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Her Share of Sorrow

Ruby's mother, Dalia, used to be a dancer before she had her children. Then she'd trained to be a psychotherapist, and you got the feeling she'd disowned her dancing days, looking back on them as delusion and vanity. Yet still she carried herself in that dancer's exquisitely conscious way, as if she was held taut by a thread running up from the crown of her head; she was still hollowly thin, and painted her eyes with black, upward-swept lines, and wore her hair pulled back austerely from the sculpted bones of her face. Serious psychotherapist glasses added intellectual distinction to Dalia's other graces.

Ruby's name might have suited her if she'd been smouldering and mysterious like her mother in the dance photographs. But she was plump and stubby with short, fat arms, lank, beige-coloured hair and fair, freckled skin that turned pink easily in the sun or if she told lies – which she quite often did. She looked like a changeling in that family, other people thought – because Ruby's older brother Nico and her father Adrian, administrator for an innovative theatre company, were also distinguished and beautiful and tall like Dalia, and very thin. Scrupulously, because they'd read all the right guides to parenting, Adrian and Dalia ignored Ruby's greedy eating at the supper table. [...] Each evening, Dalia arrived in her daughter's bedroom, strained and full of reasoned explanation, to enforce their rule that Ruby was only supposed to have computer-time for an hour; this resulted in stormy sessions of weeping, on both their parts. Lying on her back on her Spiderman duvet, Ruby wailed at the ceiling, her small mouth stretched open in an ugly shape, her face hot-pink. – What am I supposed to *do*? she lamented. – There's nothing for me to do in this house!

– But she isn't interested in anything! Dalia, also lamenting, wailed to her husband. – She doesn't draw, she doesn't read, she doesn't play imaginative games. She's not even sporty; she can't swim. And she isn't finding out information on the wretched computer, she's just looking at pictures of kittens in wellington boots or playing Crossy-Road or messaging her friends. Not that she's got any friends.

– That's not fair, Adrian reproached his wife gently. – She does have friends.

– Yes, but such hopeless ones. [...]

Ruby was 10 when they borrowed a house in the south of France from friends, for three weeks in the summer. Adrian and Nico hired bikes and were out all day. Dalia needed desperately to unwind and leave her clients behind; she took her book out into the garden, where an apricot tree was trained against a crumbling brick wall and flowerbeds were edged with lavender – bracing herself for conflict with Ruby, who couldn't live without Wi-Fi and hated the sun. She came out scowling into the brightness, stomping her feet in her jelly shoes. Hopefully, Dalia suggested she should go exploring. [...]

Dalia closed her eyes and after a pause the jelly shoes stomped indoors again.

Then things went rather quiet inside the house. Dalia fell asleep in the healing warmth, under the shade of the faded striped umbrella, and when she woke up an hour later and everything was still quiet she felt afraid. Stepping indoors, where the shutters were barred against the blazing day, she was blind at first in the shadows. Ruby wasn't anywhere to be found downstairs, or on the first floor. Dalia climbed the steep, uncarpeted steps to the attic [...]; the heat up here under the roof was feral, dizzy-making. Some furtive noise from behind the closed attic door, a small scratching or rustling, made her hesitate outside it.

– Ruby, are you in there? Are you all right?

– I'm fine thank you.

There was something peculiar about Ruby's voice, prim and slippery and secretive; for all her professional openness to things sexual, Dalia shied away from opening the door, afraid of what might be on the other side. – All right darling, just so long as you're OK.

Ruby spent all day in the attic, with only a break for a baguette, and appeared downstairs chastely enough, though hot-faced, at supper time; she ate without commenting on the food, and as soon as the meal was finished slipped upstairs again. – I’m just doing something, she said, avoiding eye contact. [...]

45 – You know what she’s doing, don’t you? Adrian said later, coming down from visiting the bathroom.
– Do I want to know?
– She’s just reading.
– Reading? Really?

50 – I opened the door a crack and peeked inside and she didn’t even hear me. Just sitting there sucking her hair, completely lost inside her book, although it’s still boiling up there under the roof.
– What book? She didn’t bring any books. [...]

Behind the locked door, Ruby was already three-quarters of the way through *East Lynne*. This was only one volume in a promisingly tall pile of Treasury Classics – *The Woman In White*, *The Cloister And The Hearth*,
55 *Ivanhoe*, *Lady Audley’s Secret*¹ – uniformly bound in red with gold lettering. [...] When Ruby first strayed into the attic, she had opened the volume on the top of the pile in a spirit of despairing mockery, because she’d never in the least liked books before. The ones she’d been given as presents, or been forced to read in class, had seemed too drearily like her own real-life childish routines of home and school and family. She hadn’t had any idea that books could transport you like this – into something better.

60 At night, falling asleep, she snuffed up the fragrance of damp-spotted old pages on her fingers; in the mornings she hurried through her chocolate milk and croissant, hungry to get back to her story. Much of *East Lynne*, in truth, was fairly incomprehensible; she stumbled among strange facts in a thick fog. The prohibitions that weighed so heavily on Lady Isabel Vane² and Sir Francis Levison – what *had* they done wrong exactly? – were all the more compelling for their obscurity; some grandeur in the language
65 intoxicated her. She was astonished when little William died. Children always got better in books, didn’t they? “I have seen the flowers we shall see in Heaven,” he said, “10 times brighter than our flowers here. When God takes a little child there it is because he loves him.” The audacity of it took Ruby’s breath away, as if something raw and wild had been dragged from where it was concealed, into the daylight. Tears flooded into her eyes: what was inside her seemed poured out on to the page.

70 “I have had more than my share of sorrow,” Madame Vine³ said. “Sometimes I think that I cannot support it.” When day faded in the attic, Ruby went on reading by torchlight, and when at last she had to go to bed, she placed her silken bookmark with trembling fingers. She staggered up dazedly from the world of her story, as if the one she returned to were the insubstantial fiction.

By the end of their holiday, she had read *East Lynne* and *The Heir Of Redclyffe*⁴, and was a good way into
75 *Lady Audley’s Secret*. Now she would never find out what the secret was. Although it was searing to be torn away from her book, Ruby had never dreamed of carrying it off with her; it would have been a desecration to steal one volume from where it belonged among its fellows. [...]

There were two weeks of holiday left, before she returned to school [...]. Then, during one dull, rainy afternoon, while her mother had sessions with clients and Nico was supposed to be looking after her but
80 was browsing his laptop on the sofa, Ruby was filled from one moment to the next with a vision of possibility. All its elements – the possession of the right virgin notebook, a picture of her own head bowed in rapt concentration over her page, the shape of her story – came together in a single lightning strike of inspiration.

85 – Where are you off to, Pud? Nico said without looking up. – No going anywhere near Mama, you know that.

¹ *East Lynne... The Woman In White, The Cloister And The Hearth, Ivanhoe, Lady Audley’s Secret*: 19th century novels

² *Lady Isabel Vane*: protagonist of the novel *East Lynne*

³ *Madame Vine*: a name Lady Isabel Vane uses as a disguise

⁴ *The Heir of Redclyffe*: a 19th century novel

- Just had a thought, said Ruby innocently.
– A thought? You’re kidding me.

Her parents were delighted with whatever was keeping Ruby quiet in her bedroom; they supposed she had resumed the reading she’d begun in France. [...] But she’d found something to do that matched or even
90 outdid the thrill of her French books – and one evening her joy in her day’s creation overflowed her caution. She announced to her family that she was writing a novel.

- Darling, that’s wonderful! said Dalia with real warmth. – How interesting!
Adrian, beaming, said that he’d always thought she might have a novelist in her.

– You could show it to your new class teacher, Dalia said. – What’s it about?
95 Already Ruby was regretting telling them. – Things, she said insouciantly.

They couldn’t have been more enthusiastic; Adrian promised that when she was finished, he’d show it to a friend who was a publisher. Yet oddly, even in their enthusiasm, there was something tainting and disappointing – perhaps because no amount of it could ever match the power and importance Ruby felt when she was making things up. Sucking her hair, Biro squeezed in her clutching fat fingers, joining up her
100 letters laboriously, she transcribed the scenes unfolding in her mind’s eye; her whole body, kneeling up on her chair, hunched over her notebook, seemed shaken by their intensity. Sometimes she spoke the words she wrote aloud, or acted them out with a scowl or disdainful toss of her head.

Her family professed great interest in reading her novel, but she held back, with uncharacteristic restraint; something delicate in her story needed her protection. Carefully, whenever she finished writing,
105 she stowed her notebook away under the mattress on her bed. But one late afternoon, in a careless moment between chapters, she left it lying on her desk while she foraged in the stash of biscuits in her wardrobe. Nico, peering in from the room next door, where he was marking time uneasily before Balliol, swooped on it.

Ruby ran screaming downstairs after him, to where their parents were making salad in the kitchen. –
110 Dad, he’s got my novel! He’s stolen it!

- Nico, that’s not on.

– No, no, really, it’s brilliant, Nico said, laughing, holding it out of Ruby’s way where she was jumping up at him, trying to snatch at it.

– It’s unforgivable, Nico, Dalia said, pausing sternly with an organic tomato in one hand and a knife in
115 the other. – Give it back to her right now.

– Listen, let me read you some of this. You won’t believe it. *Lady Carole, her cheek pale as a dove’s wing, swept from the ballroom with a flash of her exquisite eyes, dragging her long amber curls behind her. Do you think she’s taken off her wig? Meanwhile, Frederick Fillet gazed into the dying coals – coals spelled c-o-l-e-s – of the fire.*

120 – I like the sound of Frederick Fillet, Adrian said. – Is he our hero?

Ruby knew this was all a disaster and yet, succumbing to a writer’s vanity, she couldn’t help half-wanting to hear her words take on their own life in the world. Her eyes were fixed on Nico, pleading but also with a greedy curiosity. What did she sound like, really? Wouldn’t they be amazed? Wouldn’t the words forged in such passion stupefy her audience, making them at last see what she saw? She mouthed over silently what
125 Nico was reading out loud.

– “But,” stuttered Lady Carole, dread seeping into her, “surely you are not the one who once betrayed me and ran off with another woman?” The cords of her life were snapping. “It cannot be.” Frederick sobbed, laying his rugged head upon her breasts. “Forgive me, you are much more beautiful than she is.”

- Upon her breasts, Adrian said. – My word.

130 – “I do not reproach you,” Lady Carole said. “Because really she is quite nice.”

Ruby spun round on her parents, riven suddenly with suspicion. Adrian was grinning helplessly; the back of Dalia’s hand, still clutching the vegetable knife, was pressed against her mouth, and her eyes behind her glasses seemed to be staring in distress – for a moment Ruby believed her mother was ravaged by the emotion in the story. Then she saw that her shoulders were shaking.

135 – What are you all laughing at? she shouted furiously. – Why is it funny?

She stayed barricaded and inconsolable in her room that evening, though they all came humbly with apologies, and left propitiatory presents, even chocolate. – I'm very, very angry with Nico, Dalia communicated through the closed door. – It was very wrong of him. We didn't really think your story was funny, darling. We were just laughing with...

140 Ruby heard her search for the right word.

– With delight, that's all.

Ruby had her notebook back and was writing in it again. At first she worked bitterly and without conviction. They had hollowed out the best thing she'd ever done: she would finish the stupid story any old how, just to prove they were right and what an idiot she was. As time passed, however, the work regained its hold over her – and the plot altered unexpectedly from her original idea. [...] A mysterious wasting fever struck down all the members of Lady Carole's family and also Frederick Fillet, one by one. Lady Carole never slept, but moved between their bedsides, holding up a lamp, putting precious drops of water to their lips and wiping their brows with paper tissues. All in vain. *"Oh, but it is hard to part,"* they murmured. By the time Ruby had finished – on the last line of the last page in her notebook, as she'd always planned – they had all passed beyond that river from whose bourne there is no known return, and Lady Carole was left alone. Ruby dropped tears on her page for her dear family. Her heart was swollen with love, and writerly triumph.

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