

## Gift

One day in late summer I overheard my mother speaking on the telephone to my grandmother.

‘Just give her some money.’

A week later it was my birthday. A wrinkled five pound note flopped like a wilted leaf from my card. It had been touched by many hands, used to buy bread, milk, cigarettes or perhaps a part contribution to a pair of shoes.

Why did tears prick when I first saw the grey and blue queen? I’d known it was coming so there was no shock or surprise. This was a gift of love from a modest weekly pension sum, yet it felt like something newly dead.

In the evening, waiting for my thank you call to be answered, a small sharp pain of love rose in me that rarely broke the surface for air. The thanks I gave were sincere.

The treasure was pushed into an ink-stained beaded purse, ready and waiting. Folded in its silken bed, the slip of paper held a swell of emotion that was hard to explain; hard to endure.

If the zip’s teeth were opened the money was there, the sadness too.

I had become a person who my grandmother no longer knew with confidence and a person my mother no longer cared to or could explain. I was a wild cat that acted in strange exotic ways, leaping, scratching and spraying, like some demented creature in the zoo whose call no one understands.

‘You know me, you know me. Look at me and see. See the things I want, my world is only just below yours. I’m here. I’m here. Better still – see the things I need because I do

not know what they are. I do not know and you give me this money and all I will do is make a mistake.'

The point is this, and how could I have possibly known this at the time – I trusted you to know better than me.

Not to say I hadn't been disappointed by your gifts before: too soft, too small, too hard, too easy, too pink, too yellow... Oh, yes, I should mention that I am not *at all* hard to please.

But it had always been a comfort that you knew better, consulted each other and made wise choices – even if they were completely wrong.

The delight of something being chosen for me by the people who love me – that was always the gift.

Of course, I knew that the note concertinaed in its pocket-size cocoon had potential; it could be transformed.

There were things that I wanted that were disapproved of, secret things I coveted, things whose very idea possessed me, gripped me tighter and tighter until they strangled all common sense. The purse held the key, the freedom I so longed for...and at times oh, I so longed to let myself be unwise.

Months later, now more thumbled, more creased and more mine I forgot who gave me the money in the first place as I handed it over to the shopkeeper behind the counter in the chemist. He took the lion's share and returned some small change, then parcelled-up in a paper bag two bars of lily of the valley soap.

Gifts for Christmas, for my mother and grandmother.