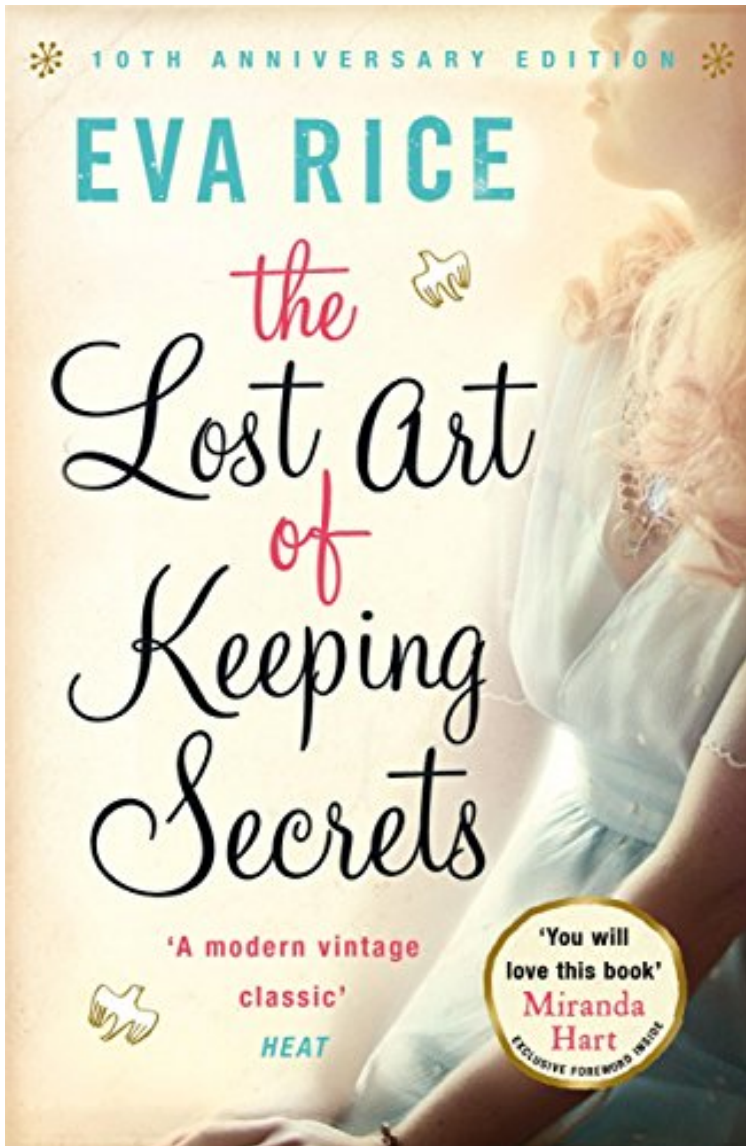


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The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets (English Edition)



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Par Eva Rice : **The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets (English Edition)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets (English Edition):

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Description : Description du produit Set in 1950s London, *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* centers around Penelope, the wide-eyed daughter of a legendary beauty, Talitha, who lost her husband to the war. Penelope, with her mother and brother, struggles to maintain their vast and crumbling ancestral homewhile postwar London spins toward the next decades cultural revolution. Penelope wants nothing more than to fall in love, and when her new best friend, Charlotte, a free spirit in the young society set, drags Penelope into London with all of its grand parties, she sets in motion great change for them all. Charlottes mysterious and attractive brother Harry uses Penelope to make his American ex-girlfriend jealous, with unforeseen consequences, and a dashing, wealthy American movie producer arrives with what might be the key to

Penelopes and her familysfuture happiness. Vibrant, witty, and filled with vivid historical detail, *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* is an utterly unique debut novel about a time and place just slipping into history.

Prsentation de l'diteur Miranda Hart contributes a fabulous foreword to this beautiful new edition of the beloved bestseller, published to celebrate its ten year anniversary. Hailed a 'modern vintage classic', *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* was a Richard and Judy Book Club Choice. This special edition also includes a brand new exclusive short story from Eva Rice, *The Moth Trap*, which offers a glimpse into the cocktail party where Penelope's parents, Archie and Talitha, first met. Set in the 1950s, in an England still recovering from the Second World War, this is the enchanting story of Penelope Wallace and her eccentric family at the start of the rock'n'roll era. Penelope longs to be grown-up and to fall in love, but various rather inconvenient things keep getting in her way. Like her mother, a stunning but petulant beauty widowed at a tragically early age, her younger brother Inigo, currently incapable of concentrating on anything that isn't Elvis Presley, a vast but crumbling ancestral home, a severe shortage of cash, and her best friend Charlotte's sardonic cousin Harry...
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THE LOST ART OF KEEPING SECRET
SEVA RICE, daughter of lyricist Tim Rice, is a writer, musician, and young mother living in London. Praise for *The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets* is as stylish, rich, and skillfully tailored as a gorgeous 1950s vintage coat. . . . With its quirky characters and lush English settings, it made me long to have lived in the London Eva Rice has evoked. Kate Harrison, author of *The Starter Marriage* [A] novel in which a time and place is recovered with enveloping atmosphere and characters who linger on in mind. *New York Daily News* Rice's remarkable gift for creating singular characters in this memorable story underscores her presence as a fresh new voice in fiction. *Publishers Weekly* The reader becomes lost in the vivid depiction of 1950s London and Penelopes romantic world, where a chance meeting can change your life forever. *Library Journal* You'll be engrossed right through the novels tied-up-with-ribbons ending, where secrets are revealed, everyone pairs off with the person you least expect, and we all learn that all you need is love. *Daily Candy*, Washington, D.C., edition Bright prospects all around. *Kirkus s* Eva Rice . . . has a keen ear and eye for the charm, glamour, and nuances of 1950s British life. *Bookreporter.com* Charlotte is a wonderful protagonist whose evolution from a naive girl to a polished woman of the world (at least the Thames) makes for a fine sensitive tale. *Midwest Book* A brilliant portrait of post-World War II London. *Historical Novels* Charming and witty. *School Library Journal*
PLUME
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For Donald Capability Rice, who helped me invent Milton Magna Acknowledgments The Lost Art of Keeping Secrets would have floundered at the starting post if not for the following, so groveling thanks to: Claire Paterson, Eric Simonoff, Molly Beckett, Christelle Chamouton, Rebecca Folland and all at Janklow and Nesbitt, Harriet Evans (editor extraordinaire), Catherine Cobain, Georgina Moore and the brilliant team at Hodder Headline, the amazing Trena Keating, Emily Haynes and all at Dutton. Joanna Weinberg, Edward Sackville, Bee Ker, Paul Gambaccini, Ray Flight (who knows his Teds), Tim Rice, my grandmother Joan Rice, my mother Jane (who is nothing at all like Talitha), and Donald Rice, whose knowledge of great country houses is unrivaled. Bouquets to Ann Lawlor (who was there at the Palladium when Johnnie Ray played), Sue Paterson, for having the foresight never to throw away her brilliant fifties magazines, Petrus, Martha, and Swift. I would also like to acknowledge Ruby Ferguson as a great inspiration. She said that we must do something about the rooms. The walls were all damp and fur had settled on some parts of the wallpaper. But we just closed the doors and hurried down to the kitchen where it was warm. Edna O'Brien, The Lonely Girl ONE The Girl in the Green Coat I MET CHARLOTTE IN LONDON one afternoon while waiting for a bus. Just look at that sentence! That in itself is the first extraordinary thing, as I took the bus as rarely as once or twice a year, and even then it was only for the novelty value of not traveling in a car or train. It was mid-November 1954, and as cold as I had ever known London. Too cold to snow, my brother used to say on such days, something that I had never understood. I was wearing my beautiful old fur-lined coat from Whiteleys and a pair of Fair Isle gloves that one of Inigos friends had left at Magna the weekend before, so was feeling quite well-disposed toward the arctic conditions. There I was, thinking about Johnnie Ray and waiting patiently with two old ladies, one boy of about fourteen, and a young mother and her baby, when my thoughts were interrupted by the arrival of a stick-thin girl wearing a long, sea green coat. She was almost as tall as I, which caught my attention straightaway, as I am just about six foot with my shoes on. She stood in front of all of us, and cleared her throat. Anyone want to share a taxi? she demanded. I cant sit around here all day waiting. She spoke loudly and quickly and without a hint of self-consciousness, and it was instantly clear to me that although the girl was addressing us all, it was me she wanted to accept her offer. The fourteen-year-old boy opened his mouth and closed it again, then blushed and dug his hands into his pockets. One of the elderly ladies muttered, No thank you, and the other I think must have been deaf, because her expression remained unaltered by the proposal. The young mother shook her head with a smile of infinite regret that stayed in my minds eye long after the day had ended. I shrugged. Where are you going? I asked pointlessly. Oh, you darling! Come on. The girl darted into the middle of the road and stuck out a hand to hail a cab. Within seconds, one had pulled up beside her. Come on! she cried. Hang on a second! Where are you going? I demanded for the second time, thoroughly flustered and wishing that I had never opened my mouth in the first place. Oh, for goodness sake, just jump in! she ordered, opening the door of the taxi. For a few seconds in time the whole world seemed to hesitate under starters orders. Somewhere in a parallel universe, I heard myself shout out that I had changed my mind and that she must go on alone. Of course, in reality, I leaped forward and into the cab beside her just as the lights changed, and we were off. Yikes! she exclaimed. I thought youd never move! She didnt turn to speak to me, but sat straight ahead, staring out in the direction that we were going. I didnt reply at once, but took in the glory of her profile the smooth, milky pale skin, the long curling eyelashes, and the thick, thick, straight, heavy, dark-blonde hair that fell well below her shoulders. She looked a little older than I, but I sensed from the way that she talked that she was probably about a year younger. She sat very still, her big mouth set in a small smile. Where are you going? I asked again. Is that all you can say? Ill stop asking it when you give me an answer. Im going to Kensington. Im having tea with Aunt Clare and Harry, which is just too impossible for words, so I should like you to come with me, well have a lovely afternoon. Oh, and my names Charlotte, by the way. That was how she

said it. Straight Alice in Wonderland. Of course, me being me, I was flattered by her absurd presumption, firstly that I would be happy to accompany her, and secondly that it would be a lovely afternoon if I did. I have to read through Act Four of Antony and Cleopatra by five o'clock, I said, hoping to appear slightly aloof. Oh, it's an absolute cinch, she said briskly. He dies, she kills herself with an asp. Bring me my robe and my crown, I have immortal longings in me, she quoted softly. You have to admire a woman who chooses to end her life with a snakebite, don't you? Attention seeking, Aunt Clare would call it. I think it's the most glamorous way to go. Hard to do in England, I said reasonably. Not many serpents hanging about in West London. There are plenty in West London, said Charlotte briskly. I had dinner with one last night. I laughed. Who was that? My mother's latest conquest. He insisted on feeding her forkfuls of shepherd's pie as if she were three years old. She wouldn't stop giggling as though it were quite the most hilarious thing that had ever happened. I must remember not to dine with her again this year, she mused, taking out a notebook and pencil. What's more, her new beau was nothing at all like he is in the orchestra pit. Orchestra pit? He's a conductor called Michael Hollowman. I suppose you're going to go all sophisticated and tell me you know exactly who he is and wasn't his interpretation of Rigoletto remarkable? It was, if a little hurried and lacking in emotion, I said. Charlotte stared at me and I grinned. I'm joking, I admitted. Thank goodness for that. I think I would have had to withdraw my invitation right away if you hadn't been, said Charlotte. It had started to rain and the traffic was worsening. Who are Aunt Clare and Harry? I asked, curiosity winning hands down over practicalities like the fact that we were traveling in quite the opposite direction from Paddington. Charlotte sighed. Aunt Clare is really my mother. I mean, she's not my mother, she's my mother's sister, but my mother has given up on everything in life except for men with batons who she believes will help further her career. She's got it into her head that she's a great, untrained singer, she said grimly. And is she? She's certainly got the untrained bit right. She's very neurotic about everything except for what happens to me, which is rather convenient as we have nothing at all in common except for our delusions of grandeur so I spend most of my time at Aunt Clare's and as little time as possible at home. And where is home? I asked, sounding just like my grandmother. Clapham, said Charlotte. Oh. She may as well have said Venus. I had heard of it, but had no idea where Clapham was. Anyway, Aunt Clare is writing her memoirs at the moment, Charlotte went on. I'm helping her. By that I mean that I'm just listening to her talk and typing what she says. She's paying me a pittance because she thinks I should be honored to have the job. She says plenty of people would give their eyeteeth to hear stories like hers from the horse's mouth, so to speak. I don't doubt it, I said. And Harry? Charlotte turned to face me. Aunt Clare was married to a very smart man called Samuel Delancey until three years ago. One of those fearfully good-looking but very mean types. Anyway, he was killed by a falling bookcase. No! Yes, really, it just collapsed on his head as he sat reading *On the Origin of Species* very ironic, my mother kept saying and as a result Aunt Clare inherited an awful lot of debt and not much else. He was a pretty scary sort of man, with a clubfoot to boot ha, if you'll pardon the pun. Harry is their only son he's twenty-five and convinced that the whole world is conspiring against him. It's very dull indeed. I'm happy to share the taxi with you, but I don't make a habit of having tea with complete strangers, I said unconvincingly. Oh, good gracious, I'm not asking you to make a habit of it. But do come. Please! For me! Charlotte implored. Although this was an absurd reason for me to accompany her, as we had only met a few minutes ago, it had the desired effect. There was something in the way that this creature spoke, something in the way that she carried herself, that made me quite certain that no one would ever be able to refuse her anything, regardless of whether they had known her for five minutes or fifty years. In that sense, she reminded me, very strongly, of my brother. I felt I was staring in at the taxi from the street and I saw myself beguiling, intriguing because I was in Charlotte's company, and a girl like Charlotte would not have singled me out for tea without thinking that there was something interesting about me, surely? She had quite the reverse effect on me than had the Alicias and Susans and Jennifers of the debutante circuit. With those girls, I felt myself diminish, sensed my shadow growing smaller, my vision narrowing until a great dread came over me that, if I wasn't careful, I would lose sight of every original thought I had ever had. Charlotte, however, was all possibilities. She was the sort of person one reads about in novels yet rarely meets in real life, and if this was the beginning of the novel well! I was pretty certain I wasn't supposed to get out of the cab until we pulled up outside the mysterious Aunt Clare's house for tea. I had always been a great believer in fate, but it had never believed in me until that afternoon. But I didn't want Charlotte to think she had won me over that easily. . . . You're very persistent. I'm not sure that I should trust you one bit, I said loftily. Oh, you don't have to trust me. I've always considered trustworthy people to be very boring indeed, and, oh my gosh! I know some boring people. I just want you to help me. There is a difference. Have you no other

friends you could take along with you? I asked. No fun. What do you mean? She tutted with frustration. Look.

I can't make you come with me. If you can't bear the thought of it, well, that's just fine. Only you'll always wonder about it, won't you? You'll be lying awake tonight thinking, Hmmmm I wonder what Aunt Clare was wearing? I wonder if she really was a monster? I wonder if Harry was the most handsome boy in London? But you'll never know, because it will be too late, and I won't come looking for you again. Is he? I asked, full of suspicion. What? Is he the most handsome boy in London? Oh, no! Of course not! At least Charlotte had the grace to laugh at herself, a surprisingly loud, harsh sound like a motorcycle starting. He's not at all handsome, but he's by far the most interesting boy you'll ever meet. You'll love him, she added simply.

Everyone does, after a while. He's irritatingly addictive. Don't be silly. I was cross with myself for asking about him. Aunt Clare always has excellent tea, Charlotte went on. Stacks of butter and raspberry jam and Eccles cakes and all the ginger scones you can eat. My mother has never understood the importance of a good tea. The cab was rocketing along Bayswater Road now. Well, I can't stay for long, I said

unconvincingly. Of course not. We sat in silence for a moment, and I thought that she would ask me my name next, but she didn't, and I later realized that it simply wouldn't have occurred to her that she should have. I had experienced, for the first time, Charlotte's great gift for circumnavigating normal behavior. I knew you would take the taxi with me, she was saying now. I saw you waiting for the bus from the other side of the street, and I thought, now there's a girl who would be perfect for tea with Aunt Clare and Harry. I wasn't quite sure how to take this, so I frowned. Just perfect! said Charlotte again. And gosh! I adore your beautiful coat, too. She fingered the fur collar. What craftsmanship! I make my own clothes. It's become an addiction. My poor mother can't understand me at all she says it will frighten any sensible men off if they think I spend long hours at the sewing machine like some spinster from D. H. Lawrence. I told her that I don't mind, as I'm not in the least bit interested in sensible men in any case. Quite right, I agreed. So what do you make? Well, I

made this coat out of an old traveling rug, Charlotte confessed. Aunt Clare tells me I'm terrifically enterprising in a voice that means she thinks I'm terrifically vulgar. Traveling rug? I said in amazement. But it's a wonderful coat! I looked at her with new respect. There was obviously a steely work ethic beneath her flighty exterior, and a steely work ethic (being something I am entirely lacking) was something I admired greatly in others. It took me forever and the pockets are a bit shabby, but it's not a bad job, said Charlotte. But when I see a coat like yours! Well! It's in another league entirely. You can wear it to tea, if you like, I was astonished to find myself saying. Charlotte hesitated. May I really? You don't mind? It would be such a treat.

She began unbuttoning her green coat before I could change my mind. Here! You try mine, she said, handing it to me. Charlotte's coat was exquisitely comfortable and warm. It seemed a little slice of her had stayed hidden in its lining, and it felt strange, like putting on a mask. She wriggled into my coat, pulling her mass of hair over the collar. The effect shocked me, not least because she possessed the actress's ability to change the aura around her simply by altering her clothing. It was as if she had been given her costume for the evening

and she was instantly immersed in her part. Thank you, she said softly. Do I look a little richer? She giggled. Yes, I answered truthfully. Oh! Here we are! said Charlotte happily. How extraordinary. No, no, I'm paying. It's the very least I can do. I feel a great generosity of spirit has come upon me. We had stopped outside one of those large, rather ugly redbrick houses off Kensington High Street. As I stepped out of the cab, the wind whipped through the green coat and seemed to cut right through me. Sure enough, Charlotte paid, dropping a shoal of coins from her long fingers and into the hand of the driver with the air of a princess bestowing thanks on her foot-man. I swear I saw the driver bow his head to her before he drove off again.

She took my arm and led me up the steps to the house and rang the bell. Aunt Clare lives on the top two floors of this monster, explained Charlotte. After Uncle Samuel died and she dealt with all his debts, it was all she could afford. She's quite happy here. Like all intelligent people, she functions very well in extreme disorder. The door was answered by a plump girl in her late teens, who offered a very dirty look before leading us up two flights of grubby-looking stairs and into Aunt Clare's flat before vanishing,

wordless. Phoebe, said Charlotte. Silly girl. She's madly in love with Harry, which is too pointless for words. Poor thing, I sympathized. Not at all, scorned Charlotte. Aunt Clare took her on to help her out for a few months after my uncle died, and she's still here now, earning more than she's worth, I can tell you. She never speaks to me, though I gather she quotes long passages from Paradise Lost to Harry whenever he sits still. She smiled up at me. Now, don't run away, for goodness sake. I'll be back before you know it. Then she vanished. And that was how I came to spend my first afternoon in Aunt Clare's study. TWO Aunt Clare and Harry NOW, I AM NOT THE SORT OF PERSON who usually jumps into cabs with strangers that behavior is more my younger brother Inigo's style of operating than mine. I tried to consider what had made me act in

such a reckless fashion, and couldn't put my finger on it at all. After all, up until the moment that I first saw Charlotte, my day had progressed in much the same way as every other Monday that year. I had taken the 8:35 train from Westbury to Paddington in the morning, drifted through my Italian and English Literature classes in Knightsbridge until three o'clock, then strolled through Hyde Park dreaming of Johnnie Ray and new clothes. Admittedly, the decision to take the bus from Bayswater to Paddington was uncharacteristic. But I was here now, and for the next half hour, there was very little I could do but follow Charlotte's lead. I was half-nervous, half-curious, and entirely surprised at myself. Maybe they're kidnapping me? I thought hopefully. They would soon throw me back onto the streets once they realized that under the expensive coat lurked a girl with no trust fund, no guaranteed income, and no decent jewels. I pulled out the powder compact I had stolen from Mama's dressing table and blinked at myself. My hair needed a comb (I hadn't one) and there was an ink smudge on my chin, but my eyes flashed back at me, defiant. Make the most of this, I thought. I was aware, for the first time in a long while, that I was alive. I shoved the mirror away and glanced around. The room was small and stiflingly hot. A fire had been lit some hours ago, and with the door closed, I felt suddenly faint. I wanted to take off the green coat, but felt, curiously, that I should not; I sensed it was part of me while I was here. I've always felt my most hungry in the middle of the afternoon and today was no exception; I felt my stomach rumble and hoped that tea would be served soon, though it worried me that there was scarcely room for a saucer. The room was so full of clutter and objects that it almost hurt the eyes. Dominating everything (and how on earth it got into the room in the first place, I couldn't think) stood a beautiful grand piano scattered with papers, pens, ink, and letters. Naturally nosy (a habit passed down through my mother's side of the family), I quickly read the first sentence of a half-finished postcard. The handwriting was clear, turquoise, and joyous. My Dear Richard it began You are quite mad and I love you all the more for it. Wootton Bassett was wonderful, wasn't it? I shifted my eyes to the large table by the window, where a faded top hat plonked on top of a stack of crumpled pound notes gave the illusion of a giant Monopoly board abandoned midgame. I had Aunt Clare down as a bit of a Miss Havisham until I noticed that the large windows were immaculately clean, and clean windows, my mother was fond of saying, are as important as clean teeth. (She rather shot herself in the foot with this expression, as there were more windows at home than one could count and she was never done employing youths from the village to come and clean them. Once an older sort of chap fell from the blue bathroom window and landed in a wheelbarrow of dead roses below. He broke his leg, but adored Mama so much that he came back the next week to finish the job, plaster and all. But back to Aunt Clare's study.) There were books, books, and more books, stacked in random piles all over the floor and spilling off the shelves, including, I noticed with a shiver of surprise, a beautiful hardback edition of the Darwin book that Aunt Clare's husband was alleged to have been reading at the moment of his untimely death. The room smelled strongly of learning, not in the calm, musty, leafy way that accompanies most rooms containing great literature, but in that more disturbing, sticky-palmed, feverish way that implies cramming knowledge for an exam or feeding an obsession. Whoever Aunt Clare was, she had no time to waste. I sat down on a very low red sofa and stretched my legs out in front of myself. The clock in the hall struck a melancholy five o'clock and I wondered how long I would have to stay here before excusing myself and boarding the train back to Westbury. Already uncharacteristically nervous, I nearly leaped out of my skin when a huge ginger cat emerged from the shadows and jumped onto my lap, purring like a tractor. Now, I don't like cats, but this one really took a liking to me, or perhaps it was drawn to Charlotte's green coat? What I remember thinking, more than anything that afternoon, was that I had never been in such a still house in all my time in London and it made me uneasy; London was not meant for the kind of heavy, low quietness that was pressing down on me now and filling me with the urge to speak out, to declare my presence for all to hear. It felt as if I had been sitting alone in Aunt Clare's study for at least an hour before Phoebe, Aunt Clare, and Charlotte emerged from wherever on earth they had been, but in fact it was less than ten minutes. It seemed that quite suddenly they were there, and the unbearable tension that can only exist when one sits alone in an unfamiliar room in a stranger's house, in a stranger's coat, was broken. Aunt Clare altered the room in the same way that a vast bouquet of spring flowers would, complementing everything around her with a vibrant, arresting beauty and a strong smell of rose water. She was a large woman, but handsome and excellently proportioned, with huge yellow green eyes, high cheekbones, and, like her niece, thick straight hair, a shade nearer to gray than blonde, all of it piled on top of her head in a beautiful chignon. Fifty-five, I thought, and only just. (I pride myself on being able to guess people's ages, and I'm rather good at it.) I jumped up at once, outraging the sleeping cat, who slunk off under the piano. So here she is! cried Aunt Clare in a singsong voice. Introduce

us at once, Charlotte. Oh this is Penelope, said Charlotte. There was a silence and my eyes opened in astonishment. At no point thus far had I told her my name. H-how do you do? Aunt Clares tiny hand was as delicate as a budgies claw in my great paw. Wonderful! said Aunt Clare briskly. This is my son, Harry, she added, and out of the shadowy corridor emerged a boy. I sighed to myself because Charlotte was right. He certainly was not the most handsome boy in London. He was short, a couple of inches shorter than me, and skinny as a rake in his crumpled white shirt and charcoal gray trousers. His hair was the same dark blond as Charlottes, only his was not poker straight, but all over the place. He looked as though he had just woken up from an afternoon nap. Hello I began, and the word choked in my throat. Because when he looked up at me, his eyes threw me completely off balance. I had never seen anything so spooky, so arresting, so brilliantly original in all my life. His left eye was a sleepy blue green, while the right was as brown as dark chocolate, and both were framed by thickly black, curling lashes, giving the uneasy impression that he had spent hours in the powder room. What ho! he said sardonically. How do you do? I recovered, stretching out my hand. He took my hand and held my gaze in a deadpan stare until I blushed scarlet, and noting this, he grinned and actually stifled a snort of laughter. I hated him at that moment. I expect youre hungry, said Aunt Clare, eyeing the green coat, now coated in ginger hair. Yes, I said, turning to her in relief. Phoebe, wed like toast, and some of Mrs. Finchs raspberry jam, and chocolate cake, and ginger scones, and a big pot of tea, please, instructed Charlotte, beaming at Phoebe. Ooh, and some of those nice chocolate biscuits, not those ghastly coconut ones, please. Coconut! I thought. Phoebe gave her a spectacular glare and vanished again. Now, come and sit next to me, Penelope, instructed Aunt Clare, oozing onto the sofa and patting the seat beside her. Charlotte nodded encouragingly. Harry was lighting a cigarette with long fingers. Harry has dinner with the Hamiltons at seven, said Aunt Clare. Hes terribly nervous about seeing Marina again. Am I? said Harry in a bored voice. Just then the telephone rang and he shot across the room to pick it up. Hullo? . . . She did? The little darling, I knew she could do it. . . . No, thank you. . . . Not at all. . . . As he spoke, Aunt Clare remained as still as a lioness, barely breathing, her face grim with concentration. (She certainly didnt have my mothers subtlety when it came to eavesdropping.) When Harry had finished his call, he replaced the receiver with a bang, hurried across the room, and picked up a coat from the back of a chair. That tip I had for the four fifty came good, he announced. He spoke very fast, scooping up coins, keys, and betting slips from the table beside the door. And please dont talk about me when Im gone, Mother, its bloody boring. With that he left us, banging the door behind him. How rude! exclaimed Aunt Clare. Isnt he? agreed Charlotte merrily. Oh, hes impossible! Aunt Clare went on. Penelope Harry has been madly in love with Marina Hamilton for the past year. Oh? I said politely. I knew of Marina, of course, but only from her photographs in the social columns. She and Harry struck me as a most unlikely match. Theyre a most unlikely match, said Aunt Clare. Marinas parents are that ghastly American couple who bought lovely Dorset House from the FitzWilliamsses. Ah. Of course. I knew Dorset House, and the FitzWilliamsses were a dull couple, old acquaintances of my mother. God only knows what theyve done to the place. Its too frightening to think about, said Aunt Clare. Ive appalling taste in interiors. I expect I should love it, sighed Charlotte. Dont talk nonsense, girl, said Aunt Clare sharply. Anyway, last week Marina became engaged to George Rogerson whos a large boy, poor thing, but supposed to be terribly nice and very rich so Harrys having to admit defeat, not one of his strong points at the best of times. I giggled. Hes out for dinner with the happy couple tonight, and on December fifth theyre throwing an engagement party at Dorset House, which, naturellement, I think is too awful for words. Harrys a very deluded sort of boy hes never been able to take rejection, which is so tiresome for us all. I only wish his father were here to set him straight. It was clear to me that Aunt Clare was the influence behind Charlottes way of talking. They both spoke in a fashion that was at once mannered and completely natural. Charlotte groaned. Oh, I wish Phoebe would hurry up with tea. Im half-starved. She thinks of nothing but food, Aunt Clare informed me. But what of you, child? How exciting to meet one of Charlottes friends, and such an attractive young girl! Do I know your parents? She cleared her throat and paused in a fashion that a novelist would describe as dramatic. You . . . you look terribly like . . . like . . . Archie Wallace, she said. For the second time I was rendered almost speechless. Hes he was my father, I managed to squeak. Hehe was killed. The war I trailed off and looked down at my hands, horribly uncomfortable. Aunt Clare paled, and for an awful moment I panicked that she hadnt realized Papa had died. Yes, she said eventually. Yes. I am sorry. I read about Archie. I was so terribly sad. She pressed her hand to her chest. And you, poor darling. His daughter. Good gracious. There was something in the way she spoke these words that made me want to comfort her, to tell her that it was all right, that yes, Papa had died, but that, really, I had never even known him. Her eyes clouded over, suddenly dead, and for a few seconds, the room sank back into that weighty

silence again. Oh, help, I thought. She's going to cry. But she didn't. Instead she said after a small pause, Of course, he and Talitha were married before they were whelped. The clouds lifted again. Um I don't think I understand, I said. They were babies themselves. Oh, I see. Yes, I suppose they were. My mother was seventeen when I was born, I explained to Charlotte. Seventeen! How romantic! she wailed. Oh, Talitha Orr was quite the most sensational beauty, said Aunt Clare. Thoroughly thoroughbred, despite being Irish, poor dear. Glorious hair, and always dressed for men, not women. That was the key to her success, you know. I laughed. I just couldn't help it. It's absolutely true. She doesn't really like women at all. It's a common trait of beautiful women, said Aunt Clare pertly. Is it? I adore women. I suppose that means I'm not beautiful, said Charlotte ruefully. Aunt Clare snorted and rounded on her niece. Don't be so damn silly! Your trouble is that you're far too trusting for your own good. Charlotte raised her eyebrows at me, and Aunt Clare coughed and gave me a slightly salty look. You have a brother, don't you? Inigo. He's nearly two years younger than me. Does he look like you, dear? I can't see it myself. He takes after my mother. Well! Fancy that, Charlotte. Have you met him? No, Aunt. How horribly casual you are, Charlotte. It really is unbecoming. You must ask Penelope to introduce you to her brother. He sounds perfectly brilliant. Charlotte and I haven't known one another a very long time I began. Aunt, we met at a party only two weeks ago but were already the greatest of friends, said Charlotte, shooting me a warning look. What party? demanded Aunt Clare. Oh, Harriet Fairclough's wedding reception, said Charlotte, not missing a beat. Really? How extraordinarily clever of you, Charlotte, to meet someone as pretty and interesting as Penelope at such a dull affair, said Aunt Clare. Wasn't it? agreed Charlotte. I gulped. Five seconds later we were interrupted by the entrance of Phoebe and the tea tray. Oh, clear the table, instructed Aunt Clare. Just put everything on the floor. Being a self-conscious sort of person, I was very impressed by the fact that she felt no need to apologize for the quite spectacular disorder surrounding us. Phoebe poured tea and gave me a plate with my toast and jam as if bestowing a huge favor the likes of which I could never begin to repay. I have to admit that the cake was exceptional, the scones melt-in-the-mouth delicious, and the tea weirdly but deliciously smoky. Charlotte ate as if she hadn't seen food for weeks, stretching over everyone to grab at the scones, shoving cake into her mouth like a child and swigging at her tea as if it were ale, and quite ruining the elegance she had acquired through the use of my coat. We never get tea like this at home, she sighed, midmouthful. How would you know? I found myself asking. You're never at home, are you? Aunt Clare snorted with laughter. How true, Penelope, dear. Yet what would you do without me, Aunt? demanded Charlotte. Manage perfectly well, I'm sure. No you wouldn't. What would you do without me keeping an eye on your errant son? You know, Harry worries me, girls, murmured Aunt Clare, absentmindedly passing me a pack of playing cards instead of the milk. I never imagined I would have a son who gambled! I mean, it's perfectly acceptable if you can justify it by knowing one end of a horse from the next, but Harry simply hasn't a clue. I lie awake at night wondering what can be done about his behavior. She sniffed again. Unfortunately for Aunt Clare, she possessed the clear eyes, unlined skin, and bright expression of one who drops off for nine hours of uninterrupted sleep as soon as her head has hit the pillow. I fought a desire to giggle. He needs help, admitted Charlotte. No one can deny that. Aunt Clare helped herself to a slice of cake. It was all well and good when he was a child, she said regretfully. We used to laugh about Julian the Loaf back then. Julian the Loaf? I asked, bewildered. Oh, he kept a loaf of bread called Julian in a wire cage because I refused to buy him a rabbit. Whether Julian was white, brown, or sliced, I forget. Harry was quite upset when his father insisted that he stop behaving in such a silly way. I must say, we all grew quite fond of that loaf. Harry's always been the same, said Charlotte, shoving another scone into her mouth. Full of ideas. An inventor of sorts. Oh! Always inventing. But really, I do wish I had put a stop to it when I could have. I should have known from the start, of course. After all, there aren't many children whose first word is dumbwaiter. Aunt Clare looked pained and I gulped loudly to avoid laughing. He's training to be a magician, explained Charlotte. He's really rather good. What sort of a magician? I asked suspiciously. The usual sort. Sleight of hand. Pulling rabbits, or perhaps loaves of bread, out of a hat, said Charlotte with a giggle. He has a great talent, apparently. Oh, it's all very impressive indeed, said Aunt Clare irritably. Very amusing for everyone but his mother. What future is there in fooling people? And how on earth he ever hoped to snare a girl like Marina Hamilton with no fixed income I simply do not know. He must be stark, staring mad. Oh, Aunt! said Charlotte airily. You do exaggerate. Anyway, it's absurd to talk about such matters in front of Penelope, who can be of no help at all. Charlotte smoothed crumbs off the lap of my coat. I felt momentarily piqued by her dismissal, yet recalling this part of the conversation later that night, I recognized a challenging tone to what Charlotte had said. How is your mother? Did you see her yesterday? Aunt Clare asked Charlotte, briskly changing the subject. She's unwell at

the moment. A dreadful cold that she cant seem to shake. Good, good, mused Aunt Clare. And your sister? Still away. Gracious, shes been gone a long time. Still, they say New York is the place to be. Shes been in Paris for the past two months, Aunt. Has she? How futile. Its a Frenchman, I suppose? No. An Englishman living in Paris. Worse, and worse, said Aunt Clare cheerfully. There is no sight so depressing as the English trying to dress French. I should know. Neither Charlotte nor I ventured to ask her how she should know, but I, for one, didnt doubt her knowledge on the subject. I ate more toast and studied Charlotte. I had never seen a face that altered so much with movement. When she talked, her face took on a slightly lascivious, amused expression, yet when she was listening and still, she looked wide-eyed and innocent, as if an impure thought had never entered her head. She did a great deal of listening (as I imagine was customary for everyone when they took tea with Aunt Clare), but unlike most people, who pretend to listen and then show themselves up

for forgetting everything two minutes later, Charlotte really seemed to take everything in, almost as if it were an exam and she was going to be tested on everything later. Aunt Clare was incapable of staying with one topic of conversation for longer than thirty seconds, though the chat repeatedly came back to Harry, as if there were some game going on in which his name had to be mentioned every three minutes. After nearly half an hour of trying to keep up, I decided that enough time had passed for it to be perfectly acceptable for me to go home. I really should be going, I said. I have to catch the train home. And where is home? asked Aunt Clare. Wiltshire, near Westbury. Milton Magna, said Aunt Clare. Of course. She spoke the name in what was almost a whisper. Although I was accustomed to people knowing of the house, there was something in Aunt Clares tone that unsettled me. From Publishers Weekly An impulsive taxi ride with a stranger in 1950s London indelibly changes Penelope Wallace's life in Rice's sparkling debut. At 18, Penelope lives with her younger brother, Inigo, and her terribly glamorous, young widowed mother in a drafty, rundown, English estate house in the countryside. With the loss of the man of the house, financial pressures mount, threatening sheltered Penelope's family manse and what's left of her family's place in society. She finds a kindred spirit in the outspoken posh Londoner, Charlotte Ferris, who has a "great gift for circumnavigating normal behavior,"

when they both reveal their passion for American singing sensation Johnnie Ray. After agreeing to accompany Charlotte's aspiring magician cousin, Harry Delancy, to his former girlfriend's engagement party to make her jealous, Penelope begins her journey through a world of smart parties, fashionable teas and simmering romance. With lan and insight into human foibles (and postwar Anglo-British relations), Rice, daughter of lyricist Tim Rice, ties the Wallace and Delancy families together with a surprising, bittersweet plot twist. Rice's remarkable gift for creating singular characters in this memorable story underscores her presence as a fresh new voice in fiction. (Apr.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed

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