

A Pair of Yellow Lilies Ruth Rendell (abridged) 1.

Bridget had a precarious job in a small and not very prosperous bookshop. She was in her mid-thirties, with a rather pretty face that often looked worried and worn.

After work one day she had gone into the library. She was not the kind of woman on whom second glances were bestowed. She arrived at the library carrying an enormous black leather bag, capacious and heavy, and full of unnecessary things. This evening the bag contained, among other things, an address book, a mascara, a cheque book, a notebook, a paperback of Vasari's LIVES OF THE ARTISTS, a bunch of keys, a silver ring with a green stone, three quarters of a bar of milk chocolate, her wallet which contained the single credit card she possessed and seventy pounds.

On the previous evening, Bridget had been to see her aunt. This was the reason for her carrying so much money. Bridget's Aunt Monica was an old woman who had never married but had been successful in other areas of life, being quite high up the ladder in the Civil Service.

Bridget did not like taking her Aunt's money. She felt humiliated as a young healthy woman who ought to have been able to keep herself. With a hand that she had to restrain forcibly from trembling, she had reached out on the previous evening for the notes that were presented as a sequel to another of Monica's favourite remarks, that she would like to see Bridget better dressed. But Bridget had plenty to do with the money, which did not include buying the simple dark coat and skirt and pink twin-set Monica had suggested. There was the gas-bill for instance. Not that Bridget had no wistful thoughts of beautiful things. Only today a woman had come into the shop wearing a dress that was unmistakably Dior. Bridget had gazed at it as at some unattainable glory, for if the truth were told it was the fantastic she admired and she would not be seen dead in a pink twin-set.

She had gazed and longed, just as now, in the library, she stared, in passing, at the back of a glorious jacket. Afterwards she could not have said if it was a man or a woman wearing it, a person in jeans was all she could have guessed at. The jacket was made of blue denim with a design applied on it. The design was of a flock of brilliant butterflies, purple and turquoise and vermilion fluttering from the open mouths of a pair of yellow lilies. Bridget had gazed at this fantastic picture in silks and jewels and then looked quickly away, resolving to look no more, she desired so much to possess it. Bridget went off to consult the library's computer as to whether a book she was looking for was in stock.

Afterwards she recalled, though dimly, some of the people she had seen as she crossed the floor of the library to where the computer was.

An old man in gravy-brown clothes reading a newspaper, two old women in fawn raincoats and pudding-basin hats, a child that ran about in defiance of his mother's threats and pleas. The mother was a woman about Bridget's own age, grossly fat, with fuzzy dark hair and swollen legs. There had been other people less memorable. The computer told her the book was in stock but out on loan. Bridget went back to her table and sat down. Then she reached down for her bag and the notebook it contained.

The bag was gone.

Bridget immediately told herself she couldn't have lost the bag, she couldn't have done, she must have taken it with her to the computer. The bag wasn't there. She told the two assistant librarians and then the librarian herself and they all looked round the library for the bag. It seemed to Bridget that by this time everyone else who had been in the library had swiftly

disappeared_ The librarian was extremely kind.

'It's nothing to do with me,' she said, 'but was there much money in it?'

'Quite a lot. Yes, quite a lot.' Bridget added humbly, 'Well, a lot for me.'

The police could offer very little hope of recovering the money. The bag, they said, and some of its contents might turn up. Meanwhile Bridget had no means of getting into her room, no means even of phoning the credit card company to notify them of the theft. The librarian very kindly saw to all that.

That first evening Bridget had to come to terms with the loss of seventy pounds, her driving licence, her credit card, her cheque book, Vasari's LIVES OF THE ARTISTS (she would never read it now), her address book and the silver ring with the green stone_ She mourned, alone there in her room. She fretted miserably.

But at the end of the week a parcel came. It contained her wallet (empty but for the library card), the silver ring, her address book, her notebook and most of the things she had lost but for the money and the credit card and the cheque book, the driving licence, the paperback Vasari, and the bag itself. A letter accompanied the things. It said:

DEAR MISS THOMAS,
THIS NAME AND ADDRESS WERE IN THE NOTEBOOK. I FOUND YOUR THINGS
INSIDE A PLASTIC BAG ON TOP OF THE LITTER BIN IN KENSINGTON CHURCH
STREET. I AM AFRAID THIS IS ABSOLUTELY ALL THERE WAS, THOUGH I HAVE
THE FEELING THERE WAS MONEY IN THE WALLET AND PERHAPS OTHER
VALUABLE THINGS.
YOURS SINCERELY

PATRICK BAKER

His address and a phone number headed the sheet of paper. Bridget, who was not usually impulsive, was so immediately brimming with amazed happiness that she lifted the phone and dialled the number. He answered. It was a pleasant voice, educated, rather slow and deliberate in its enunciation of words, a young man's voice. She poured out her gratitude. How kind he was! What trouble he had been to. What could she do for him? Come and have a drink with him, he said. Well, of course she would, of course. It was two years since Bridget had even been out with a man.

The aspect of Patrick Baker which would have made him particularly attractive to most women, if it did not repel Bridget, at least put her off. He was too good-looking for her. He was, in fact, radiantly beautiful, like an angel or a young Swedish tennis player. His looks frightened her and made her shy. Looking at him was altogether too much for her, and she tried to keep her eyes turned away.

Nor would she have known what to say to him. Fortunately, he was eager to recount in detail his discovery of her property in the litter bin in Kensington Church Street. Bridget was good at listening and she listened. Later, he asked her to have dinner with him the following evening. Bridget said all right but it mustn't be anywhere expensive or grand.

It wasn't, and this was just as well since at the end of the meal Patrick found that he had left his cheque book at home and Bridget was obliged to pay for their dinner. He was very grateful. He kissed her on the pavement outside the restaurant. They went back to his place in a taxi.

Going home with Patrick, she was rather drunk. Not drunk enough not to know what she was doing, but drunk enough not to care. She fell into Patrick's arms with delight, with reckless abandon and a determination to enjoy herself. During the night the central heating went off and failed to restart itself. It grew cold but Bridget, in the arms of Patrick Baker, did not feel it.

She was the first to wake up. She lay in bed and thought about what a lovely time she had had and how that was enough and she would not see him again. Seeing him again might be dangerous and she could not afford with her unmemorable appearance, her precarious job and low wage, to put herself in peril. Presently she got up and said to Patrick, that she would make him a cup of tea.

'Don't get cold. Find something to put on in the cupboard,' he had said.

She dressed. While the kettle was boiling, she looked with interest around Patrick's living room_ He was an untidy man, she noted, and his taste was not distinguished. He hadn't many books and most of what he had was science fiction, so it was rather a surprise to come upon Vasari's LIVES OF THE ARTISTS in paperback between a volume of fighting fantasy and a John Wyndham classic.

She was aware of a sudden unpleasant chill. It was comforting to feel the warmth of the kettle against her hands. She made the tea and took him a cup, setting it down on the bedside table, for he was fast asleep again. Shivering now, she opened the cupboard door and looked inside.

He seemed to possess a great many coats and jackets. She brushed the hangers along the rail. His wardrobe was vast and complicated. He must have a great deal to spend on himself. The jacket with the butterflies slid into sudden brilliant view as if pushed there by some stage manager of fate. Bridget gazed at the denim jacket as she had gazed with similar wonder once before. She stared at the cascade of butterflies in purple and vermilion and turquoise that tumbled from the open mouths of a pair of yellow lilies.

She hardly hesitated before taking it off its hanger and putting it on. It was glorious. She stood over Patrick, wondering whether to kiss him goodbye. Perhaps not, perhaps it would be better not. After all, he would hardly notice.

She let herself out of the flat. They would not meet again. A more than fair exchange had been silently negotiated by her. Feeling happy, feeling very light of Heart, she ran down the stairs and out into the morning, insulated from the cold by her coat of many colours, her butterflies, her rightful possession.