

All That is gold does not Glitter

All that is gold does not glitter...ⁱ

As day dawns, I grab the bundle of dirty laundry and run down to the river, to get the washing done before class. My aim is to arrive at the schoolhouse just as Teacher opens the doors; I won't waste one moment of the two years of school time that I'm allowed, now that I've fulfilled my social duty and produced a healthy, virus-immune, baby.

Teacher says I'm a good student and the Guardians have promised that, if I give birth to a second immune child, I can continue my education for a further two years ... 'You're lucky,' Mother says, 'I didn't get the chance of any learning. Girls weren't educated in my day...' Poor Mother, she anyway birthed only one healthy baby – me. All the others are buried in the Baby Cemetery.

Rooting around for stones to use for pounding and scraping away the dirt from our clothes, my fingers dredge up a strange-looking pebble. It feels warm to my touch and almost soft; it gleams in the pale light of the morning sun. I hold it carefully in my open palm, admire its yellow colour; there seems to be some sort of pattern etched into it ...

Pretty! I give a whoop of pleasure – then look around guiltily when I realise I have made an open-mouthed sound outside the safety of the family Bubble. Luckily, there is nobody about yet to report me. I will keep the pebble and show it to Teacher; maybe he will help me to find some information about it in one of the precious books in the library.

I like to do some extra reading before class begins; particularly when Teacher joins me, our heads nearly touching as we pore over the words on the fragile pages. Once, he pointed to one of the magic pictures that the BeforePeople called *photographs*. 'See, you have her name, Kylie. She was famous in the Beforetimes.'

'What did she do?' I asked ... Teacher laughed, 'She did *singing* –that up-and-down sounding the BeforePeople liked to make. They didn't understand the risks back then ...'

Sometimes in class I feel Teacher's eyes on me and I do believe he cares for me. He often chooses me to read aloud and praises the way I try to voice the

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Oldspeak words, to tease out their meaning. He smiles at me more than at the other girls.

I have a secret plan: *Now that I have produced a virus-immune child, the Guardians will let me have some say in who fathers the next one ... I'll ask if Teacher can be selected – and hope that he agrees. Then, if we have a healthy child together, he might choose to be my Life Partner and we could live together in a family Bubble ...* Just the thought of it makes my heart skip with joy.

I finish the washing and hurry home to feed Jessie. She nuzzles my breast and I kiss her soft head, amazed, as always, that the wrinkled elder the Guardians chose to lie down with me sired this sweet-faced child. Mother says that he's over fifty – but I don't believe her; nobody lives that long. He may be old, but he's often picked for a first lying-down because he's known to be kind and careful – and successful. And I conceived quickly; I didn't need to lie with him many times.

At the schoolhouse, Teacher looks up and smiles. 'Early as usual, Kylie ...'

'I wanted to show you something,' I hold out the pretty stone 'Ah,' he says, 'where did you find this?'

'In the river, just now. Do you know what it's called?'

'It's called gold.'

'Like the colour?' I think of the bright tint the dyers make from crocus flowers.

'Yup,' he says, 'that's how the colour got its name. In the Beforetimes this metal was prized; people hoarded it, stole and cheated for it, even killed for it...'

'Why?' I ask, astonished, 'What's so great about it? Does it make special tools or something?'

'No,' Teacher says, 'it's too soft for that. They used it for adornments – this is part of a necklace,' and he touches the leather Cord of Honour around my neck, which shows that I've given birth to a healthy child.

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‘So the BeforePeople thought a useless metal was so important that they would kill and die for it? Were they stupid?’

Teacher shrugs. ‘I wouldn’t call them stupid exactly – they were certainly very ingenious in devising all that *Tech* we read about. But this craving they had for gold metal was like an addiction. They hid it away when the Virus struck them down ... Seems they treasured it; hoped to go back for it in the Aftertimes. We know better today, of course – that Jessie and the other children like her are our real treasure ...’

Without thinking, I place my hand on Teacher’s; he turns his hand over and our fingers fold together. ‘Kylie,’ he begins, and suddenly he seems hesitant, almost shy, ‘I’ve been thinking ... when it’s time for you to birth again, perhaps I might ask the Guardians whether’

But, at that moment, the other girls come crowding into the school room, and he stops mid-sentence. Urgently, I lean into him, ‘Yes,’ I whisper

I slip the gold stone into the pouch at my waist; Jessie can play with it.

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*All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost ...*

Tolkien, The Riddle of Strider