

*Inventory*



**LINDA BLACK**

# **Inventory**

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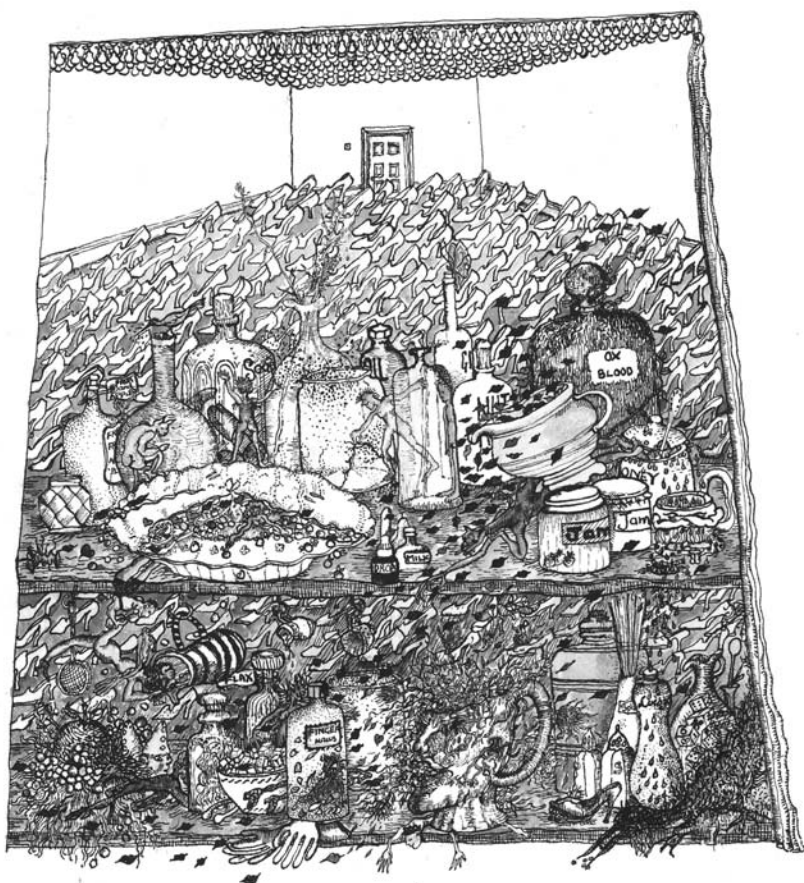


For Rosie, Joseph and Thomas



## *1. Furniture & Things*





*Inside the Pantry*



## **Hang up your coat, take off your shoes**

Your bag will go in the cupboard for safekeeping. What have you got in here, it weighs a ton? I expect you'll be hungry.

He takes it all in: the pantry (one tin of corned beef, 3 eggs, a jar of home-made pickled onions, half a loaf of white bread – uncut, a slab of cheddar and a dish of yellow salted butter); high ceiling (it seems to go all the way to the roof), bare light-bulb, empty vase, single high backed chair, linoleum, Formica, and in a far corner a heavy chenille curtain hiding he suspects the passage to the stairs.

Where can I leave my umbrella?

## The box room

On a gate-leg table, an open exercise book (inside, a neatly labelled diagram: the reproductive system of the rabbit – one up from earthworm) and several packets of Trebor mints. Behind sliding glass doors: Beauty (both Black and Sleeping); Jo, Meg, Beth – *a little quiver in her voice* – and Amy; Katy *absolutely on her feet*; Heidi, Raskolnikov. Earthworms, also called ‘night-crawlers’, are hermaphroditic and have five pairs of hearts. Dismal days, eventful days, days of commotion.



## The yellow chair

Wasn't always, isn't really – underneath it is, as I remember it, a darkish blue, not quite petrel. Scanning the room, I can't find a match and decline to lift its skirt. Three thoughts occur, vie for precedence. I like to be exact, attend to minutiae.

I am mistaken. A petrel is a sea bird, related to the shearwaters, typically flying far from land; the colour (though it isn't) is petrol blue. Small crosses like sideways kisses are woven into the fabric – regularly, but how far apart I couldn't say – and dots, I believe there are dots. I could liken the pattern to swallows – there is something in the curve of a wing.

There are no arms. Its wide back curls around my shoulders, tapers like a cut-off triangle to meet a circular seat. A further point – the springs have gone; under the cover I have placed – some time ago – an old feather cushion and several pieces of thickish card. They slip about sometimes.

Its legs are wooden, hidden. It is my grandmother's chair, a low chair, a feeding chair. I do look later; about some things, I am completely wrong.

## Here's 'Thin Little Scrap'

Darting from room to room, bounding stair treads three at a time. He (startlingly male) has a mission, an infrared camera for seeing into the past. What disturbs him is *he can't remember where he put it*. The clothes-airer when she wasn't looking? The laundry basket? Which might mean it ended up through the mangle. Surreptitiously he backtracks, keeping out of harm's way. Last month it was here, two years ago there. *Where was I last October?* His concern is no one else finds it, tainting it with their perceptions. Oh, he's tried collaboration (female, nuff said). He feels a creak in the bone, due he thinks to rapid reversals – or could it be the angle of jump? There's a tune going round in his head. He blames the Mike Sammes Singers. If he weren't trapped here, he'd be after them with his broom and his cotton cloth (dipped in gumption), this tinker, this grudge, this ne'er-do-well.

## **In the first place, you should be comfortably seated**

With the removal of the alimentary canal, a general impression of the reproductive organs is at once apparent. Two sac-like bodies lie above the nerve cord. The two ovaries, white, translucent, triangular bodies, can be seen attached to the posterior face of the septum between segments 12 and 13. Their size will depend on their ripeness. You will notice that no attempt has been made to display the testes. Is everything clear? Is there any difficulty?

## I choose a cup

One blue, one green – one missing (the same in all ways but one, *which* I can't clearly say). Two matching saucers: blue cup, green saucer, green cup, blue saucer. Nothing else resonates, particularly not the colour of tea. I found (?) a broken cup some time ago under the sink, my sink.

*Do I throw it out? Pretty, delicate, hand painted; part damaged, part not – does the bit that is signal death to the bit that isn't, then the bit that wasn't, won't be? Is it inevitable, the flawed part dragging down the rest? If I broke my arm would you throw me out? What about craftsmanship, beauty, the right to be – to not be perfect; for each part to play its part – to carry on – to fall apart? For the sake of a blemish should the rest suffer? Through no fault of its own. How does it offend? It hasn't changed. Lessened by association . . . and so forth.*

I am looking at a china coffee cup from the days of crystal cruets, monogrammed napkin-rings, crumb-trays. It is white, hand painted, rimmed in gold leaf as is the handle and decorated with curlicues and borders of differing blue stripes. A crack runs the circumference of the base and up one side. Visible from the outside only, placed at regular intervals, are four rivets, slightly disguised.

Printed on the base: 325 (in gold) *Royal Winton* MADE IN ENGLAND A and what looks like *ELEANUM*, smaller, in blue, rather faded; floral pattern, handle cross-riveted at the top, pinned at the base – right the way through. For this, I like it all the more.

Round the corner from where I used to live (when I lived there) I once rescued smithereens of china – jugs, tureen lids, clay pipes, the like – from a deep hole, as many as I could. I keep them in a shoebox, show visitors.

*Post Script*

It was a riveting story.

All eyes were riveted on her

The grip was firm enough to rivet her to the spot.