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The Driver's Seat

Written by Muriel Spark

Published by Penguin Books

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MURIEL SPARK

The Driver's Seat

With an Introduction by JOHN LANCHESTER

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'And the material doesn't stain,' the salesgirl says.

'Doesn't stain?'

'It's the new fabric,' the salesgirl says. 'Specially treated. Won't mark. If you spill like a bit of ice-cream or a drop of coffee, like, down the front of this dress it won't hold the stain.'

The customer, a young woman, is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress. She is saying, 'Get this thing off me. Off me, at once.'

The salesgirl shouts at the customer who, up to now, has been delighted with the bright coloured dress. It is patterned with green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within the green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple. This dress has not been a successful line; other dresses in the new stainless fabric have sold, but this, of which three others, identical but for sizes, hang in the back storeroom awaiting the drastic reductions of next week's sale, has been too vivid for most customers' taste. But the customer who now steps speedily out of it, throwing it on the floor with the utmost irritation, had almost smiled with satisfaction when she had

tried it on. She had said, 'That's my dress.' The salesgirl had said it needed taking up at the hem. 'All right,' the customer had said, 'but I need it for tomorrow.' 'We can't do it before Friday, I'm sorry,' the salesgirl had said. 'Oh, I'll do it myself, then,' the customer had said, and turned round to admire it sideways in the long mirror. 'It's a good fit. Lovely colours,' she said.

'And it doesn't stain,' the salesgirl had said, with her eye wandering to another unstainable and equally unsaleable summer dress which evidently she hoped, now, to offer the satisfied customer.

'Doesn't stain?'

The customer has flung the dress aside.

The salesgirl shouts, as if to assist her explanation. 'Specially treated fabric . . . If you spill like a drop of sherry you just wipe it off. Look, Miss, you're tearing the neck.'

'Do you think I spill things on my clothes?' the customer shrieks. 'Do I look as if I don't eat properly?'

'Miss, I only remarked on the fabric, that when you tell me you're going abroad for your vacation, there is always the marks that you pick up on your journey. Don't treat our clothes like that if you please. Miss, I only said stain-resisting and then you carry on, after you liked it.'

'Who asked you for a stain-resisting dress?' the customer shouts, getting quickly, with absolute purpose, into her own blouse and skirt.

'You liked the colours, didn't you?' shouts the girl.

'What difference does it make, so it resists stains, if you liked the fabric before you knew?'

The customer picks up her bag and goes to the door almost at a run, while two other salesgirls and two other customers gasp and gape. At the door she turns to look back and says, with a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation with an undoubtable excuse, 'I won't be insulted!'

She walks along the broad street, scanning the windows for the dress she needs, the necessary dress. Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants' office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail-warden of a mouth; she has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men. Her immediate superior had given her the afternoon off, in kindness, Friday afternoon. 'You've got your packing to do, Lise. Go home, pack and rest.' She had resisted. 'I don't need a rest. I've got all this work to finish. Look – all this.' The superior, a fat small man, looked at her with frightened eyeglasses. Lise smiled and bent her head over her desk. 'It can wait till you get back,' said the man, and when she looked up at him he showed

courage and defiance in his rimless spectacles. Then she had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, the jerky backward movements of her little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years. As she ran to the lavatory she shouted to the whole office who somehow or other were trying to follow or help her. 'Leave me alone! It doesn't matter. What does it matter?' Half an hour later they said, 'You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation.' 'I'm going to have it,' she said, 'I'm going to have the time of my life,' and she had looked at the two men and five girls under her, and at her quivering superior, one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely.

Now, as she walks along the street after leaving the shop, her lips are slightly parted as if to receive a secret flavour. In fact her nostrils and eyes are a fragment more open than usual, imperceptibly but thoroughly they accompany her parted lips in one mission, the sensing of the dress that she must get.

She swerves in her course at the door of a department store and enters. Resort Department: she has seen the dress. A lemon-yellow top with a skirt patterned in bright V's of orange, mauve and blue. 'Is it made of that stain-resisting material?' she asks when she has put it on and is looking at herself in the mirror. 'Stain-resisting? I don't know, Madam. It's a washable cotton, but if I were you I'd have it dry-

cleaned. It might shrink.' Lise laughs, and the girl says, 'I'm afraid we haven't anything really stain-resisting. I've never heard of anything like that.' Lise makes her mouth into a straight line. Then she says, 'I'll have it.' Meanwhile she is pulling off a hanger a summer coat with narrow stripes, red and white, with a white collar; very quickly she tries it on over the new dress. 'Of course, the two don't go well together,' says the salesgirl. 'You'd have to see them on separate.'

Lise does not appear to listen. She studies herself. This way and that, in the mirror of the fitting room. She lets the coat hang open over the dress. Her lips part, and her eyes narrow; she breathes for a moment as in a trance.

The salesgirl says, 'You can't really see the coat at its best, Madam, over that frock.'

Lise appears suddenly to hear her, opening her eyes and closing her lips. The girl is saying, 'You won't be able to wear them together, but it's a lovely coat, over a plain dress, white or navy, or for the evenings . . .'

'They go very well together,' Lise says, and taking off the coat she hands it carefully to the girl. 'I'll have it; also, the dress. I can take up the hem myself.' She reaches for her blouse and skirt and says to the girl, 'Those colours of the dress and the coat are absolutely right for me. Very natural colours.'

The girl, placating, says, 'Oh, it's how you feel in things yourself, Madam, isn't it? It's you's got to wear them.' Lise buttons her blouse disapprovingly. She

follows the girl to the shop-floor, pays the bill, waits for the change and, when the girl hands her first the change then the large bag of heavy paper containing her new purchases, she opens the top of the bag enough to enable her to peep inside, to put in her hand and tear a corner of the tissue paper which enfolds each garment. She is obviously making sure she is being handed the right garments. The girl is about to speak, probably to say, 'Everything all right?' or 'Thank you, Madam, goodbye,' or even, 'Don't worry; everything's there all right.' But Lise speaks first; she says, 'The colours go together perfectly. People here in the North are ignorant of colours. Conservative; old-fashioned. If only you knew! These colours are a natural blend for me. Absolutely natural.' She does not wait for a reply; she does not turn towards the lift, she turns, instead, towards the down escalator, purposefully making her way through a short lane of dresses that hang in their stands.

She stops abruptly at the top of the escalator and looks back, then smiles as if she sees and hears what she had expected. The salesgirl, thinking her customer is already on the escalator out of sight, out of hearing, has turned to another black-frocked salesgirl. 'All those colours together!' she is saying. 'Those incredible colours! She said they were perfectly natural. Natural! Here in the North, she said . . .' Her voice stops as she sees that Lise is looking and hearing. The girl affects to be fumbling with a dress on the rack and to be saying something else without

changing her expression too noticeably. Lise laughs aloud and descends the escalator.