

The Searching Glance

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LINDA CRACKNELL

*The Searching
Glance*



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For my mother

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The Smell of Growth

YOU CAN WEAR this one, as you've been a good girl, I say to Pauline. I pull the red mini skirt up over her long thin legs, and then we choose the white T-shirt. Her eyes make a wee rattle as they blink open and shut. I comb out her blonde hair. It feels slick and jangles in the sun coming through the French windows. A small yellow leaf is tangled behind her ear and I ask her, what have you been up to?

Mum pulled up my pyjama top this morning and said the spots are away and I'm probably better, but I should stay off school one more day just to make sure. She makes me tomato soup and toast every lunchtime. It's like a different house during the day—quiet without the boys, and the phone rings loudly, and Mum takes her purse and goes to the shops, and sometimes visitors come. Mum spends most of the day up to her elbows in water, her hands pink in her Marigolds. But this morning she put on a dress and rubbed hand cream on after she washed-up.

Yesterday I felt better enough to go down the garden.

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Me and Pauline filled our teacups at the pond and chatted, but Mum thought I was hiding because the bracken came way up over my head. She said the water's dirty no wonder I'm ill, and it's a bad place and that there's danger. She doesn't like the wild land at the bottom of the garden which she calls I-despair-of-it. It's just the patio she likes, where the sunshine is. I don't know why she thinks it's bad. There's that smell down there that goes up my nose all hot and thick. Geoff-Next-Door says it's Growth. But I don't think Growth is the same as bad. You don't see robbers down there, or the men who drive too fast like the ones Mum shouts at when she's taking us to school.

Geoff-Next-Door helps Mum with the lawn-mower and he lifts bags of coal for her in the winter. She doesn't know what we'd do without him. But I don't like to look at him because one of his eyes darts about like a wee fish while the other one doesn't blink and looks like he's just woken up. Mum says it's a glass eye.

I watched the tadpoles for ages before Mum found me. They've grown wee legs which wriggle as they swim. I tried to catch one in my hand but it slipped through. I was elbow-deep in the cold water and vanished my hands down below the slime at the bottom. Once I pushed an old bone that I found near the compost heap into the slime and I never found it again. But instead rose up a beautiful string of silver beads in the water that I couldn't catch, just like the tadpole.

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Look at you covered in mud, she said, when she found me. Can't you just grow up? She pinched her hand on my wrist and pulled me away from the pond. I've told you. Keep away can't you? I wanted to show her how the tadpoles had changed, but her hand cuffed at me and spurted the tears out.

Today I'm staying indoors. I look out the window and when Nina swooshes up in her car, with her hair flying out the back and her waving hand, I see the line on Mum's forehead fade.

Give your wicked auntie a kiss then, Nina says, although she's not my auntie really. You're just like I was at your age. Legs up to your ears. She pushes my hair behind my ear as if she's looking for the top of my leg there. I'm growing my hair out, I tell her, and tip my head back till I can feel it tickle my shoulders just like hers and Pauline's does. When she stands up, her dress rustles and a smell whooshes from it like if you get too near the budleia bush.

She curls my fingers over a packet of sweeties and then takes Mum out into the sunshine. You need some colour in your cheeks, I hear her say. Nina must have been sitting out a lot already. The flat bit where her blouse is open and the necklace glitters, is almost the colour of the barley sugar. I don't open the sweeties yet, in case Mum says I don't deserve them.

Nina's eyes are white around the blue pupil bit,

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whereas Mum's always look pink. It's having the three of us to look after on her own and it's not fair. That's what Geoff-Next-Door says. You be good for her, eh? I nod and it doesn't really feel like a lie but I think he knows that I like to watch tadpoles. I don't mean to catch cobwebs and twigs in my hair, and I'm always sorry when I hear Mum crying in her bedroom. Sometimes I have to pinch the soft white bits under the boys' arms if they do mischief. That's what growing up means—not getting muddy, or leaving things on the sitting room floor. It means wearing Marigolds, and not having toys like children do. We have to learn to be good like Mum or Nina are. Pauline's nearly good too.

When they come in, Mum tinkles keys and Nina's handbag goes snip-snap. Your mummy needs a bikini, darling. Shall we three girls go on a shopping trip, mmm? They've lovely ones at the Outlet store and they're half the price. Her long eyelashes go bat, and out of the big snip-snap bag she pulls her gold lipstick case. There's a wee mirror attached to it, and she pins back her mouth as she paints, cross-eyed in the mirror. She eats her lips together and makes a pout at me, then laughs. She rustles down, pointing the lipstick at my mouth, and says, go like that, and makes that funny face again. I look at Mum. Just this once, she says, and she's almost smiling and her lips have changed colour too.

In the car the wind slaps down my eyes, and I push

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Pauline's shut for her. Nina has dark glasses on so she can drive. When we get there, she pulls her scarf off and brushes her hair. I have to comb Pauline's too. I'm almost at the end of my, Mum says, and then she stops speaking and her head drops. And Nina puts a hand on her shoulder and snip-snap out comes the hanky. She swings my hand as we cross the car park. We'll find your ma something bright to cheer her up, eh?

In the Outlet store it's noisy. Behind a screen are rows of sewing machines galloping along material with ladies driving them. There's a cash register by the door, but no one sitting at it like you get in Tesco's. All around the room there's troughs full of plastic bags with different colours showing through them. Pushed underneath the troughs are big cardboard boxes, brimming with more bags the same. On the wall above each trough there's a piece of clothing pinned up to show you what's inside the bags.

Nina tugs Mum about, piling bags in her arms. That's fabby, she says, holding a turquoise one against Mum. Just the thing to set off a tan, and look at it only eleven ninety-nine and it's a genuine Fancini. Nina sends Mum behind the curtain.

There's a pink life-sized doll with long thin legs. She's wearing a bikini with wee gold rings at the side of the knickers and between her boobs, and I say to Pauline, I can just see you in that. We sit under her feet and I pull

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Pauline's red skirt straight. We both have tired legs. I suck at my lips but they don't taste like strawberry how they looked in the mirror, not even sweet at all, but like anti-septic or something.

Nina's bag goes snip and makes me look at her. She's leaning over a pool of plastic like she's watching tadpoles swimming between the bags, trying to catch one. I keep quiet because she looks busy in her head, like Mum at the sink with the line across her forehead. That's a pretty one, she says to herself. The snip-snap bag yawns over her arm and the tadpole-catching hand dips below the trough. It's like it belongs to someone else because she's not looking in the cardboard box where it is. The hand looks like a claw with its red nails. It clamps onto a bag of turquoise and scoops it in. Snap, goes the snip-snap bag and Nina moves on to the next trough, paddling again in the pool of plastic.

Mum steps from behind the curtain, undressed except for the orange bikini. Nina puts her hands on her hips like she's looking at a beauty queen. You look fantastic, she flips her head back so her hair slicks like a tail down her back. But Mum has bony bits on her tummy and a label poking out under her arm and you can see her knickers under the bikini bottoms which are very very small. Pauline and I sit at the big doll's feet and blink.

When Mum takes the orange bikini and calls the lady to the cash register, Nina doesn't say anything about the

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turquoise one that she chose. She doesn't even try it on. And the bag doesn't snip or snap to get out her purse. When we get back into the car, I look at Nina's face, close up, as she turns to speak to Mum. She's eaten off some of her lipstick and underneath she's a purple-pink colour. I see for the first time that she has lines drawn in red on the outside of her nostrils, like wee cracks in a blackbird's egg shell. Over the top of them there's a soft pink dusting, like sherbet.

After lunch, Nina leaves. She kisses Mum and then me. Her lipstick is quite worn away now. She left it on the edge of the glass she was drinking from—a sticky print like a slug's skin, all puckered up, like when you poke them with sticks in the garden. When she gets in the car, she stares into the mirror. And I want to ask her if she's going back to the Outlet because she's forgotten that you have to give money when you buy something.

You've got very quiet says Mum to me. Maybe you're not quite better after all. She's put on her orange bikini but this time without knickers underneath and she stretches on the sunlounger, all pink and shiny. I sit beside her for a while but she has her eyes closed, and when I say Mum, Nina is a good girl isn't she, she just smiles a little at one corner of her mouth and mutters, Girl? Lady, then, I say. And she breathes, Go inside, rest.

I take the Marigolds from the sink and creep past Mum and down the garden with Pauline. Geoff-Next-Door is

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vrooming his lawnmower, but I don't look at him. His hand goes up in the corner of my eye.

I take off her red miniskirt. And I unpeel the white T-shirt. When she's naked, I put her in the water, wearing the Marigolds to keep my hands dry and soft like Mum's. She floats with one arm up above her head like she's waving goodbye, and a leaf sticks on her tummy. But she doesn't look right because her eyes are still wide open, staring blue into the sky. So I take her out again and push the lashes of one eye down so I just see the pink hood. The other eye is full of water and won't shut. My finger doesn't work properly with the floppy end of the Marigolds, so I pick up a stick. I push the eye shut with it. Then I push it harder. It makes a snapping noise and goes into her head, so far that I can see she's hollow and dark red inside, not pink. When I've done both her eyes I put her back in the pond and with the Marigolds up to my elbows I can push her all the way down to the bottom. Her hair waves like a bright seaweed, fading.

Lastly rises the string of silver beads that I try to catch in my hand. And in amongst the bracken, the smell of Growth oozes in my nose.

Over the Garden Wall

HIS LIPS SENT beads of the recent rain quivering down the waxy red curve of the frangipani petal. The sun had reclaimed the sky again, crashing black shadows onto the ground and returning colours to primary. But drips still beat onto the lower foliage of the garden, flicking leaves up and down like piano keys with no apparent player. It was the first time that the frangipani bush had flowered, and he lingered over it with his face and fingers and his inhalations, soaking in the sense that it was only there because of him, because he had planted and nurtured it. Now he would be the one to enjoy it.

Someone from home had written to congratulate him on his garden 'retreat'. Outrage advanced on him in the hours after reading the letter. As if he was the sort of man to retreat. He had written back straight away, saying quite to the contrary, he considered his garden an 'attack'. Hadn't his campaign involved taking possession of the

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land, a blitz on the scrambling native bush, a colonisation of the fragrant and the flamboyant? And wasn't he right now safeguarding his territory, securing its borders?

He had set a flame to the letter with its impertinent P.S.—'So sorry to hear'.

His world was complete. Mangoes fell, ready sliced onto his plate; prawns, by the bucketful. There was always a cold beer to cool his throat as he stared from his bar terrace across the Indian Ocean. The heavy curve of a young shark's backbone over the back of a bicycle would soon be straightened as he carried it to his kitchen. He could drive to another beach if he wanted to, or perhaps to the bar on the west where the sunsets were better.

Everywhere he went, people straightened their backs in the fields or turned mid-purchase in the market, and raised a hand in the air for him. And they called out his name—children and adults. He couldn't hear them because the air-conditioning didn't work properly unless the car windows were shut. But he saw his name in the shape of their lips. It made him rise upright in his seat. Even though they gave it freely, he was determined to deserve their respect—the man who, with the barest soil on this hard white coral rock of an island, had made frangipani and bougainvillaea blossom, and filled the night air with the scent of ylang-ylang.

He relished the world he had created as he drew on his cigar underneath the stars and the moon, listening to the

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dark crash of the waves. The night air was full of the trilling creatures he had attracted. He didn't know whether the disembodied sounds were made by birds, insects, frogs maybe. And he didn't want to see, in case they were ugly scuttling things that would make him want to pull his bare feet away.

Even during the day much of his time was spent on the terrace with a beer in one hand, gazing out across his own private lagoon, with his garden hooting and trilling behind him. He played in whispers with the similar sound of the words 'lagoon' and 'saloon'. He had both here, two-in-one, he joked to himself. He did that—played with words, plaited and unravelled them. Recently, 'stronghold' and 'stranglehold' had come into his head together—unrelated, and yet so similar in sound. A lifetime of crossword puzzles must have done that to him. The mind sparring with itself.

About a mile out, he could see waves breaking over the reef—he could hear them, in fact. Boats would come edging through the shallows, working their way a few miles south to the break where an underwater cliff sheered downwards and they could escape, to fish the deeper sea. At first he had felt that the turquoise water of the lagoon belonged to him. He had wanted the boats to stay out. The *dhow*s and poled canoes, and rickety dug-outs with their outriggers had the whole of the purple-blue sea beyond the reef as their realm. He wasn't going to take

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that from them. But as time went on he had noticed that the boats scudding along the lagoon didn't interrupt the stark whiteness of his coral beach by coming ashore. The men's heads turned towards him, and their hands rose. That was all. In the early days he had stood, the captain on his bridge, as they went past. But not now. He just let them pass.

Anyone who looked into his garden could see that life was good because he made it so. After a lifetime of postings and stations here and there, of being exposed to this and that danger, he'd made himself secure. He'd trucked in dark rich soil from the mainland to embed his roots, and imported dried blood and bone meal from Europe. Now he was enclosed by a rising tanglewood of green.

When he drove through the village at night, he saw folk clustered in the lamplight and shadows, and he smelt roasting fish. There was laughter and music from a tinny radio, but no electricity, and he saw that they used the most basic of implements. With his garden, he had shown them what was possible, how they didn't need to live on top of each other in huts full of charcoal smoke, and stand in their doorways each dawn to sweep at the hard coral they had chosen to support their lives.

As the garden's riches had grown, it had drawn in intruders. More sweet almonds must hit the ground than remained under the tree in the morning, and it wasn't just the fruit bats to blame. The rustle and thump behind him

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at dusk was surely someone raiding the mango tree. Paths with an ancient, bare-foot quality began to appear. The white sandy trails worn amongst the trees reminded him of through-routes across wasteland, between housing estates, in his long lost past. And he didn't want to be reminded of the trickle of sweat down his back. Running through the scrub from the sound of pursuing footsteps. The Barr Boys next door and his mother reminding him, 'We're polite to neighbours, aren't we, now?'

No one wanted thieves in their garden.

There were dogs, too. He heard them at night, roaming and howling as a pack. And he heard the squeals of their victims. The dogs scavenged for waste at the back doors of hotels, collectively wolfish. (How similar 'dog' was to 'god', he noticed. And yet gods were singular. A 'pack of gods' was unthinkable.) He didn't want dogs in his garden, either.

The disappearing fruit and the dogs hadn't galvanised him though, on reflection. It was the trouble that started things. Gangs of young men, fired up with—what? Hunger? He shook his head, doubted it. (He made a mental note at the same time though, of the similar sound of 'hunger' and 'anger'.) Drugs, perhaps. Or just fired up by being young men. They came with *pangas* and slashed at people and property. The Italian hotel owner a few miles down the coast had to be helicoptered out with his injuries. Word was it was an orchestrated attack, out-

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siders, probably from the mainland.

It was true that the thick, rich foliage he had created around himself provided perfect cover for someone to creep up on him. In the middle of the night, he would sometimes raise his head from the pillow at a sound penetrating the jungle of his dreams. He didn't even open his eyes, and slumped back down to resume sleep as soon as he was reassured. But he began to feel the need for clearer definition where the garden bordered the road to the village—something between the green and the white. And he would get an *askari* too, to act sentry for him at the entrance, an *askari* with a dog.

He dallied with the idea of a thorn hedge—both burglar-proof and beautiful. Like a hostile hedge of holly that he would have thought of to surround the Surrey garden with its roses and striped lawns. The garden he had worked so hard to out-do here. The hedge would be impregnable, ten feet high, five feet in diameter, a strong single species to provide privacy and protection. Our passion for privacy, he thought, that's what makes us different from the people here.

But his plan remained a plan.

The story of the Italian-run hotel reached the British newspapers and she had written saying, 'You told me it was completely safe there—a paradise.' Not long afterwards she wrote again saying how beautiful the azaleas were that spring and how the Fosters had a new spaniel

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pup, and that she would stay there after all for the summer. And then the final letter saying, 'There's someone else'.

He tripped as he broke through the deep shade of the garden, reading the letter. Sunlight on the terrace flashed off the white page and blinded him for a moment. The jolt fizzed up his heartbeat.

Then he had decided. A hedge would take time to grow. Whereas a wall could materialise quickly.



'Mattress?'

'Eheh.'

'Fridge?'

'Eheh.'

'TV?'

'Eheh.'

Hassan met Idi's grunts of assent with incredulity. Was it possible that a boy from his own village would get all these riches? He laughed, slapping his hand against the breeze block wall that Idi sat astride.

'So he pays you in dollars?'

'He will.'

Hassan grew tall. 'I can help you.'

'It's a job for one. That's what he said.'

'You could ask him for me, brother. You know him—'