'

'Could you check in the stock room for me, please?'

She tutted. 'Nah, they're all out.' And they went back to their conversation.

Now even more annoyed, I walked off without saying thank you. Not that they would have understood the words. I felt like announcing, 'Just so you know: I would have bought one in every colour (except salmon pink), if

you could just have looked for me, or checked to see if another branch had them!' but what was the point? They didn't care about how many vest tops they sold, or whether a glossy magazine had written about the amazing quality of the cotton, any more than they'd care if I spontaneously combusted in the middle of the store, leaving bits of burnt flesh all over the cut price tea towels. They didn't care. Full stop. It made me so angry, irrationally angry. Angry and small. I can't explain why.

I walked away from them, intending to head straight for the exit, when something caught my eye. There was a pack of tights where it shouldn't have been, discarded next to a pile of T-shirts. Three pairs of extra-large, American tan tights, in a tea-coloured packet as ugly as its contents. American tan tights, the sweaty, nylon type that are supposed to be flesh coloured but don't match anybody's skin tone, not anyone in the whole wide world, whatever race they are. They don't even make fake tan that colour. Someone must have picked them up and then thought better of buying them, abandoning them to a lonely fate far away from the other tights. Unwanted tights in a store where nobody cared.

I don't know why, but I found myself picking up the tights and examining them, passing them from one hand to the other. Something inside me made me want to take them, even though I thought they were ugly and I knew they

wouldn't fit, and I'd never wear them, even if they did, not in a million, trillion years.

I couldn't see any security tags on them; they were almost begging to be stolen. I began to wonder what would happen if I took them. Would anyone notice? Would they care? Were there cameras in the store? Would an alarm sound as I went out? What would happen if I got caught? Would anybody understand that I really didn't want the tights? Would they ask me why I'd stolen them? My heart started beating very fast, my face flushed. Those tights were going to be mine, I was going to take them, I had to have them.

I picked up two T-shirts from the top of the pile and headed back into the changing room, pulling the curtain tight shut. I looked around me. The changing room was just a box, with three walls, a curtain and a bench. Nobody could see in and there weren't any cameras – they're illegal in changing rooms, aren't they? Then, breathing so fast I felt I might pass out, I opened up my bag and stuffed the box of tights deep inside. Taking in a gulp of air, I pushed my way out through the curtains, marched past the jewel-coloured vests, past the ignorant shop assistants and past the security barriers that framed the exit doors. As the doors parted for me, I held my breath and waited for a piercing siren, a hand on my shoulder, a shout . . . But

there was only the noise of the traffic. I was out on the street again, and the hideous tights, the tights I didn't want but I had to possess, were mine.

**Posted by Palgirl at 6:05 PM**

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# Chapter 1

The boy watched the girl from his bedroom window, just as he had done many times before. She was sitting on the wall outside her house, apparently waiting for something to happen, or for someone to arrive. If she'd glanced upwards for a moment, she might have noticed him, and then he would have waved, but she didn't look up. Not once. She kept staring at the ground, as if she found her shoes fascinating. The boy supposed that she might have been following the progress of an ant or a worm along the cracks in the pavement. He screwed up his eyes and concentrated really hard, willing her to gaze up at him and smile. Then he imagined an invisible magnet attaching itself to the top of her head and gently pulling it towards him. But his powers of concentration could not have been strong enough, because her head did not move, not even a centimetre.

The boy's name was Noah, like the guy in the Bible who herded all the animals into the ark, two by two, and ended up on top of a mountain, while all the world drowned beneath him. Noah liked that story. He found it easy to picture himself floating in a big, empty world, with only binary creatures for company. Perhaps he'd fit better there. He was tall and stringy and gangly, uncomfortable with the length of his arms and prone to bumping into things. It wasn't his fault. He'd grown so quickly, his limbs expanding nightly like creeping vines, that he hadn't yet worked out how to control his body's new form. His eldest sister had rather unkindly nicknamed him Lurch, because he stooped, in the way that very tall people often do. She said it looked like his head was too heavy for him. 'It must be all those brains,' she teased, 'they must weigh a ton. And that *ridiculous* hair,' the dense, dark hair which covered his head like a carpet of soft bristles. 'That hair,' she said, 'and those long eyelashes, they're totally wasted on a boy.' Then she ruffled his hair with her fingers in a big sisterly way, like she always did, and Noah squirmed, like he always did, although secretly he quite liked it.

Noah wondered if the girl had noticed how much he'd grown. She always used to be taller than him, by a good head and shoulders, even though they were the same age, but it was an awfully long time since they'd stood back to back to compare heights. He remembered how she used to cheat by standing on tiptoes to make

herself taller, and how he'd pretend he hadn't noticed. Now, when he saw her from the window, or passed her in the street, she was always wearing heels, which amounted to the same thing.

The girl was named Ruby, because she was her parents' shining jewel, and because they liked an old band called The Rolling Stones, and she was born on a Tuesday. Noah only knew there was a song called 'Ruby Tuesday' because his mum had played it to him once. He didn't much care for The Rolling Stones; they all looked ancient, like bits of dried-up old leather. He didn't know what Ruby thought of The Rolling Stones now. Or anything else, for that matter. They hadn't spoken properly for about four years, not since secondary school had begun.

Noah and Ruby had been neighbours all their lives. Her house was situated at the other corner of their cul-de-sac, almost, but not quite, directly facing his. Noah thought a cul-de-sac sounded posh, but it wasn't really, it was just a street that didn't go anywhere. He supposed he was what people called the boy next door, except strictly speaking he was the boy opposite. If things had worked out like they did in the olden days, in stories, then they should have grown up and become sweethearts and, eventually, got married. But it wasn't the olden days, it was nowadays, and nobody is interested in the boy next door, or has a 'sweetheart', do they?

On the very first day of the very first term, he had called at Ruby's house as arranged and they had walked to the school gates together, chatting nervously. He had expected that they'd walk home together too but, by the end of that first day, Ruby had already found a new friend to walk home with. By the end of the week, she'd asked him to stop calling on her in the mornings and, by the end of that term, she'd stopped hanging out with him altogether. He had gone round after school one day to see if she wanted to go out on their bikes, just like he often did, and she'd said, 'No thanks, I don't want to do that any more.'

It had hurt him, deep in his gut, and for a while he'd wondered what he'd done wrong, but his mum said he shouldn't worry, he hadn't done anything, girls could just be like that sometimes. 'At this age they want to hang out with other girls and older boys, not boys the same age as them,' she'd said. She'd told Noah it was probably just a phase and Ruby would want to be his friend again someday, and that he should be patient.

Being patient wasn't a problem for Noah. He had some other friends, of course, and he had his computer, and he was pretty good with that – exceptional, some people said, like a mini Bill Gates. You needed to be patient while you waited for stuff to download or tried to crack a password. He'd got so caught up in his games and his codes and his software that he'd forgotten about Ruby altogether for a while, didn't really mind that she

wasn't his friend any longer. He'd see her on the street, getting into the car with one of her parents, or leaning against the wall with some of her mates, and he'd nod at her as he walked past, in a neighbourly way, and get on with whatever he was doing. But, lately, for the past few months or so, he'd been feeling differently, and the fact that Ruby was no longer his friend had started bothering him again. He couldn't explain why, but whenever he saw her he felt a need to be close to her, to talk to her, and every time they passed each other without speaking, he felt what he could only describe as a twang of emptiness in his belly. And, he would never have told anybody this, but he had started having dreams about Ruby too – embarrassing dreams.

He looked down at her now and wondered if she ever thought about him at all, or remembered the times they'd spent playing together as little kids, bouncing a tennis ball against the garage doors. Maybe that was it, maybe she still saw him as a little kid. And maybe he was, at least compared to the boys she hung around with now, sixth formers with pecs and super-white trainers and rap on their MP3 players. His mum told him he was handsome, but mums always think that, don't they? All he knew was he didn't have the right clothes and he wasn't good at football, and the stupid thing was he didn't really care about those things anyway; it was just that *she* did.

He could see that she was on her phone, walking around in circles and moving her head and her arms

about an awful lot, as if she was annoyed with whoever was on the other end. She was too far away for him to lip-read, and the sound of her voice didn't carry across the street, but he could now see that she had an overnight bag with her and so it didn't take a genius to work out that she must be waiting for her dad, and that he was late again, and she must be upset with him. Noah couldn't figure out why she didn't wait for him inside, but perhaps he didn't like to come into the house when her mum was there. Noah didn't know much about how divorced people behave; his parents were still together, and so were his aunts and his uncles and his parents' best friends. He knew he was lucky. Ruby's parents got divorced when she was twelve, by which time she was no longer speaking to him, so he didn't know how she felt about it. But he did know she really loved her dad and he had noticed that she didn't seem to smile as much as she did when they were kids, not when she was on her own, anyhow.

An email pinged into his inbox and he glanced down at his screen to read it. It was from one of his forum friends, a guy in Canada. Noah had contacts all over the world now, people who swapped software and tips with him. It was amazing how similar techie types were, he thought. Whether they came from Canada or Katmandu they all spoke the same language. It made him feel comfortable, like he belonged somewhere.

When he looked out of the window again, Ruby had

vanished. He hadn't heard a car pull up, and she hadn't had time to walk out of sight, so he guessed that she must have gone back inside her house. Maybe her dad wasn't coming today after all. He felt sad for her. Sad, and if he was honest, a tiny bit glad too, for himself, because it meant that she'd still be nearby.

He sighed and returned his gaze to his computer screen. He had a lot to do, emails to answer, some coursework, and then there was the project he was working on, the thing he was keeping to himself. Working on the computer made everything simple, if he let himself be absorbed by it. There were no surprises and no disappointments, only problems to be solved.

'Noah? Can I come in?'

The voice startled him. An hour or two must have passed; he had been concentrating so hard he hadn't been conscious of the time.

'It's OK, Mum,' he said.

His mum peered around the door, hesitantly, as if she wasn't sure what she might find inside. 'That was Pam from over the road on the phone,' she said. 'She wants to know if you can pop over there later.'

Noah felt his pulse quicken. Pam was Ruby's mum; he hadn't been invited into their house for years. He wondered if focusing hard on Ruby, willing her to look up at him, had in a strange way worked after all. He cleared his throat, so his voice wouldn't come out squeaky. 'What does she want?'

‘Something about Ruby’s computer being broken.’

Noah felt a pool of crimson spread across his ears and down his neck at the mention of her name. He hoped his mum hadn’t noticed.

‘Her dad was going to take a look at it, but he’s stuck on some business trip. Mrs Taylor from down the road must have told them you’re a bit of a whizz with a PC these days, and Pam wondered if you could fix it instead.’ She smiled. ‘Oh, and they said they’d give you twenty quid.’

Noah nodded. ‘All right,’ he said, trying to contain his excitement and his nerves. He didn’t care about the money. ‘I’ll go round in a bit.’

He went over an hour later; he would have gone straight away, but he didn’t want to seem too keen. Before he left, he changed his shirt and put on extra deodorant. He didn’t think he smelled, not when he sniffed his armpits, but he’d heard you become immune to your own scent, and he didn’t want to take the risk.

Pam let him in. ‘Oh, hello Noah,’ she said, in a faintly surprised tone, as if she hadn’t been expecting him. He thought that was strange, given that she’d asked him to come. Maybe he was too early. Or maybe it was his appearance that startled her. He was conscious that people who hadn’t seen him for a while often took in the length of his body, in the way they might have admired a tall building. ‘Ruby’s in her bedroom. I’ll just get her for you. Ruby!’ she called out. ‘Noah from across the

road is here! Can you come down please!’

Noah heard the padding of footsteps above him and Ruby appeared at the top of the stairs. She’d tied up her hair and changed since he’d seen her from the window. She looked so pretty close up, he almost gasped.

‘Come up, Noah,’ she said. She waited on the landing while he climbed towards her. Curiously, he noticed, his legs felt both as heavy as lead and uncontrollably light, at the same time. When he got to the top of the stairs she beckoned him to follow her. She must have forgotten that he knew where her room was; he’d been in it hundreds of times, just not for ages. Their houses were laid out exactly the same, except she had the room at the back, which, in his house, was shared by his two younger sisters. He had the box room, which, in Ruby’s house, was used for storage. At least, it used to be. He followed her into her bedroom, trying to keep his pulse under control. He felt weird being there, alone with her, but she seemed oblivious. He wasn’t sure what to do with himself, where to stand or sit, so he leant against the door frame, while she sat down on her bed. The room hadn’t changed very much in four years. All the furniture was the same, and it was positioned the same, and the walls were still painted a sunny primrose yellow. There were far more blu-tacked posters now, of actors and singers and sports stars, and there was more make-up on the dressing table, and fewer toys, but that was to be expected. She was fifteen, not eleven.

‘The computer’s over there,’ she said, pointing to her computer desk. ‘Obviously.’ She smiled, warmly. ‘Do you need anything? A drink or something? I might be able to find some biccies.’

She was a still a kind person underneath, Noah thought, even though she wasn’t his friend now. He shook his head.

The problem wasn’t serious, it was just a matter of doing a basic rebuild of some of her files – something she could have done herself, if she’d known how. He was disappointed. He knew that if he told the truth and said, ‘It’s nothing,’ and sorted it out in an instant, she’d thank him and then he’d just go home, and that would be that. He wanted to spend time with her – he realised he might not get another opportunity. So he said, ‘Hmm, I can see what you’ve done. Don’t worry, it’s nothing too serious, but it’s a job and it will take me a while to fix.’ He hoped she hadn’t noticed his shaky voice. He wasn’t used to lying.

‘Oh, right,’ she said, getting up. She didn’t seem interested. ‘I’ll leave you to it, then.’

‘Well,’ he began, and tried to think of a reason to make her stay. ‘It’s just that I might need you for passwords and stuff. It would be better if you were here.’

‘Oh, OK then.’ She shrugged and sat back down, hard, making the bed bounce. It reminded Noah of the times that they used to jump up and down on it,

pretending it was a trampoline, until Pam told them off for wrecking the springs.

‘It’s been a while,’ he said, smiling, hoping she’d remember too.

‘It sure has,’ she replied, in the vaguely amused tone people use when they’re either not sure what you’re talking about, or don’t want to continue the conversation.

He fiddled around on her computer for a while, tidying her files and cleaning things up. He was still hoping she’d start chatting to him, but she didn’t. She just sat in silence, thinking about something or nothing – he couldn’t tell – although he was fairly sure she wasn’t reminiscing about their shared childhood. He would have said something himself, if he’d known what to say, if he hadn’t been so afraid of saying the wrong thing. Every so often, he’d glance around at her and smile in a goofy way, and she’d smile back, but only with her mouth. So he just got on with the job at hand. When he asked her for her passwords, he expected her to tell him to budge up, so she could type them in herself, privately, but she actually spelled each one out loud for him. She must have forgotten that he had a photographic memory; he would still remember them all weeks later.

‘All done,’ he said, eventually, twisting around in the chair. He couldn’t think of any other delaying tactics. It wasn’t as if she was talking to him anyway. Well, that’s it, then, he thought, opportunity lost, and he made a move to get up.

‘Before you go . . . ’ she said, and, surprised, Noah sat back down. ‘Do you know anything about blogs?’

‘Sure,’ he said, smiling to himself. There was nothing about blogs he didn’t know. He’d been blogging even before they were called blogs. ‘What do you want to know?’

She hesitated. ‘It’s not for me, I mean, it’s not my blog, it’s for a friend of mine. She wants to start one up and she’s not sure the best place to look, or how to make it searchable and stuff.’

Noah wondered which friend she meant. There was the short girl with the blond hair and the shrill voice, the one who wore too much make-up – she might have been called Hannah, or Honey. And there was Amanda, the skinny one with black hair and shiny shoes, who all the boys seemed to like, although Noah couldn’t understand why. ‘It all depends,’ he said, and checked himself. Ruby didn’t need to hear a long list of technical specifications. That would be like announcing, ‘Yes, you’re absolutely right, I am a computer nerd!’

‘Well,’ he continued, ‘there are some good ones, easy ones to use. I can set you – I mean, your friend – up if you want. Why don’t you tell her to call me?’ He took a deep breath, daring himself to say it. ‘I could give you my number.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ruby. She paused again. ‘Um, I’d rather you just showed me now, if that’s OK. I mean, if it’s not too much hassle.’

Noah was hurt. He figured that she probably didn't want her friend to find out that she knew him, or that they were neighbours. And she didn't want his number. She thought he was an embarrassment to her, didn't she? For an instant he felt like telling Ruby where to stick her friend's blog, but that feeling passed, and then he went back to feeling that he'd do anything for her, because when she was around he couldn't help himself. 'OK,' he said, getting up from the chair. 'You'd better sit down here and tell me exactly what your friend wants.'