

**Extracts from *Notes from the Lost Property Department* by
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Extract # 1: The lost memories of Iris (1972)

1. The rocket lolly and the roundabout

A roundabout.

Wooden boards, splintery, sun-warmed. A circle of mountains spinning above her. The smell of pine trees on the hill, a chill breeze with snow on its breath from the upper slopes.

The evening light reawakens the menace of the Amphitheatre: the massive arc of basalt rock that broods in the distance, towering over the smaller mountains and the Tugela valley below. She still feels inside her the memory of seeing it for the first time as a four-year-old: that emptiness and fullness in her chest; her smallness beside its inconceivable hugeness; the silence and the way it seemed always to be watching her, with its breath – sometimes warm, sometimes cool – on her neck. At night she lay in the dark waiting for the Draken to swoop down and snatch her out of her bed, and fly back to the jagged peaks and eat her. Slowly. Starting with the soft bits in her tummy.

It seemed to her that no one else could understand this mountain, because otherwise why would they just walk around on its lower slopes like it was nothing?

She's too old for all that now. But the first sight of the Amphitheatre always makes her feel shivery and bursting, like she wants to cry or pee. And relieved, because when she's at home in the city, this mountain seems impossible, like something she dreamt. She pretends that the huge white cumulus clouds over Johannesburg are mountains, but then she starts to wonder if *her* mountain is just a cloud.

The roundabout is a way to get the mountain's power, so it can't hurt her. As soon as she'd arrived, as always, she'd run down through the garden, past the tennis courts and the bowling green and the swimming pool, all the way to the playground at the bottom, which is just a few rusty bits scattered on the winter-white dry grass like some giant kid's forgotten toys. An old tractor – they've given it a new coat of bright orange paint; a vicious green slide, polished silver by a legion of sliding backsides; a row of swings with their wooden seats hanging skew on their chains.

The roundabout is a circle of weathered boards holding five spokes of rusted red bars. She spins it as fast as she can by pushing herself with one foot on the hard baked dirt track that circles it. Then she lies on her back with her feet in the middle, staring up at the spinning sky, and chants. *Amphitheatre way up high, Devil's Tooth bite the sky, I am Iris hear me cry* – she says it fast and loud, the words running into each other, so she can manage it ten times before the roundabout stops.

When the roundabout slows to a halt she keeps lying there, her eyes closed, feeling the giddy spinning in her head and the thin warmth of the winter sun through her jersey, breathing in *that* smell – dusty grass and rust and oil, mixed with the sharp tang of the pines behind the playground, and the sweet mountain air.

Something splatters next to her ear, showering her cheek with small drops. She raises her head and peers at it. A lurid pink liquid, seeping into the board.

She looks up to find a girl of about her age, licking a rocket lolly. They sell them in the camp shop. Rocket lollies have three strips – strawberry, banana, and vanilla – with a hard chocolate coating at the end. The pink splat is a delivery from the strawberry strip.

The girl stares back with flat blue eyes, while her small pink tongue darts in and out between white teeth, hooking small scoops of ice cream. Iris glances down at the splat (melting now, with small pieces of black grit evident amongst the pink) and back at the girl. She must have stretched out her arm and deliberately dripped the ice cream next to Iris's head. Had she been aiming for her face and miscalculated, or lost her nerve and twitched it at the last minute?

Is this a strange offer of friendship, or a declaration of war?

'Hallo,' the girl says, in a voice clipped of friendliness. Her blue eyes are as blank as a closed door.

She perches on one of the upright bars of the roundabout. Iris scrambles up to sit on the bar opposite her. Iris surveys the girl's grey pants, pink-and-white cardigan (free of ice-cream drips) and white buckle-up shoes, and wishes into oblivion her own lumpy home-knitted jumper and too-short grubby jeans.

'What's the matter? Cat got your tongue? I'm from England, by the way.'

Lick lick lick goes *her* little tongue, like a kitten lapping milk.

Iris reviews her knowledge of English girls, gleaned mostly from her Christine Pullein-Thompson pony books. The scruffy ones were poor and loyal and lovely, the well-dressed ones naffy and rich, with their own ponies, which they mistreated. 'Are you rich?' she blurts out, in the interests of social classification.

The girl's eyes widen in disbelief. 'What an *odd* question,' she says, with a small humourless laugh. 'That's *very* rude, you know, to ask someone you *hardly* know about their money. But I suppose you don't learn manners out here ...'

'I don't live here. I live in Johannesburg.'

‘I meant in *South Africa*.’ She knows all there is to know about South Africa, her voice says, and it’s pitiful.

Iris practises mind control on the girl. *Go away go away go away* ... But the girl just licks the ice cream unhurriedly, turning it so that it doesn’t drip.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Rebecca,’ Iris suggests impulsively. Partly because *Iris* seems too dull, also because she feels suddenly that owing to her real name will give this girl some disturbing power over her.

‘How old are you?’

‘Almost twelve.’

‘*Almost twelve?* And you still play on roundabouts?’ With a derisive noise, somewhere between a snort and laugh.

‘How old are *you*?’

‘Twelve and a half. My name’s Phoebe. Phoebe Pendleton.’

Iris gives her own snort. ‘Phoebe? No, seriously, what’s your real name?’

‘What? Have you never heard it before?’

‘Well, ja, but I never thought anyone was *actually* called that.’

‘Well, *yah*.’ She exaggerates the ‘j’ and ‘ah’ of ja. ‘That’s my name, Miss Almost-Twelve.’

And with a disbelieving shake of her head and a final circling lick, she stalks off, leaving Iris alone on the roundabout. Her glossy ponytail swings disdainfully, catching the light of the late-afternoon sun.

Extract #2 : Grace is the mother of Iris. This is an extract from her reminiscences

The rose looks rather sinister on the path, so dark and brooding, the petals splashed beside it like blood. *Red rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all*

my days ... How strange that it should be lying there; I cannot see the bush that it came from. If I were of a fanciful disposition I might imagine that Edie's ghost put it there ... to remind me of my 'unfinished business'. After all, my confession to Iris, were it ever to find voice, would surely begin with a rose: the rose just like that, that was lying by the door of our room at the Royal Natal National Park Hotel, when we came back from dinner ...

It was half hidden, in the shadows by the wall. Not quite at the door. A little way off, so that you might have thought it was dropped by accident. George didn't see it, but I did. I could just as easily not have seen it, or not have paid any attention to it. It was just a rose – how could I have predicted the long shadows it would cast on the lives of all I love most?

When George opened the door I hurried into the bathroom so that I could study my face for traces of duplicity before he saw me.

'It's just a rose someone dropped, you foolish woman,' I told the idiot in the mirror. But I knew that it wasn't. I was already acting. Already playing the innocent wife. Already trying to reconstruct what I'd normally do under these circumstances. Because it felt suddenly as if I had no idea at all. As if the woman who'd existed before the fallen rose was someone whom I barely knew.

I walked back into the bedroom. George was standing at the old-fashioned basin in his vest and boxers, putting toothpaste on his brush.

'I think I left my book in the lounge,' I announced (how false I sounded). 'I'm just going to pop back to get it.'

'Get it tomorrow,' he said.

'I want to read it now. In bed.'

'Really? It's a bit late for reading.'

I was beginning to hate him. ‘Well, it might get mislaid, anyway. I’m going to get it now.’

‘If you insist,’ he said, with that indulgent paternal tone he adopted when he thought I was being womanishly irrational. ‘Don’t wake me when you come in.’

He turned away and began brushing. I opened the door, looking back for a moment, chilled by the wordless reproach of his slightly stooped shoulders bent over the basin, then turned oblivious back so vulnerable to betrayal. His shoulders shook slightly with the vibration of his toothbrush, so that it looked as if he was sobbing.

I stepped out of the door and leant against the wall, adjusting to the darkness. The rose was still there. I walked past it, bent as if to adjust my shoe (feigning who knows what to who knows whom), and picked it up. There was a slip of white paper wrapped around the stem, fastened with a white ribbon – his daughter’s, perhaps? I walked down the porch fronting our row of rooms, my heart screaming my faithlessness to all who cared to hear, walked around the corner, and paused under the light. I brushed the rose against my cheek, weak-kneed at its silken caress, and untied the note. Four lines of poetry, just legible in the dim light...

Footfalls echo in the memory

Down the passage which we did not take

Towards the door we never opened

Into the rose-garden.

And written underneath, Meet me there at midnight.

Well, dearest Iris. If you were me, would you have said no?