

# Excerpt

## THE REPLACEMENT - MELANIE GOLDING

NOW

Leonie

Friday, 21 December

Leonie presses her palm to the outside of the shop window. The glass is cold; the fat little star of her hand leaves an imprint in condensation when she pulls it away. She laughs and slaps her hand back on the window, stamping another and another, a bit like when she does potato printing at the kitchen table, the potatoes soon left aside in favour of dipping her hands straight in the paints. She concentrates on tracing the outlines of the handprints with a fingertip, before they fade away.

‘Mamma,’ she says. ‘Come look. Me do painting.’

Behind her, a handbag stands abandoned on the pavement. She turns around, toddles over, picks up the bag. She looks up and down the street, her whole body turning first one way, then the other. There is no one else there. The chill wind blows in her face, tightening the skin on her cheeks and almost toppling her, almost taking her pink bobble hat from her head. Two bobbles; like a teddy bear’s ears.

‘Mamma?’ Leonie is still, wearing a small frown. Then, she upends the handbag onto the slabs. Nappies and wipes fall out, nappy bags are whisked up the street by the wind. There is a coin purse, a collection of receipts, a bunch of keys attached to a smooth pebble with a hole in it. Picking up the pebble, she shakes the keys so that they rattle, then drops the lot back on the ground. A fruit bar, half-finished and wound into its torn wrapper is what she reaches for next. She has it in her mouth when she hears the shop bell. The heavy door creaks as it opens, spilling yellow light and warmth onto her fingers, now almost blue with cold, that peep out beyond the cuffs of her coat.

Though it isn’t late, it’s nearly dark; the shortest day of the year. The girl toddles towards the shop’s light, towards the Christmas tree just inside, past the stranger at the door who has stepped aside to let her in, who is saying, ‘Where’s your mummy.’

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