The Clothes on Their Backs

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Extract

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This morning, for the first time in many years, I passed the shop on Seymour Street. I saw the melancholy sign in the window which announced that it was closing down and through the glass the rails on which the clothes hung, half abandoned, as if the dresses and coats, blouses and sweaters had fled in the night, vanished down the street, flapping their empty arms.

There was Eunice, behind the counter, patting her blue-black lacquered hair with silver nails. How old she looked, and how forlorn, her chin sinking for a moment on her chest.

Then I saw her rouse, and raise herself up, lifting her chin with a cupped hand. She mouthed a couple of words to herself. *Be brave*!

An impulse took me through the door, a strong pang of sympathy. I stepped inside and her perfume filled the room, inimitably Eunice – Revlon's Aquamarine, the scent of eau de nil and gold.

'You!' she said. 'Vivien, is it really you, after all this time?'

'Yes, it's me.'

'I thought so. How come I never saw you before?'

'London is very vast,' I said.

'A woman gets lost easy, but not me, I've been here all along. You knew where to find me.'

'But I wasn't looking for you, Eunice. I'm sorry.'

You never went to see how Eunice was? my uncle's voice cried out, in my head. *You left her all alone like a dog, my Eunice! You couldn't even pop in to buy a pair of gloves?*

'Well,' she replied. 'That's true. You and me had nothing to say,' and she gave me a haughty stare, raising her nose high and pulling back her shoulders. 'How is your family doing?'

The shoulders filled out her jacket, she smoothed the box pleats of the skirt. Three gilt buttons engraved with fleur-de-lis flashed on her jacket sleeve above the swollen bone of her wrist, lightly freckled. I recognised her gold watch. My uncle gave it to her. It was an Omega, his favourite brand, still revolving on quietly, tick-tock.

'My father died last week.' How strange it was to refer to him in the past tense, to think that I would never see again that cantankerous old man. Whatever was unresolved between us would stay unresolved unless we met again in the *yane velt* – that life, that other life.

'I only saw him the two times, neither was a nice occasion, you'll agree – your mother, though, she was very different from him. Is she still alive?'

'No, she died sixteen years ago.'

'That's a shame, now she was a true lady. I'm sorry she went before her time. And what happened to the boy? Don't look at me so innocent, you know who I mean.'

Yes. I remember. A sudden laugh, sharp little teeth, a lascivious mouth, his hands rolling his cigarettes, his red canvas boots, his spiky dark hair. His T-shirt. His guard's cap. His fish tank. But particularly I recall his smell and what was in it: and the whole arousing disturbing sense of him flooded my veins, a hot red flush of shameful erotic longing.

The red tide subsided. 'I don't know what became of him, he must be in his late forties now.' A residue of sadness, imagining the sultry, sexy boy as a middle-aged man for he had had nothing much going for him apart from youth and all its carnal excitements.

'You are a careless person, Vivien. You always was, you've not changed.'

'Oh, Eunice, you don't know anything about me. It's been nearly thirty years. You can accuse me of anything you like, but careless! No, not at all.'

'OK, OK, I take that back. So tell me, where have you been living all this time?'

'Abroad for a few years, but I'm back in London.'

'In that flat round the corner?'

'No, of course not. I have a place near Regent's Park.'

She looked me up and down and I knew what she was thinking – that I didn't dress like a woman from Regent's Park. Where were the pearl necklaces, the Chanel handbag, the diamond earrings, the fur coat? Eunice had an exact understanding of the clothes that rich people put on when they got up in the mornings; she read all the magazines, but I was more or less in rags. Those jeans!

And she had not spent most of her life in the retail trade without knowing how to seize an opportunity. A rich woman badly dressed is in need of a clever saleswoman. 'Well, well,' she said, 'you want to buy an outfit? I've got something that would fit you. We're low on stock because we're closing but I could find you a nice bargain.'

I smiled. *Me* of all people, being offered a dress. For I no longer bothered to look at my reflection in shop windows as I passed, let alone cringe in front of a full-length dressing room mirror with strong overhead lights, and if I did I would not recognise what I saw. Who was that dreary woman walking up the steps of the tube with lines around her eyes, jeans, boots, leather jacket,

chapped hands, a ruined neck? That middle-aged person you see hesitating at the traffic lights, trying to cross at Oxford Circus, with her dyed hair and untended roots?

For some time – several months, but perhaps it was longer – I had let myself go, just drifted away from even thinking about how I looked, had let go the self which once stared in the mirror, a hand confidently holding a mascara wand, a person who cared about how she appeared to others.

There are mitigating circumstances. This is not my true personality. A year ago my husband died, thirteen and a half months, to be exact, and then my father. Too much death gets in your hair, in the crevices of your nose, your clothes, it's a metallic taste in the back of your mouth. My daddy was ancient, a toothless old man in a dressing gown and stained trousers; my husband had muscled forearms with reddish gold hairs and a thick neck which he had trouble finding collars to fit. He was so full of life and energy and humour, had a go at things whether he was any good at them or not, then cracking jokes about his own failures; only Vic could get lost on a golf course.

Twice this has happened to me. In the middle of my life here I was, as it was in the beginning. The same pearl grey horizon with no distinguishing features has reappeared.

And today of all days, on my way to my father's flat to get it ready for the house clearance people, a woman I had not laid eyes on for nearly thirty years was looking me up and down, remembering me as a young girl in her early twenties when I *was* careless, as charged. And curious, full of yearning, longing, passion, hope, indignation, judgement, disdain. Full of conviction, of course, about what not to wear. Yet now I stood with a line of white at the roots of my hair, in my jeans and plucked at the green silk scarf round my ruined neck, for no one looked at me any more the way Vic had looked. And despite my sturdy legs, the roll of fat around my waist, I felt like a ghost, only half here.

But Eunice was renowned for always wanting a woman to make the most of herself, whatever her drawbacks, whether imposed by nature or self-inflicted. 'I don't say you are the skinny girl you was when I saw you last, you filled out quite a bit,' she said, 'but look, this is for you. I can give you a good price.'

The dress she handed me was red, the colour of dark wine held up to the light in a glass bottle. I held it tentatively, rubbing the fabric between my fingers then holding it up against me. I didn't really get it. I couldn't see how it was supposed to fit.

'It looks nothing on the hanger,' she said, 'but you try it, you'll see. It's just right for your colouring, your black hair, and when you fasten it round your waist it pushes up your bosom. It's a *wrap* dress. You never seen one of those before? They're all the rage. And the fabric is silk jersey so it's going to do wonders for your bottom, you wait. Try it on!'

I get dressed quickly in the mornings and rarely bother with make-up apart from a balm to keep my lips from cracking. My daughters bring me round miracle skin creams that they read about in magazines, and saved up to buy me a weekend break at a spa, for which I have not yet got round to making the booking. Sweet girls, they turned out; more confident, straightforward and loving than I was at their age, for which they have their father to thank – and being the products of a successful (though hardly perfect) marriage. His light colouring came out in both of them, the reddish hair, the rosy cheeks and dimpled smiles.

'You're closing down,' I said, looking round trying to remember the place in its heyday, when I last came here in the seventies, and it did not seem so different. Perhaps the colour of the walls had been altered, and the carpet, but let's face it, I was more changed than the shop.

'Yes, after all these years, the owner Mrs Post, she died and her daughter Carolyn took over but she is not a saleswoman, she doesn't know how, and then the ladies that used to step in here

to buy, my loyal customers – Mrs Cohen, Mrs Frame, Lady Parker with the false breast from after the operation – I remember them all but they don't come any more, they stay inside their flats. No excuse, I say. Look at me, I'm that age and still I'm on my feet. Go and try that dress, right now.'

'But I don't want a new dress, I have all the clothes I need.'

'*Silly* girl.' She looked at me, with dark, inquisitive eyes. 'What's your age now?' she said. I told her. 'Not such a bad one. Shame you got that skin that falls into wrinkles, though a good cream wouldn't do no harm, either.'

'Well, you look marvellous, Eunice.' I said this in deference to that iron determination of hers: never to surrender to what she could conquer with her own will – her weapons an eyeliner pencil, a lipstick, and a pair of stockings with no runs in them. But then her son was no good, and she had nothing to live for, in that direction, unlike me.

'I work at it, Vivien,' she said. 'All my life I made sure I never had a torn fingernail or my shoes needed heeling. Many times I had no dinner when I got home at night so I could take my business suit out of the dry cleaner's. You going to try that dress on or not?'

'I'm too fat. Look at me, I'm as big as a house.' It was an exaggeration, I had put on a couple of stone since she last saw me but then I marvel at how thin I was in those days. I put my hands across the bodice of the dresses I once wore – I had no chest to speak of. Children round you out. I'm not so much overweight as neglected for there is self-abuse and then there is self-desertion.

'Don't be ridiculous, a woman is never too big for a nice dress. This is going to take pounds off you, you'll see.'

And Eunice stood there with the dress in her hands, this old woman facing the emptiness of her enforced retirement. She was holding a dress and urging me to try it, she was reminding me of what I had once intimately understood and had forgotten,

that surge of excitement, that fizz, that deep pleasure – for a new dress changes *everything*.

'Go *in* there, try it on, that lovely dress.'

Alone in the little room with its velvet-covered stool, its hooks to hang my clothes, its flattering mirror and its clever lights, unzipping my jeans, pulling them past legs covered in a fine dark down that I went for months without remembering to shave or wax, I could not even recall the last time I bought something new. But the sight of the red dress was enough to intimidate me. How were you supposed to put it on?

I called out to Eunice. 'See?' she said. You inserted your arms in the sleeves and threaded a long belt through a slit at the side, wrapped with clumsy fingers the other belt around your waist and tied it in a bow. When I had managed to complete that awkward manoeuvre the dress acquired a life of its own, taking charge of my body, rearranging it to assume a completely different shape. Breasts *up*, waist *in*. I looked at least ten pounds slimmer.

The dress felt dangerously silky, it felt as if it might cling to me for good. And in the mirror a startling visitation from one at first I barely recognised or remembered, the one whom I had let go, that slim, exciting girl, that former me, silvery in the glass, smiling back at a fifty-three-year-old woman with white roots in her hair. Vivien Kovaks!

The red dress was glowing like rubies against my skin. I stood on tiptoe to mimic the effect of high heels. I thrust my right leg forward and put my hands on the place where I last remembered seeing my hip bones. Without the camouflage of my silk scarves, the wrinkled neck was exposed but the skin on my breastbone was unlined. Oh, the tricks your body plays, the fun it has with you, you have to laugh. Well no, not really.

'What do you think?' I said.

She looked me up and down with her appraising shop assistant's

stare, darted forwards and rearranged the neckline in a couple of quick movements with her hands. 'See that? *Now* your bosom is uplifted. You need a good bra, by the way, Selfridge, they've got a nice selection. And make sure you get measured before you buy anything, you're wearing the wrong size.'

The dress dissolved and mingled with my flesh. Who knew where my skin began and the silk jersey started? I was falling ridiculously in love with a piece of cloth.

'I'll take it.'

'Now don't go buying it as a favour. I've got a nice pension from Mrs Post. I don't want for anything.'

I noticed there was a beige mark at the neckline. Another customer had left the trace of her make-up and Eunice hadn't seen it. It would come out with dry-cleaning yet I felt a wrench of sorrow that after a lifetime of close examination of herself, she had lost her own keen eyesight. Her irises had a milky opacity. I didn't say anything about the mark but she seemed to feel some small dissatisfaction in me, a criticism, perhaps of her. The balance adjusted itself again, and not in my favour.

'Why did you come in here, today?' she said, in the old sharp tone I remembered, like being battered by icy needles. 'You saw the closing down sale and thought you could get a bargain one last time?'

'I was just passing,' I said. 'That's all. Just passing.'

'You never passed before?'

'To be honest, Eunice,' I said, 'I always took another street, or I crossed to the other side of the road. I didn't *want* to see you.'

'So. You couldn't even look me in the eye.'

'Oh, come on. You tell me what I did wrong. I didn't—'

'You! You were a nasty, deceitful little girl. You broke that man's heart. And after everything he went through.'

'Yes, he had a hard life but that doesn't—'

'Doesn't what? Doesn't give him the right to make himself

comfortable, for the old age he never had *by the way*, thanks to your meddling?'

She slammed the dress down on the counter and threw it into a bag, unfolded, without tissue paper.

'A hundred and twenty pound. Cash or charge?'

I took out my credit card.

'Oh! *Platinum*. You've done well for yourself, money always comes to money, I always say. A rich husband, I suppose.'

And here we were again, back to where we started, Eunice and me. There would be no parole, no probation. I was still the nosy niece of her tormented lover, my uncle – and all the sorrow I inadvertently brought him, the girl she blamed for his premature death. Because he was the love of her life. That incongruous pair: the black manageress of a Marble Arch dress shop and the refugee slum landlord from Budapest.

She pointed a brown-lined finger at me, the silver nails chipped, a slight tremor at the fingertips. She began to speak and then for no reason her eyes welled up and she started to cry. I had never seen this, not even at my uncle's funeral when her face was hidden by a hat with a small black veil splashed with black net roses. But now all the past had overwhelmed her, the love she bore him, set in stone, turned molten in her chest.

'You don't know how it was that a man should look at me the way he did, after . . . that other thing,' she said.

'What other . . .?' I began, but just as soon as they had started, the tears stopped. She slipped a smooth brown veil over her features; an old sadness was set in them, like stains you cannot remove.

'I'll wrap up the dress for you properly,' she said. 'I'm sorry I snapped at you, Vivien.'

'It's all right,' I said. 'I understand.' For it was nearly thirty years since he died and still she suffered. Was this what I had to look forward to – thirty years of hard grief ahead of me?

Tentatively I reached out to touch her arm; her bones were fragile under her jacket and I was afraid that if I held her she would break. We had never touched before, apart from that first handshake on the street outside my uncle's house, her blue-gloved hand in mine.

She allowed me to rest my hand on her jacket. The silk of the sleeve surrendered slightly. She raised her face to mine, vivid and radiant.

'I have so many feelings for that man, every day I think about him. You ever visit his grave? I do. Once a year. I take stones to weigh him down so he doesn't rise up again and wander the earth in torment and in my flat I put a vase out with fresh flowers and a card on the mantelpiece, in memory. Did you see, I still got that watch he gave me, and the gold heart and chain with the little diamond in it. I only ever take that necklace off for a wash, and the lighter, I've still got that too, though I don't smoke no more. I could have got a lot of money for those things but I never sell them. Never. They're all I've got left of him, that *wonderfu*l man.'

I walked up Marylebone High Street, the strings of the carrier bag swinging, containing the dress, my ruby-red silk jersey dress.

This morning I had been forced along a different route by a police cordon set up because of a terrorist scare: a man was on a balcony with a towel wrapped round his waist, police marksmen had their guns aimed at him. There was supposed to be a bomb-making factory in the flat behind him. Last year there were blasts, deep in the tunnels, just as Claude predicted nearly thirty years ago, the stench of burning flesh, then rotting bodies deep down in the Piccadilly line.

Diverted by terrorism, which led me to Eunice, and this red dress.

I turned off at the familiar corner. My territory. I grew up here, these are my streets. I am a Londoner. I accept this city

with all its uncontrollable chaos and dirty deficiencies. It leaves you alone to do what you like, and of where else can you say that with such conviction?

This is Benson Court, where I was born. No programme of modernisation and refurbishment was ever agreed on by the squabbling residents of the flats. The same dusty brass lamps suspended from the ceilings, and the same Canaletto reproductions in tarnished gilt frames hanging on the walls. The lift's cage, its clanking metal gates opening and closing, the groaning cables, the wood-panelled cabin with its pull-down leather seat, all unchanged. A tenant died in there last year. My father pressed the button to go downstairs and a corpse ascended, sitting upright with her shopping – the retired ballerina, dead with her head becomingly to one side. That old girl always knew how to strike a pose.

I let myself in. Silence. Dust. Smells. Memory. I went into the kitchen, which was the worst room, to make a cup of tea. Things were in the fridge that didn't belong there, books and pens my father used to write his bizarre letters to the newspapers, advertisements cut out of discarded magazines left by the bins – a disembodied hand displaying a diamond watch.

I sat down at the table and drank my tea. The stove on which my mother had heated countless tins of soup stood as if it did not know that in a few days, when the house clearance men arrived, it would be broken up for scrap. No one wanted that charred and grease-blackened engine, gas wheezing through its pipes. Not even a museum would take it. Vic, my husband, tried to make an omelette on it, once. There was something badly wrong with the heat distribution of the burners, he said; they flickered like guttering candles. I'd die for one of his omelettes, flecked with chives or plump cubes of pink ham. I'll have one again, some day, in that place, that other place.

By Friday, everything would be gone. All traces of my parents and their nearly sixty-year residence of these four rooms would vanish under coats of new paint, the old lino torn up, the place fumigated. The flat was encrusted with our lives. I had left long ago, my mother was sixteen years gone, my father wheezing out his last breath in his TV armchair, a copy of the *Radio Times* still in his fingers when I found him the following day. Sixty years of their interminable tenancy. How strange it was that people could acquire such apparent permanence, that nothing, not a bomb, could shift them (and bombs had fallen, not on this flat, but nearby during the blitz, my parents below ground in the air-raid shelter in the garden and back up in the lift the next morning to the kitchen in time for breakfast). At the end of the week nothing would remain. In a month, strangers. And for the rest of my life I would walk past Benson Court without the key to unlock the front door, without authorisation to ascend in the lift. No doubt they would throw away the old hessian doormat. A new welcome would take its place.

A sigh of wind against the window. Opposite, a drawn blind. The lift was silent; it had not moved from the same floor. The whole mansion block was still, and I was alone in there, with nothing for company but a new dress. '*Clothe me*,' I thought, '*I am cold*.'

A bell chimed in the hall. My uncle's voice echoed through the flat. I heard him suddenly, like a hallucination.

The uncle who was the love of the life of Eunice, the manageress of the Marble Arch dress shop, the uncle who could be killed by many methods, dead but unwilling to lie down, was speaking, *shouting*.

I have not forgotten our summer together, when I learned the only truth that matters: that suffering does not ennoble and that survivors survive because of their strength or cunning or luck, not their goodness, and certainly not their innocence.

And then I laughed, for he *was* there. For almost thirty years my uncle had been in hiding in a cardboard box. I had brought it back to the flat myself a few months after he died and placed it in my mother's wardrobe, pushed to the back.

I went into the bedroom and I parted her clothes to reach it, past her brown felt waistcoats, her wooden stick which my father refused to throw away. Not since she died had I seen that stick and I reached out to touch it, at first gingerly, then tenderly, rubbing my fingers against the grain. I felt the wearing down of the wood that her hands had gripped for so long, the satisfying curve in the neck – the cells of her body were all over that thing.

Here he was: my uncle had come to rest in his sister-in-law's wardrobe, next to that stick, which was the object that first drew her to his attention, and as a result of this she married my father and they left Budapest and came to London, and I was born, and my daughters born, and everything follows.

Not literally in the wardrobe. He was still under his marble stone in the cemetery, but his voice was alive, in the series of tape recordings and sheets of paper on which I had painstakingly typed the transcripts, and of course his own account, which he had tried to write himself.

Tapes, stick. These objects, this ordinary rubbish belonging to people who were dead, had survived them all. And the girl I had let go was also there, somewhere, just waiting for me to put on a red silk jersey dress to make her presence known. I was looking for her. She was somewhere in this flat – not a ghost for I am still alive, very much in the world, I don't pass through lightly or silently. I am my uncle's flesh and blood, after all, and nothing *he* ever did was without an impression.